



STUDIES

IN THE SPIRITUALITY OF JESUITS

PETER CANISIUS AND THE FUTURE OF
CHRISTIAN CATECHESIS

THOMAS J. FLOWERS, SJ

54/2 SUMMER 2022

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a word from the editor...

Fr. Nicholas Lancicius (1574–1653) of Lithuania, born Mikołaj Łęczycki, served the Society as a provincial, tertian master, professor of literature, rector of the college in Kalisz (Poland), and delegate to General Congregation 6 (1615–1616). He left a large collection of written compilations of Ignatius’s words and deeds that he had gleaned over the years from oral and written traditions. He did this for the express purpose of “giving more strength to those in the future who will choose our form of religious life.”¹

For modern Jesuits, one anecdote in particular can be uncomfortably weird and weirdly touching, taken from when St. Ignatius was superior general at the Roman College:

When [Ignatius] saw a young man eating contentedly, the holy Father was marvelously refreshed, and for this reason he summoned to his table Benedict Palmius, a heavy-set adolescent, and he happily watched him eating, and he told him not to blush for shame. Thus, on every occasion he showed maternal affection towards his own. This also was a sign of his love for the members of his household: that he always put a good interpretation on everything, as much as he could. This gave rise to a proverb in the house: “The interpretations of the Father.”²

¹ The collections are found in *Monumenta Historica Societatis Iesu*, vol. 85; *Fontes Narrativi de S. Ignatio de Loyola et de Societatis Iesu initiis*, vol. 3, ed. Candidus de Dalmases (Rome, 1960), 339–721; the quotation is on page 702. The unpublished English translation by Fr. Kenneth Baker (UWE) will appear in a future issue of *Studies*.

² Ignatius, *Font. narr.*, 665. Fr. Pedro Ribadeneira (1527–1611) made a similar observation about Ignatius’s interpretations being proverbial. On this point, see *Remembering Iñigo: Glimpses of the Life of Saint Ignatius of Loyola*, eds. Alexander Eaglestone and Joseph A. Munitiz (Leominster, UK and Saint Louis, MO: Gracewing and Institute of Jesuit Sources [IJS], 2004), p. 55, no. 92.

It is charming to think of scholastics in the Roman College with bemused looks on their faces as they discussed Fr. Ignatius's particular way of interpreting reality. But it certainly underscores just how seriously he regarded the Presupposition in the *Spiritual Exercises*, that all good Christians should endeavor to put a good interpretation on others' words and deeds whenever reasonably possible.³ It was not about being Pollyannaish or unworldly. On the contrary: because of original sin, human beings are more inclined to interpret things negatively, for which reason any efforts to resist that fallen inclination serve to recapture human perceptions and relationships the way that God had intended them from the beginning.

However, the Presupposition is not so much a doctrine to be believed as a style of living to be practiced. As such, its real truth and value become evident only when put into action, which is precisely what Spanish Jesuit J. Carlos Coupeau (ESP) has been suggesting about how Jesuits should read the *Constitutions*. For Fr. Coupeau, the style of the text *is* its essential message. Some of the content of the *Constitutions* is obsolete after five centuries, but Ignatius adopted attitudes of invitation, cooperation, accommodation, engagement, and prayerful discernment throughout the entire text, and all of these remain relevant in every generation. In other words, how Jesuits put the *Constitutions* into practice in specific historical contexts might differ, but this *style* of their way of proceeding transcends the ages.⁴

And now, Fr. Thomas J. Flowers (UWE), published poet and teacher of Jesuit history, has provided readers with an essay in which he makes the same argument about the catechisms of the Dutch Jesuit St. Peter Canisius (1521–1597). When Fr. Flowers first proposed his subject to the Seminar on Jesuit Spirituality, he remarked, “The

³ *Spiritual Exercises* 22.

⁴ See J. Carlos Coupeau, “The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus: The Rhetorical Component,” *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 14 (2004), 199–208; *El Espíritu en la Forma: Las Constituciones a la luz de la retórica* (Bilbao, Santander, and Madrid: Mensajero, Sal Terrae, and Universidad Pontificia Comillas, 2014); *From Inspiration to Invention: Rhetoric in the Constitutions of the Society of Jesus* (Saint Louis, MO: IJS, 2010); “La Mistagogía de las Constituciones: El Mistagogo,” *Manresa* 76 (2004), 371–89.

trouble with much of catechesis is its tendency to answer questions no one is asking." And when the Seminar enthusiastically approved his proposal to show why Canisius's style is authentically Jesuit and still relevant today, one member added, "The best thing that Thomas can do is do what he said that he is going to do."

And he did. In addition to breaking open the style of the Canisius catechisms, Fr. Flowers makes clear just how thoroughly that style was rooted in the pastoral sensitivities of Canisius's mentor St. Peter Faber (1506–1546), and even earlier, in the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius himself. Certainly not coincidentally, the Presupposition figures prominently for Canisius as well, in that it becomes part of the style in which his written catechisms penetrate the defenses of college students made skeptical by church scandals and Reformation ideas, and bring them to, as St. Ignatius used to say, a heartfelt, "interior knowledge" of Jesus Christ.

Clearly, such a style is needed now more than ever.

Barton T. Geger, SJ
General Editor

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Thomas J. Flowers (uWE) teaches Jesuit history and spirituality throughout the Jesuit Conference of Canada and the United States, mostly to Jesuits in formation. He has a PhD in history from the University of York, an MA in history from Saint Louis University, and an STB from the Pontifical Gregorian University. His article, "Understanding the Early Jesuit Context for 'Our Way of Proceeding,'" recently appeared in *Archivum Historicum Societatis Iesu*, and he contributes frequently to *Thinking Faith*, the online journal of the British Province.

Peter Canisius and the Future of Christian Catechsis

Thomas J. Flowers, SJ

The stunning popularity of the catechisms of St. Peter Canisius in the sixteenth century is only rivaled by their startlingly pastoral attitude, marked as they are by careful attentiveness to the particular needs of the audience they sought to reach. While their content bears the marks and shortcomings of the age in which they were written, their pedagogy remains relevant for the church and the Society of Jesus today as we struggle to announce the Gospel in a way that can reach and move the people whom we seek to serve.

When Peter Canisius (1521–1597) arrived at the University of Ingolstadt in November 1549, the situation he confronted dismayed him. Sent there by St. Ignatius along with Alfonso Salmerón (1515–1585) and Claude Jay (1504–1552) to teach theology, Canisius encountered a student body with little interest in what the Jesuits had to offer. Few attended Canisius’s lectures on Peter Lombard’s *Sentences*, and those who did had imbibed enough Lutheranism that they expressed deep skepticism at Canisius’s scholastic approach to theology. His students had no patience for allegorical interpretations of Scripture, for exhortation to pious Catholic practices like fasts and pilgrimages, or for the defense of the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience observed by Catholic religious.

