

Among my mom's immediate family in their small Ohio farm town known as Columbus Grove, there was an understanding that if you wanted to meet Catholics in the area, you'd need to go "northwest 'bout 8 miles up ta Kalida." [long "i"] This isn't to say that there were no Catholic celebrants in Grove; yes there were some, and they had their own church, as did Methodists, Presbyterians, Pentacostals, and others. Rather, I think the local lore had more to do with the fact that Kalida's clean and peaceful streets were dominated by St. Michael's Catholic church, a veritable cathedral overlooking the flat plains of NW Ohio. Though modest in terms of Notre Dame or Cologne, St. Michael's classic architecture and exuberantly-tall bell tower cannot help but make an impressive statement on the horizon, and within the culture. Hence, the Kalida Catholics.



St. Michael's & the plains of Ohio

This anecdote of local culture has never been anything but a gentle stereotype, most probably supported by demographics. But nothing more.

IT'S A START

Five hundred years ago, according to medieval urban myth, a German professor of theology [also a composer, priest, and monk], nailed his Ninety-Five Theses – which criticized practices of the Holy Roman Catholic religion – to the doors of All Saints' Church in Wittenberg. Though Martin Luther's picaresque pamphleteering has slim basis in fact, his criticisms were stinging and palpable, and eventually earned him the honor of excommunication by the Pope, and being branded an outlaw by the Holy Roman Emperor [usually the German king]. Luther's public actions and professed beliefs, especially against the practice of selling indulgences [the exchange of money for forgiveness from God], have been credited with starting The Reformation, which gave rise to a new "brand" of church generally known as Protestantism, as in *protest*.

This was no Kalida Catholic anecdote; it was unholy war. Catholic-Protestant conflict would engulf middle Europe for the next 150 years, and thousands upon thousands of innocents were slaughtered,



Martin Luther and his Ninety-Five Theses

countries smashed, kingdoms lost. As the character Robert Cecil says in our play, *EQUIVOCATION*, all for "petty theological differences tearing us apart."

FOLLOW THE MONEY

But, there was more than theology at play. Those indulgence payments added up to vast fortunes, used to support a privileged clergy and build great religious palaces such as St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. Besides believing that faith alone was the ticket to heaven, Luther didn't think it was fair for poor people to bear the rich man's burden. Further, his translation of the Bible from obscure Latin into German opened the door to textual interpretations and insight by the many, rather than the infallible few, or the one. There was a feel of populism in the reform and it took root and gained strength through the common people – the kind of revolutionary strength that threatens the indulged, corrupted and empowered.

The Reformation was inseparable from politics. The royals who ruled Europe were seen as God's anointed; they ruled through religious warrant as well as by heredity and law. And speaking of heredity, in England, 1533, King Henry the Eighth wanted the Church to annul his first marriage in quest of a male heir with his second wife-in-waiting, Anne Boleyn. The Pope would not agree, so Henry initiated the English Reformation, separating the Church of England from papal authority [and himself from Catherine of Aragon], and appointed himself the Supreme Head of the Church of England. By this action, the official English religion became Protestant, and England joined the religious turmoil emerging in Europe.

THE ELIZABETHANS

In Shakespeare's time, 70 years on, Queen Elizabeth had adopted somewhat tolerant but decisively anti-Catholic policies. The Act of Uniformity required all to attend Protestant church services, though the penalties for non-compliance were not overly severe. But beneath the repression there simmered a mood of rebellion, a dream to restore the Holy Catholic faith across the land. This feeling continued through the transition from Elizabeth's death to the 1603 installation of James VI of Scotland [also Protestant] onto the English throne as James I. There was hope that James would be more tolerant than his predecessor; that hope proved in vain.



Ann Boleyn with King Henry VIII, head of church and state.

GUY FAWKES

With apologies to both learned historians and you, patient readers, we finally come to The Gunpowder Plot of 1605 and the events which sparked Bill Cain's play, *EQUIVOCATION*. It was reported by King James I that the government had discovered a plot by Catholic recusants, supported by Jesuits and engineered by Guy Fawkes, to light the fuse to 36 barrels of gunpowder in a cellar room directly beneath the House of Lords. The time of detonation was to be November 5th, as the King convened Parliament. The explosion would have lopped off the head and shoulders of English government, as the King, his Queen, his son and heir, Lords and many nobles –



Celebrating on Bonfire Night

not to mention many hundreds of citizens in the vicinity – would have met instant death. The perpetrators also sparked a Midlands rebellion, with plans to kidnap the King's daughter and install her as the new Catholic monarch, controlled by her keepers. To this day, a debate remains on how, exactly, the plot was discovered, but discovered it was, and the conspirators paid with their lives.

A BURNING MEMORY

November 5th is celebrated as Bonfire Night, or Guy Fawkes Night, when his effigy is repeatedly burned and Britains celebrate the continuation of monarchy, unity and rule of law. One could imagine the consuming heat of those bonfire flames as a reminder of the fervent belief and dangerous passions that burned Europe for a century-and-a-half, before cooler heads prevailed. One might also point out that no matter what the subject matter, fervent passions and beliefs are always in danger of exploding, if not cooled by reason. No doubt Shakespeare had much to say in this regard, and in *EQUIVOCATION*, playwright Bill Cain has brought the bard to brilliant life to speak on his own behalf.

See you at the theatre.

David



Guy Fawkes & the Gunpowder Plot Conspirators