Indeed, Rome’s prohibitions regarding heresy had few enforcers at Ingolstadt, and Lutheran and other Protestant books were passed eagerly among students and faculty alike. Even the efforts of Canisius, Jay,

and Salmerón to celebrate the sacraments among the Catholic faithful met with opposition, this time not from those inspired by Lutheranism, but from the local parish priest, who accused the Jesuits of attempting to steal away his flock. Canisius's discouragement permeates the letter he wrote four months later describing the situation to Juan de Polanco (1517–1576), secretary of the Society of Jesus.¹ Yet his sense of just how ineffectual his efforts were proved the perfect context for one of the most significant inspirations of his life, for it was precisely at this moment that he conceived the notion of creating a new Catholic catechism.

In 1555, Canisius published his first catechism, the *Summa Doctrinae Christianae*, a book directed toward what we would now consider upper high school or beginning college students. He went on to publish a children's version of his catechism in 1556—often known as his *Minimus Catechismus*—and one for younger adolescents in 1558, which is often called his *Parvus Catechismus*. In 1569, there appeared an expanded version of his *Summa* under the title *Opus Catechisticum*, with extensive notes that included lengthy excerpts from Scripture, the Church Fathers, and Canisius's other sources. And in 1589, Canisius's illustrated catechism, the *Catechismus Imaginibus Ornatus*, was published.

By the time Canisius died in 1597, the various versions of his catechism had been printed in no fewer than 347 editions and in sixteen different languages. Another 832 editions appeared between 1598 and 2004.² In 2005, Pope Benedict XVI made reference in a Wednesday audience to the tradition in Germany, still current in the early twentieth century, of calling any catechism, regardless of author, “a Canisius.”³ Canisius's catechisms quickly numbered among the most significant works

¹ Canisius to Juan Polanco, March 24, 1550, in *Beati Petri Canisii Societatis Iesu epistolæ et acta*, 8 vols, ed. Otto Braunsberger (Freiburg im Breisgau, 1896–1923), I:306–14. The research for this issue of *STUDIES* derives from my PhD dissertation, *The Reform of Christian Doctrine in the Catechisms of Peter Canisius*, University of York, 2021.

² For the definitive word on the publishing history of Canisius's catechisms, see Paul Begheyn, *Petrus Canisius en zijn catechismus: De geschiedenis van een bestseller/Peter Canisius and his catechism: the History of a Bestseller* (Nijmegen, 2005); and Begheyn, “The Catechism (1555) of Peter Canisius,” *Quaerendo* 36, no. 1/2 (2006): 51–84.

³ Pope Benedict XVI, “On St. Peter Canisius,” General Audience, 9 February 2011, www.zenit.org/en/articles/on-st-peter-canisius.

of his life, and they figure prominently in any account of his sanctity.⁴ But their striking popularity and longevity give only the barest indication of their significance to Christian catechesis.

Canisius's disillusionment at the University of Ingolstadt spurred him to design a different sort of catechesis. His experience of Lutheran-inspired students left him longing not for a perfect explanation of Catholic doctrine, but for a pedagogy that could penetrate the skepticism and hostility that clouded the religious experience of the young people he had been sent to teach. Their questions, doubts, and needs guided Canisius to create a catechetical approach without precedent in the history of Christian catechesis, and one that has been little imitated in subsequent Catholic catechisms. Faced with an unfamiliar spiritual landscape, Canisius looked to his own formation in the *Spiritual Exercises* as a guide to shaping a catechetical program that not only could meet his students where they were, but that could also provide them with the spiritual tools they would need to live lives of faith in a context crowded with competing religious calls.

*Faced with an unfamiliar spiritual landscape, Canisius looked to his own formation in the *Spiritual Exercises* as a guide to shaping a catechetical program.*

The relevance of Canisius's catechesis for the contemporary church and Society of Jesus lies not in the specific content of his catechisms but in the pedagogical principles that he developed to bridge the chasm that separated his theological training from the religious experience of the audience he longed to reach. Those principles have a perennial value that stands out from the outdated theological content of his catechisms. When its sixteenth-century trappings are properly contextualized, Canisius's pedagogy retains remarkable vibrancy for us today as we consider the question of how to use our theological education in a way that can

⁴ James Brodrick's *Saint Peter Canisius* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1935) remains, despite its age and hagiographic tendencies, the standard scholarly biography of Canisius. By presenting a few key examples of how Canisius's catechism quickly achieved fame among Catholics and notoriety among Protestants, Brodrick gives a sense of the book's impact beyond the mere fact of its wide distribution. See Brodrick, *Saint Peter Canisius*, 241–52.

reach out effectively to the skeptical, hostile, and indifferent whom we hope to educate in the faith and to lead into an encounter with Christ and Christ's Church. To create an effective catechism requires careful discernment, lest we cling to particular traditions of instruction as if they were necessary elements of church tradition itself. What Canisius offers us is a model of catechesis that responds to the needs of the moment, seeking not to demand belief of those catechized but to persuade them to believe. By exploring how Canisius wrote his catechism, we can gain wisdom about how better to catechize ourselves.

Thus, this article is divided into two parts. First, I will delve into the structural, tonal, and stylistic elements of Canisius's catechism in order to understand his unique pedagogical insights. Then, in part two, I will present these insights as a pedagogical paradigm that can be used to create better catechesis today. In the end, Canisius's catechetical paradigm grounds itself upon (1) the presumption of good will, (2) a tone of persuasion rather than command, and (3) attention to the coherence of the overall catechesis. These principles, in turn, allowed Canisius to create a pedagogy that moves from (1) the beauty of God's wisdom to (2) a knowledge of the harm that sin inflicts, and (3) to an appreciation of the goodness that lies in store for those who pursue the good. Taken together, these elements can serve as a practical guide to developing catechesis for the people whom we most struggle to reach today.

I. A Jesuit Catechesis

Canisius's concern for catechesis had its roots in his Jesuit identity. The *Formula of the Institute* contained in Pope Paul III's 1540 bull *Regimini Militantis Ecclesiae* describes a Jesuit as one who "is member of a community founded chiefly for this purpose: to strive especially for the progress of souls in Christian life and doctrine and for the propagation of the faith by the ministry of the word, by spiritual exercises and works of charity, and specifically by the education of children and unlettered persons in Christianity."⁵ This last ministry is the

⁵ *Formula of the Institute* 1540, no. 1; *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus and Their Complementary Norms: A Complete English Translation of the Official Latin Texts*, ed. John W. Padberg, SJ (St. Louis, MO: The Institute of Jesuit Sources [IJS], 1996), 3–4.

ministry of catechesis, and there can be no question that the early Jesuits took seriously this charge to teach children and uneducated people the basics of the faith.⁶ So when Canisius perceived that his students at the University of Ingolstadt were not adequately prepared to take on the standard theological textbook of the time, Lombard's *Sentences*, it was natural enough that his mind turned to catechesis.

The situation Canisius faced at Ingolstadt was not something unique to that particular university or city. Amid the growing popularity of Lutheran doctrine and the continued failings of the Catholic hierarchy to address corruption in its own ranks, even still nominally-Catholic university students had started turning more and more to Lutheran theology as an antidote to the inadequate fare provided by the church in the moment. The growing popularity of Lutheran ideas was, indeed, why the Duke of Bavaria had asked for Jesuits to come in the first place, that they might stem the tide.⁷ The task before Canisius and his brethren was daunting. Faced with what he perceived to be the ignorance and hostility of his students in Ingolstadt, Canisius decided that what they needed most was a primer in Catholic doctrine. Thus, after his long lament to Polanco regarding the appalling situation he endured in Ingolstadt, Canisius pleaded "that sometime you may advise your son Canisius concerning the way of proceeding with this people and also provide for me a Catechism for the Germans."⁸

Canisius was convinced that the Jesuits needed to compose a new catechism to meet the unique situation they faced among "the Germans." But it took him awhile to realize he would need to write the book himself. At first, he thought the project was best suited to Diego Laínez (1512–1565), whom Canisius considered the ablest of the Society's theologians. As Canisius explained to the older Jesuit, he hoped that Laínez "might deign to gather together Christian doctrine in order that the doctrine of the church, from which so long they have wandered, might be

⁶ For a good summary of early Jesuit practice regarding catechesis or "teaching Christianity," see John W. O'Malley, *The First Jesuits* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 115–26.

⁷ See Brodrick, *Saint Peter Canisius*, 128–33.

⁸ Canisius to Polanco, March 24, 1550, *Epistolæ et acta*, I:313. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from original sources are mine.

commended more easily to German boys and simpler persons.”⁹ Canisius referred to the project itself as a “Catechism that will be proposed for the German youth according to the method [Latin: *ratio*] and discipline of our Society and your judgment.”¹⁰

In these brief lines, the contours of the project Canisius envisioned emerge. He wanted a catechism specifically designed to reach those who had long “wandered” from Catholic doctrine under the influence of Lutheranism. And he believed that the best way to set about composing such a catechism lay in the “method and discipline” of the Society of Jesus. This was why Canisius looked not to the myriad popular catechisms already available to him in 1550 but proposed creating a new one: Canisius believed that it was only a *Jesuit* catechism that could meet the needs of the population he wanted to reach.

What Canisius actually meant by a catechism composed according to the Society’s “method and discipline” only became clear five years later when he published his first catechism. The intervening years had seen sporadic correspondence about possible catechetical efforts and the beginnings of various projects along these lines by Jesuits Claude Jay, Diego Laínez, and André des Freux (1515–1556), but no actual, finished catechism had emerged, and Canisius eventually took matters into his own hands.¹¹ Canisius’s *Summa Doctrinae Christianae*, printed under the aegis of Ferdinand I of Habsburg—then King of the Romans but soon to be Holy Roman Emperor—established the catechetical model to which all of Canisius’s subsequent catechisms would conform.

⁹ Canisius to Laínez, 10 February 1551, *Epistolæ et acta*, I:348.

¹⁰ Canisius to Laínez, 10 February 1551, *Epistolæ et acta*, I:348.

¹¹ The best published account of the history of Canisius’s catechism is Patrizio Foresta, “Un catechismo per li Todeschi: per un’archeologia della *Summa doctrinae christianae*,” in *Diego Laínez (1512–1565) and his Generalate: Jesuit with Jewish Roots, Close Confidant of Ignatius of Loyola, Preeminent Theologian of the Council of Trent*, ed. Paul Oberholzer, SJ (Rome, Institutum Historicum Societatis Iesu [IHSI], 2015), 689–713. Chapter 3 of my PhD dissertation offers a more comprehensive picture than Foresta’s article and disagrees with Dr. Foresta in some particulars. See Thomas Flowers, “The Reform of Christian Doctrine in the Catechisms of Peter Canisius” (PhD diss., University of York, 2021), 86–138.

Thus, although there are minor differences of content among Canisius's catechisms, his pedagogical approach never substantially changed as he adapted his text. His fundamental audience remained the same whether he was addressing children or young adults: Canisius strove in all of his catechisms to provide a foundation in Catholic doctrine that could answer the questions of the skeptical and provide them with the spiritual tools that they would need to navigate the religious landscape of the post-Reformation world.

The first indication of Canisius's conception of what constituted Jesuit catechesis lies in the unique structure he gave to his *Summa*. No standard structure for Catholic catechesis existed in 1555 when Canisius published his catechism. Such a standard was set first in 1566, when Pope Pius V promulgated the *Roman Catechism*, the first official catechism ever issued by the Catholic Church. That papal catechism established as normative a structure for catechesis that has endured through the centuries and was, indeed, emulated by the church's second official catechism, the 1992 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. In this structure, there are four basic "pillars" around which all catechesis is organized: belief, as exemplified by the Apostles' Creed; the seven sacraments; morality, as exemplified by the Ten Commandments; and prayer, as exemplified by the Our Father.

Prior to this official codification of the "four pillars" of catechesis, these same elements had already long been used in Catholic catechesis.¹² In the Christian catechumenate of the third and fourth centuries, it was already common practice to use the texts of the Creed and the Our Father in the instruction of those preparing for entrance into the Church, and the Ten Commandments featured prominently in the moral catechesis of the Middle Ages, particularly in texts that prepared priests and penitents for the sacrament of penance.¹³ Thus, although it would not be until over a decade after Canisius published his first catechism

¹² See Robert I. Bradley, *The Roman Catechism in the Catechetical Tradition of the Church: The Structure of the Roman Catechism as Illustrative of "Classic Catechesis"* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1990).

¹³ For a good introduction to the history of Christian catechesis, see Berard I. Marthaler, *The Catechism Yesterday and Today: The Evolution of a Genre* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1995).

that Catholic catechism gained an official structure, standard features of Catholic catechesis nevertheless existed, the most prominent of which were the use of the Creed, the seven sacraments, the Ten Commandments, and the Our Father as organizing principles for instruction.

Yet while Canisius included all four of these elements in his catechism along with many other standard lists and features that could be found in prior catechisms, his structure did not conform to any catechetical precedent.

Canisius introduces his table of contents by declaring that “Christian doctrine revolves around wisdom and justice.”

At the beginning of the text, Canisius introduces his table of contents by declaring that “Christian doctrine revolves around wisdom and justice.”¹⁴ He justifies this claim, after listing the contents of the book, by quoting from the biblical book of Sirach, also known as Ecclesiasticus: “For a summary of all of Christian doctrine, you need only comprehend one word of Ecclesiasticus: ‘Son, if you desire wisdom, conserve justice and God will provide it to you.’”¹⁵

On the basis of this rather obscure biblical verse, Canisius justified dividing his catechism into two books: one on wisdom, and one on justice. The book on wisdom has four chapters: on faith, which principally treats the Apostles’ Creed; on hope, which principally treats the Our Father; on love, which principally treats the Ten Commandments and precepts of the church; and on the seven sacraments.

Using the Pauline triad of faith, hope, and love as a catechetical tool and linking the three theological virtues to these three Christian texts followed a tradition that traces back to the catechetical writings of St. Augustine of Hippo (354–430). In his *Enchiridion of Faith, Hope, and Love*, Augustine argued that “the entire contents” and the “foundation

¹⁴ Canisius, *Summa Doctrinae Christianae, Ante-Tridentina in Sancti Petri Canisii Doctoris Ecclesiae catechismi latini et germanici, Pars Prima: Catechismi Latini*, ed. Fridericus Streicher, SJ (Munich: Officina Salesiana; Rome: Pontificia Universitas Gregoriana, 1933), 5.

¹⁵ Canisius, *Summa*, 5. In the Latin Vulgate, this passage is Ecclesiasticus 1:33; in the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible (NRSV), the book of Ecclesiasticus is called “Sirach,” and the verses have, in some places, been reordered to reflect different ancient manuscripts, so this quotation is from Sirach 1:26.

of the Catholic faith” could be summed up by “knowing what is to be believed, what ought to be hoped for, and what ought to be loved,” and he proceeded to use the Creed to explain belief, and the Our Father to explain hope.¹⁶ Augustine did not use the text of the Ten Commandments to explain the virtue of love, but he did contend that “love is the end of all the commandments.”¹⁷ Thus, Canisius was in good and traditional company in making these connections in his first book on wisdom when he used the same elements as St. Augustine.

However, it is the second book of Canisius’s *Summa* that truly sets his catechism apart. Turning to the topic of justice, Canisius divided the second book into two parts: the first on fleeing evil, and the second on seeking good. Here, he used many of the lists of sins, vices, and virtues that had come to dominate medieval catechesis, but he did so in a careful and deliberate manner. In the first part, after a general discussion on sin and evil, Canisius presented the seven deadly sins as “the root and head of” all other sins, because “as from a corrupt root” all other sins are born from these pernicious inclinations.¹⁸ From these, he goes on to discuss the “sins of another in which some fault is ours,” the sins against the Holy Spirit, and the four sins that “cry out to heaven,” the latter of which I discuss at the beginning of part two below.

In the second part, Canisius offers the “threefold good works” prayer, fasting, and almsgiving as the archetypal forms of seeking the good, and then proceeds to explain the works of mercy, the cardinal virtues, the gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit, and the Beatitudes. This unfolding of how a person seeks the good culminates in passionate, sermon-like exhortations on the three evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience. In the sixteenth century, taking these vows as a religious was seen as the height of spiritual perfection because it reflected the way Jesus Christ lived. Thus, Canisius’s catechesis on seeking the good reaches its natural conclusion in an imitation of Christ that aims for perfection. After this, Canisius concludes his catechism with a treatment of the “four last things” — death, judgment, hell, and heaven.

¹⁶ Aug. *Enchir.* 1.3–4 (CCL 46:49).

¹⁷ Aug. *Enchir.* 32.121 (CCL 46:113). The section on charity is in ch. 31–33.

¹⁸ Canisius, *Summa*, 50.

Having turned away from sin and embraced the good, the ideal reader of Canisius's catechism would, in the logic of the text, be prepared to face his own death and eternal destiny.

If this approach to teaching morality seems less than revolutionary, it is because Canisius has used elements of the medieval tradition in his efforts at catechetical innovation. The subtlety of his pedagogy lies hidden beneath the pedestrian quality of his theology. The first indication that Canisius's *Summa* differs from the usual Catholic catechetical approach lies in the placement of his catechesis on the Ten Commandments in his book on wisdom rather than in his book on justice. By dividing his catechesis into these two categories, Canisius indicates that there are two essential parts to Christian doctrine: the wisdom we come to know, and the justice we seek to do. Logically, anything that pertains to what we believe and profess would fall under the category of wisdom, and all that pertains to ethics would come under the heading of justice. It makes sense, for instance, to treat the Creed under wisdom and to teach about sin and virtue under justice. The apparent illogic of placing his catechesis on the Ten Commandments in the book on wisdom rather than the book on justice thus stands out.

Indeed, not only do the commandments of the Mosaic Law naturally fall under the category of pursuing justice, but also they have nearly always been used in Catholic moral teaching as the means to explain and categorize sin. They are the bedrock of much Catholic catechesis on morality and were used in this way in both the 1566 *Roman Catechism* and the 1992 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. From this perspective, the decisions to include the Ten Commandments under the category of wisdom and to teach the pursuit of justice separate from the Ten Commandments could not be anything but deliberate innovations by Canisius.

As a part of Canisius's catechesis on acquiring wisdom, the Ten Commandments thus emerge as a reflection of the wisdom of God. This is evident from the beginning of Canisius's presentation of the commandments, where he starts his list of the "mandates of the decalogue" not with the words of the first commandment itself but with reference to the declaration of God, "I am the Lord your God," made

before delivering the commandments in the book of Exodus.¹⁹ He goes on to explain that “God begins the decalogue by his acquaintance and by the entrance of his majesty in order that the certain [. . .] authority for his laws might be evident.” We need, he argues, to reflect upon the majesty of God so that “we may contemplate here, as if in the clearest mirror, the certain will of the divine majesty.”²⁰

The commandments thus serve, in Canisius’s catechesis, as a way of accessing the mind and will of God. In short, they reflect who God is, such that our knowledge of them increases our own wisdom. The commandments certainly do call for a response in the active lives of believers, as they represent ethical norms. But in Canisius’s catechesis, their role as giving insight into God’s way of seeing the world is their most significant feature. Indeed, they provide a beginning for the Christian moral life, although they do not represent its fullness, and it is for this reason that they belong not in his catechesis on how to live justly but in his catechesis on the fundamental wisdom of God that undergirds Christian faith.

Canisius made no real novitiate, and took his first vows less than two months after having first heard of the Society's existence.

This paradigm placing the Ten Commandments at the threshold of the moral life was characteristic of the ministry of the Jesuit whose style of life and ministry had the most profound influence on Canisius’s self-understanding as a member of the Society of Jesus: Peter Faber (1506–1546). Canisius had entered the Society under the mentorship of Faber, with whom he made the Spiritual Exercises in 1543. In a later, more institutionalized moment in the Society’s history, Faber’s role would have been that of novice master to Canisius, but in those early days of the Society, Canisius made no real novitiate, and took his first vows less than two months after having first heard of the Society’s existence. Yet in the beginning of Canisius’s Jesuit life, Faber was his most important teacher and his model for

¹⁹ Canisius, *Summa*, 14. The Scripture reference is to Exodus 20:2.

²⁰ Canisius, *Summa*, 14.

Jesuit life. Although the two Jesuits only knew each other for the short span between Canisius's entrance in 1543 and Faber's death in 1546, when Superior General Claudio Acquaviva (1543–1615) asked the mature Canisius to write a memorandum on Jesuit life for the edification of the Society at large in 1583, Canisius still presented Faber as the embodiment of the Jesuit charism.²¹

In the years when Canisius knew him, Faber engaged in an itinerant ministry with three essential features: preaching on the Ten Commandments, hearing confessions, and giving the Spiritual Exercises. He actively engaged in this ministry from 1539 onward, as he began the travels that would occupy him for the remaining years of his life. In 1540, while working in the Italian city of Parma, Faber explained to Ignatius that "we taught the commandments already at the beginning when we came to Parma," and now "some women take up the duty of going from house to house, teaching the maids and other women [. . .] always before everything [. . .] the ten commandments, the seven mortal sins, and after that what is for a general confession." In the meantime, Faber himself kept busy giving the Exercises to some priests of the city.²² In November 1541, Faber presented a remarkably similar portrait of his ministry in the Iberian city of Galapagar where he occupied himself with "teaching the commandments and giving the exercises."²³ The same story was repeated in other cities where Faber ministered.²⁴

Faber's preaching on the commandments brought people to him as a confessor, and his encounters in confession were one place where he could invite people to consider the possibility of making the Spiritual Exercises. That the Ten Commandments represented

²¹ Canisius to Claudio Acquaviva, January 1583, *Epistolæ et acta*, VIII:116–54. The part specifically on the example of Faber is at pp. 119–29.

²² Faber to Ignatius and Peter Codacio, 1 September 1540; in *Monumenta Historica Societatis Iesu* [henceforth MHSI], *Fabri primi sacerdotis e Societate Iesu Epistolæ, memoriale et processus* [henceforth *Fabri*] (Madrid, 1914), 32–33.

²³ Faber to Ignatius, 17 November 1541, *Faber*, 136.

²⁴ The best English language biography of Faber remains William V. Bangert, SJ, *To the Other Towns: A Life of Blessed Peter Favre, First Companion of St. Ignatius* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press: 2002); originally published by The Newman Press, 1959.

merely the beginning of the spiritual progress through which Faber hoped to guide those whom he served is evidenced by the thoughts that he shared with Cornelius Wischaven (1509–1559) in 1544 on the sacrament of penance. For Faber, it was not enough that a confessor determine and absolve the sins of the penitent. Rather, he believed that those who came to confession ought to be “greatly dissuaded from tepidity of life and to be brought to the foremost and loftiest of holy struggles and of Christian edification.” Indeed, “it is good if the penitent might be brought into [. . .] some new order of living.”²⁵ For Favre, preaching on the Ten Commandments brought the repentant to the sacrament, but confession itself presented an opportunity not only for reconciling sinners, but also for providing them encouragement and help in turning away from sin and toward the good.

This ministerial approach worked its way into Canisius’s catechesis. Like Faber, he used the commandments as a fundamental building block but did not rely upon them when it came to providing the tools that his audience would need to live lives of greater justice. As such, the commandments played a key role in how Canisius described the wisdom of God toward which he wanted his audience to aspire, but he would use other means to show them how to live up to this ideal. In Faber’s case, those other means involved an individual process through conversation in confession and, at least for some, the intense spiritual experience of the Exercises. For Canisius, these means were the principles of the Spiritual Exercises fashioned into a guide to moral discernment in the second book of his catechism.

Scholars long have overlooked the link between the Spiritual Exercises and Canisius’s catechesis in his book on justice. This is because evidence for the connection depends upon recourse not to the published text of the *Exercises*, but to the form of the Exercises that Canisius received from Faber when he first made the retreat in 1543. Fortunately, although Faber’s extant writings provide very few indications of the methods he used as a spiritual director, Canisius’s first experience of the Exercises is surprisingly well-documented. The most frequent references that Faber himself makes to the Exercises

²⁵ Faber to Cornelius Wischaven, January 1544, *Fabri*, 247, 248.

are in letters to Ignatius, in which his usual comments are laconic, indicating little more than the number of people whom he has directed and where they are in the progress of the retreat.

Typical of these descriptions is his remark in a letter of December 1542, noting that the two bishops he is directing “have each made the general confession and begun the process of the life of Christ.”²⁶ But Faber’s one significant description of his own methods in giving the full Exercises comes from two entries in his private spiritual diary, his *Memoriale*, written while he was giving the Exercises to Canisius. In addition, Canisius, like so many others who have made the Exercises over the past five hundred years, took notes both on what Faber said to him and on his own thoughts after he had made his meditations. Canisius’s principal archivist, Otto Braunsberger (1850–1926), recovered a portion of these notes in the 1920s. While these notes subsequently have been lost, Braunsberger’s excerpts were published in two articles.²⁷ These notes, combined with the entries in Faber’s *Memoriale*, make Canisius’s one of the best documented experiences of the Spiritual Exercises in the sixteenth century.

From these sources, it is clear that, as a director, Faber freely adapted the Exercises that he had received from Ignatius. The notes that Canisius presumably wrote down based on Faber’s oral instructions for the final meditation of the Exercises—the *Contemplatio ad amorem*—reveal a series of slight but striking and important divergences from the Ignatian text. The Ignatian text of the *Contemplatio* suggests a meditation on four points that, broadly speaking, focuses on the topics of gifts received from God, the way in which God dwells in all that God creates, the way that God labors in the world, and the way that all good things descend from God above.²⁸ In Canisius’s notes, there also are four points, but

²⁶ Faber to Ignatius, 22 December 1542, *Fabri*, 189, no. 64.

²⁷ Otto Braunsberger, “Ein Meister des innern Gebetes. (Zum Teil nach ungedruckten Quellen),” *Stimmen der Zeit* 105 (1923): 81–91, esp. 83; and “San Pedro Canisio y los Ejercicios,” *Manresa* 1 (1925): 327–39, esp. 329–30. Quite a bit of mystery surrounds what happened to Canisius’s autograph notes, but my own investigations suggest that they should be in a specific codex in the Jesuit archives in Munich where they most certainly are not.

²⁸ *Spiritual Exercises* 234–37, hereafter abbreviated *SpEx*; *The Spiritual Exercises of*

these four points are all topics covered under Ignatius's first point, the "benefits of creation," the "benefits of redemption," "particular benefits," and "benefits of the glorification."²⁹

And so, Faber's meditation apparently covered less ground than Ignatius's. But Faber also invited Canisius to engage in a triple colloquy with the three persons of the Trinity, which the Ignatian text lacked, and Faber does not appear to have given to Canisius any prayer resembling the text of the *Suscipe*—"Take, Lord, receive"—that features prominently in the Ignatian text.³⁰ While much could be made of these and other differences between the two approaches to the *Contemplatio*, the simplest point is the most relevant for understanding the connection between the Exercises and Canisius's catechesis: the Exercises that Canisius received from Faber did not in every point correspond to the official, Ignatian text, and it was this experience of the Exercises that permeated Canisius's prayer and ministry.

However, a more significant difference between the Ignatian text and the Exercises that Canisius received from Faber reveals itself in the description that Faber provides in his *Memoriale* of the principal graces of the four weeks of the Exercises. In the third exercise of the First Week, Ignatius proposes a "triple colloquy" with Mary, Christ, and God the Father, in which the one making the Exercises seeks to "obtain" three things:

first, that I may feel an interior knowledge of my sins and also and abhorrence of them; second, that I may perceive the disorder in my actions, in order to detest them, amend myself, and put myself in order; third, that I may have a knowledge of the world, in order to detest it and rid myself of all that is worldly and vain.³¹

Saint Ignatius: A Translation and Commentary, trans. and ed., George E. Ganss, SJ (St. Louis, MO: IJS, 1992), 94–95. All quotations from the *SpEx* are from this edition.

²⁹ Braunsberger, "San Pedro Canisio y los Ejercicios," 329.

³⁰ See Braunsberger, "San Pedro Canisio y los Ejercicios," 329; *SpEx* 234; ed. Ganss, 95.

³¹ *SpEx* 63; ed. Ganss, 45.

In his *Memoriale*, Faber also distinguishes three graces to be sought in the First Week: “first, true knowledge of and sorrow for all the sins of the past; second, knowledge of the disorder in one’s life; third, knowledge and intention of a true amendment and ordering of life in the future.”³²

While there can be no question that these two lists of graces cover similar ground, a few slight changes that Faber made to the Ignatian Exercises effect a difference in tone. In the Ignatian list, the Spanish word *conoscimiento*, written today as *conocimiento*, figures in the first and second petition. Although it is correct to translate this word into English as “knowledge,” note that there are two words for *knowing* in Spanish and other Latinate languages. The sort of knowing connoted by *conocimiento* is familiar knowledge—the kind of knowledge that one has of a person or place they know well. This is distinct from knowing in the sense of the verb *saber*, which connotes knowledge of a more factual nature—the kind of knowledge that pertains to facts learned. Thus, I might know (*saber*) that Rome is a city in Italy without knowing (*conocer*) Rome the way that someone who lives there does.

Ignatius suggests, in the first petition, that retreatants seek to “feel an interior knowledge” of their sins; and, in the third petition, that retreatants know the world and its evils in a similarly familiar way. Faber, on the other hand, has made *conoscer* the principal verb, and the spiritual heart, of all three petitions. Furthermore, whereas Ignatius invites one to look both to one’s own sins and to the sins of the world, emphasizing that one should “detest” and “abhor” all of the sin that one perceives, Faber proposes a gaze that is entirely inward, and places the emphasis not on how the retreatant feels about sin but on how the retreatant recognizes and knows sin.

This focus on the interior knowledge of sin shaped Canisius’s catechetical sensibilities. When in his catechism he turned from the fundamental wisdom of God to the practical question of how to live a life of greater justice, he recognized an interior knowledge of sin as the necessary first step. In the very first question that Canisius presents in his

³² *Faber Mem.*, 303; Pierre Favre, *The Spiritual Writings of Pierre Favre: The Memoriale and Selected Letters and Instructions*, ed. Edmond C. Murphy, SJ, and Martin E. Palmer, SJ (Saint Louis, MO: IJS, 1996), 241.

book on justice, he explains that avoiding evil “in the first place [consists] in knowing and fleeing from sins, since these are themselves the greatest evils for mortal men.”³³ Avoiding sin, for Canisius, does not then consist in memorizing a list of rules that one must follow. Rather, it depends upon recognizing what sin is and how one falls into sin, and doing so in order that one knowingly can avoid sin. To explain how one arrives at sin, Canisius follows the categories of St. Augustine, suggesting that there are three steps we pass through when we sin: suggestion, pleasure, and consent.³⁴

Canisius goes on to describe how a sinner progresses through these steps, and then he summarizes by noting that these are “the ropes and fetters, by which Satan throws bound man not only into every genus of evils but also into the abyss of the underworld.”³⁵ For this reason, “it is important to discern and observe the grades of each type [of sin] and the offspring [of sin], that we might not be deceived and imperiled.”³⁶ In this way, by knowing sin thoroughly, in its wiles, types, and progress, one gains the knowledge necessary to begin to resist and avoid the trap of sin.

This rationale makes sense of why Canisius presents the traditional medieval lists of sin, beginning with the seven deadly sins, and then turns to the “sins of another in which some fault is ours,” the sins against the Holy Spirit, and the sins that “cry out to heaven.” In Canisius’s pedagogy, these lists do not represent an exhaustive taxonomy of sin but rather provide for his intended audience a better knowledge of the wiles of sin. To avoid sin, one must know well the disordered appetites that lead to sin that the seven deadly sins describe, for only by so recognizing sinful inclinations in their earliest stage can one hope to resist sin’s allurements.

³³ Canisius, *Summa*, 49.

³⁴ Canisius, *Summa*, 50. Augustine presents this analysis of sin in *On the Lord’s Sermon on the Mount*, CCL 35 (1967):1–188; Denis J. Kavanagh, trans., *Commentary on the Lord’s Sermon on the Mount*, FOTC 11 (1951): 19–199.

³⁵ Canisius, *Summa*, 50.

³⁶ Canisius, *Summa*, 50.

It is similarly important to recognize the tricks of mind by which one convinces oneself that conniving or enabling someone else's sin is not itself a sin. And while Canisius would have expected few of the young people in his audience to have experience of the grave sorts of sins listed in the sins against the Holy Spirit and the sins that cry out to heaven, these weightier sins nonetheless serve the same purpose as the other lists of sins, in that they round out a person's knowledge of what sin is truly like and to what excesses sinful behavior can eventually transport the one who does not know sin for what it is. These lists thus become, in Canisius's pedagogy, tools for moral discernment. Again, while they do not list every possible sin, they do provide the general characteristics of sin. As such, they are, as Faber says, the grounds for "knowledge of the disorder in one's life" so that a person might make an "intention of a true amendment and ordering of life in the future."³⁷

Providing tools to recognize and turn away from sin represents the first step in Canisius's catechesis on the pursuit of justice, and knowledge of the good and the grace to do that good follows naturally thereafter. In the Exercises, those who come to know their own sins and are committed to freeing themselves from the disordered attachments that lead to sin are thereby prepared to enter the Second Week with its meditations on the life of Christ. In Canisius's catechism, those who have gained knowledge of sin are prepared, in the second part of the book on justice, to gain knowledge of the good. This good will culminate in the most perfect imitation of Christ through the evangelical counsels.

In the Ignatian Exercises, the Second Week moves back and forth between two related concepts: the contemplation of the mysteries of the life of Christ and a reflection on how the individual making the Exercises might best respond to the call of Christ. This twofold process reaches a culmination in the triple colloquy that Ignatius proposes for this week, which has the exercitant seeking to be "received under [Christ's] standard [. . .], first in the most perfect spiritual poverty; and also, if his Divine Majesty should be served

³⁷ *Faber Mem.*, 303; ed. Murphy and Palmer, 241.

and if he should wish to choose me for it, to no less a degree of actual poverty." Furthermore, one should seek "in bearing reproaches and injuries" to "imitate [Christ] more."³⁸

Thus, the one making the Exercises seeks to respond to Christ's call by imitating him as closely as possible. The overall goal of the Second Week proposed by Faber was the same as in the Ignatian Exercises: "the aim proposed for the contemplations on the life of Christ," he noted in his *Memoriale*, is "to know [Christ] in order to imitate him."³⁹ But the graces that Faber proposed for the triple colloquy reveal a different emphasis than those of the Ignatian Exercises, since Faber suggests "first, self-renunciation; second, perfect contempt of the world; third, perfect love of the service of Christ our Lord." While these two approaches spring from the same origin and complement one another, there are differences between them. For example, in place of a focus on imitating Christ in poverty and in receiving insult, Faber has once more proposed a more thoroughly inward examination, this time emphasizing the renunciation of self-centeredness and the ways of the world as a means toward embracing a more wholehearted service of Christ.

When Canisius in his catechesis turned toward seeking the good, he followed the paradigm Faber had proposed with these Second Week graces. Canisius begins the new section of his catechism with a definition of Christian justice as "all good things which might be done honestly, clearly, and piously."⁴⁰ He continues by noting that "the true use and proper fruit of our vocation and of Christian justice is born through Christ as the Apostle testifies evidently, 'That denying impiety and secular desires we live soberly, justly, and piously in this age.'" Denying "secular desires" and "impiety" correspond, to what "the gospel tells us: 'as liberated from the hand of our enemies, without fear we may serve him in holiness and justice before him all our days.'"⁴¹

³⁸ *SpEx* 147; ed. Ganss, 67.

³⁹ *Faber Mem.*, 303; ed. Murphy and Palmer, 241.

⁴⁰ Canisius, *Summa*, 60.

⁴¹ Canisius, *Summa*, 60. The reference to the testimony of "the Apostle" is in Titus 2:12; the Gospel reference is in Luke 1:74–75.

In these brief lines, through his scriptural citations, Canisius has described the same spiritual progress outlined by Faber when Canisius made the Spiritual Exercises in 1543. Canisius's "denying impiety" stands in for Faber's "self-renunciation," since they both imply the rejection of selfish, impious human desire. Denying "secular desires" is, yet more obviously, the same as "contempt for the world." Being free to serve Christ "in holiness and justice before him all our days" equates with "perfect love of the service of Christ." The phrasing is Canisius's own, but the pattern described corresponds to Faber's program for the Second Week of the Exercises.

This explains why Canisius then presents fasting, prayer, and almsgiving as the "three founts" of Christian justice.⁴² In fasting, we take steps toward "conquering the flesh and subjecting the spirit."⁴³ Then, in prayer, we turn away from sin and seek salvation, for it is "the pious affect of our mind in God by which faithfully are entreated whatever things are salutary to us."⁴⁴ Finally, in almsgiving, our renunciation of at least part of our own wealth allows that "the condition of misery of another, by our pathos, is lifted."⁴⁵ These essentially ascetical practices thus serve as the foundation for a life oriented toward the good in general and the imitation of Christ specifically. From this basis, Canisius proceeds to catechesis on the corporal and spiritual works of mercy, the gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit, and the Beatitudes. Here, he presents a portrait of what the good looks like in concrete terms, not merely as lists of things his audience need do but as a way of deepening their knowledge of the good, so that when they see goodness they will recognize and strive after it.

These various aspects of the good culminate in Canisius's presentation of the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience. He emphasizes from the start that the counsels are not "necessary for pursuing salvation," but were "counselled by Christ as a

⁴² Canisius, *Summa*, 61.

⁴³ Canisius, *Summa*, 61.

⁴⁴ Canisius, *Summa*, 63.

⁴⁵ Canisius, *Summa*, 64.

rule of preparing salvation more expediently and easily.”⁴⁶ His reason, however, for emphasizing their importance comes down to their unique relationship to Christ, “the absolute exemplar of evangelical perfection,” who “not so much by word taught [. . .] but rather, by the example of his most holy life, confirmed to us” the wisdom of the evangelical counsels.⁴⁷ To live a life of poverty, chastity, and obedience was then, for Canisius, to imitate Christ.

On this point, he writes that, “since the height of evangelical perfection resides in him,” in following the counsels, “as much as you can, you will imitate Christ.”⁴⁸ Thus, although Canisius certainly knows that not all of the students who use his catechism will embrace these counsels in the way a member of a religious order does, they nonetheless present the good in its fullness, as embodied by Christ. In this, they round out his portrait of the good after which he hopes that all of his students will strive. In this way, just as the Spiritual Exercises embrace every “means of preparing and disposing our soul to rid itself of all its disordered affections, and then, after their removal, of seeking and finding God’s will in the ordering of our life for the salvation of the soul,” so does Canisius’s catechism seek to present its audiences with the knowledge and tools necessary to turn away from sin and toward goodness in imitation of Christ.⁴⁹

II. A Responsive Catechesis

Thus far, I have argued that the key to appreciating the genius of Canisius’s catechism lies in recognizing how he delved into the depths of his formation in the Spiritual Exercises to create a uniquely Jesuit catechetical paradigm that responded to the pastoral challenges he faced. The key to applying the pedagogical wisdom that resulted from this methodology to

⁴⁶ Canisius, *Summa*, 70.

⁴⁷ Canisius, *Summa*, 70.

⁴⁸ Canisius, *Summa*, 73.

⁴⁹ *SpEx* 1; ed. Ganss, 21.

our catechesis today lies in distinguishing his style of catechesis from the actual content of his catechesis.

Most contemporary readers of Canisius's catechism will probably reason that certain features of his teaching might offer young people today not clarity but confusion. The basis, for example, of his teaching on the four sins that cry out to heaven is that these sins are the ones that Scripture describes as such. These sins are homicide (Gn 4:10), homosexual activity (Gn 18:20–21), oppression of the poor (Ex 22:21–23), and cheating workers of their wages (Ja 5:4). Thus, for example, after Cain has murdered Abel, God tells Cain that "your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground!" and the Letter of James proclaims that "the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts."⁵⁰

Canisius's teaching on these sins that "cry out to heaven" proves problematic on the question of homosexual activity. The basis for asserting that it was one of the sins that cried out to heaven lies in the presumption that it was the sin for which God destroyed the city of Sodom. That interpretation is problematic today, since Catholic biblical scholars generally agree that the grave sin for which the inhabitants of Sodom were punished was not, as Canisius believed, homosexual activity, but rather inhospitableness and hostility toward strangers.⁵¹

So too, presenting the evangelical counsels as the highest state of human perfection has less resonance—and perhaps less relevance—in light of post-Vatican II church teachings that place greater esteem on the vocation to married life. The list goes on, but even these two examples make evident why Canisius's catechism itself is not an adequate tool for teaching basic Christian doctrine today. It is, like all theological textbooks, a product of its moment in the history of the church.

⁵⁰ Gn 4:10b; Ja 5:4. Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible quotations are from the NRSV.

⁵¹ The Pontifical Biblical Commission, *What Is Man?: A Journey Through Biblical Anthropology* (London: Darton Longman, & Todd, Ltd. 2021), no. 186.

However, the method of Canisius's catechetics has a relevance that goes beyond the limits of its content. Of course, a significant aspect of this method is the reliance, demonstrated in part one above, of his catechesis on the spiritual perspective of the Exercises. But to appreciate how this can help contemporary catechesis, we need to place even his very Jesuit use of the Exercises within the context of his more basic approach.

In brief, Canisius chose to create a pedagogy based on the Exercises not because the Exercises are an infallible catechetical tool, but because he recognized that they fit a catechetical paradigm that presumes the intelligence and good will of those whom he seeks to catechize. This key principle undergirds the most significant stylistic choice that he made in his catechism and led directly to his choice to use the spirituality of the Exercises to present Christian teaching.

The first indications of this approach appear in the way that Canisius relied upon a catechetical mainstay—namely, the question-and-answer format. Canisius was neither the first nor the last catechism author to use questions and answers as a pedagogical tool.⁵² But when compared with the use made of this format by other catechisms, it becomes quickly apparent that Canisius applied the technique differently. For example, the 1597 *Dottrina Christiana Breve*, written by Roberto Bellarmino (1542–1621), presents questions as being asked by the “Master” to the “Student.”⁵³ Accordingly, the master interrogates the student about the student's knowledge of Christian doctrine, as such:

⁵² The catechism of the Bohemian Brethren (1523) and Martin Luther's catechisms (1529) both had used the question and answer format before Canisius. The history of this format in teaching doctrine indeed was older still, and from the sixteenth century on, it would become the standard format for Catholic catechisms. See Gerald S. Sloyan, “Religious Education from Early Christianity to Medieval Times,” in *Shaping the Christian Message*, ed. Gerald S. Sloyan (Glen Rock, NJ: Paulist Press, 1958), 23–26.

⁵³ Roberto Bellarmino, *Dottrina Cristiana Breve composta per ordine di N.S. Papa Clemente VIII Dall'Eminentissimo Roberto Bellarmino in Ven. Cardinalis Roberti Bellarmini Politiani SJ Opera Omnia Ex Editione Veneta, Pluribus Tum Additis Tum Correctis Iterum Edidit*, ed. Justinus Fèvre, vol. 12 (Paris: Vives, 1874), 261.

1. M[aster]: Are you a Christian? S[tudent]: I am by the grace of God.
2. M: What do you mean by Christian? S: He who makes profession of the faith and love of Christ.⁵⁴

The questions and answers that Bellarmino presents are simple and straightforward, but a commanding tone pervades the entire catechism: Bellarmino is presenting answers that the student must know.

Canisius strikes a different tone. Although he never states explicitly who asks the questions, from the very beginning of his *Summa*, the questions appear to be of the sort that an inquisitive student would ask of his teacher:

Who can be called a Christian?
What is handed down first in Christian doctrine?
What is understood by the name of faith?⁵⁵

The clear sense that Canisius intends his questions to mirror the queries of an inquisitive student rather than an authoritative examination of a student's faith only grows when the catechism treats topics that the Reformation made controversial. Thus, for example, when treating the sacrament of marriage, Canisius raises the question, "Is marriage permissible for all?" and when treating holy orders he asks, "Are not all Christians equally priests?"⁵⁶ These are questions that arose in the minds of students influenced by Lutheranism, since Luther, along with nearly all other Protestant Reformers, railed against celibacy and the priestly ordination.

But while these questions touch upon hotly debated points, there is no hostility in the answers that Canisius provides. For example, in response to the question about marriage, he offers that "not in the least" is marriage permissible for all, since "the holy Apostles handed down, as Epiphanius said, that it is sin to be converted, after decided virginity, to

⁵⁴ Bellarmino, *Dottrina Cristiana Breve*, 261.

⁵⁵ Canisius, *Summa*, 6.

⁵⁶ Canisius, *Summa*, 47, 42.

marriage.”⁵⁷ And in answer to the question about universal priesthood, he explains that “the witness of scripture” makes clear that “not all are sent as apostles, and if we grasp this name of priesthood properly, not all Christians are reckoned rightly as priests. For the Lord did not whatsoever send all Christians to baptize, nor to evangelize or to remit and retain sins.”⁵⁸

Canisius's is a responsive catechesis that seeks not to command but to persuade.

Here, whether or not Canisius's theology of holy orders and celibacy coincides with modern Catholic teaching is beside the point. The point is that he has responded to real questions that his students had, and he did so in a way that both respected their intelligence and avoided any *ad hominem* attacks against Lutherans.

From this perspective, Canisius's is a responsive catechesis that seeks not to command but to persuade. It is responsive in that it reveals an attentiveness to the real questions of his Lutheran-influenced students, and persuasive in its insistence upon answering these questions thoroughly, thoughtfully, and without rancor. And this responsive, persuasive approach expresses itself not only in how Canisius framed questions and answers, but also in what he omitted from his catechism. The sources Canisius does and does not cite, and the manner in which he utilizes these sources, showcase this strategy.

Canisius had realized at Ingolstadt that the scholastic approach to theology got him nowhere with students who had learned from Lutheranism to distrust the “modern novelties” of these latter approaches to the Christian faith. Thus, Canisius only sparingly cites scholastic theologians and medieval councils. By contrast, the catechism is heavy with references to Scripture and the Church Fathers. Yet Canisius knew, as referenced above, that the allegorical interpretations of Scripture employed by the Church Fathers inspired only skepticism and scorn on the part of his students. So when he quoted Scripture, he used only those passages that he felt he could interpret literally, and he steered clear of

⁵⁷ Canisius, *Summa*, 46.

⁵⁸ Canisius, *Summa*, 42.

passages in the Fathers that delved into allegory. Such deliberate lacunae in Canisius's catechism demonstrate not only his desire to persuade a hostile audience, but also his ultimate respect for them and for their intelligence, in that he was willing to discuss doctrine on the terms that they demanded.

One further element rounds out the tonal aspects of Canisius's responsive pedagogy—namely, his apparent desire to make his catechesis gentle and coherent. He frames theological explanations in a way that explains, rather than presumes, the relevance of what he presents. For example, before he launches into his point by point examination of the content of the Apostles' Creed, he discusses what it means to be a Christian and to have faith.⁵⁹ Likewise, at the end of his section on love and the commandments, he asks, "Is there something else to consider as part of this Christian doctrine?"⁶⁰ And in the opening questions of the second book, he asks not only "what pertains to Christian justice," but also "what is sin," including how Christians can flee from sin and "what way leads to the pit of sin."⁶¹ These examples are indicative of how the catechism turns from one subject to another, and demonstrate Canisius's concern to ensure that his audience is with him and that they understand how one piece of doctrine relates to the next.

This is particularly evident in how he relates his teaching on the sacraments to the chapters before it on *faith* and the Creed, *hope* and the Our Father, and *love* and the Ten Commandments. As he concludes his chapter on love, Canisius poses the question, "Should anything else be considered for this part of the Christian doctrine?"⁶² He answers that there remains the "doctrine of the sacraments" that were "instituted as divine instruments for accepting, exercising, increasing, and conserving faith, hope, and love."⁶³ For neither "wisdom nor Christian justice can be received or retained without the sacraments."⁶⁴

⁵⁹ Canisius, *Summa*, 6.

⁶⁰ Canisius, *Summa*, 24.

⁶¹ Canisius, *Summa*, 49–50.

⁶² Canisius, *Summa*, 24.

⁶³ Canisius, *Summa*, 24.

⁶⁴ Canisius, *Summa*, 24.

In the answer to this question, Canisius presents the sacraments as the bridge between his book on wisdom and his book on justice, suggesting that it is only through the grace of the sacraments that we can hope to receive wisdom and pursue justice. He thus leaves his audience with the impression that the catechesis they are receiving has internal logic and coherence. They know what they have learned, what they are learning, and what they will learn.

This responsive, persuasive, and coherent pedagogy prepares Canisius's audience well to receive the teaching he presents in his second book, for by the time they arrive at that point in the catechism, they have grown accustomed to the respect with which Canisius treats their faith and intelligence. In this context, Canisius's use of the spiritual perspective of the Exercises to present a method for moral discernment makes perfect sense. In the way the Exercises schooled retreatants in the discernment of spirits and invited them to free themselves from disordered attachments so as to follow more closely in the footsteps of Christ, Canisius recognized a pedagogy that could provide his intended audience with the tools that they would need to navigate the religiously and morally confused landscape that they inhabited.

In this, he did not seek to give them a set of moral imperatives by which to judge their actions, as this would be a catechesis of command, not persuasion. Rather, he sought to respond to the uncertainty of a world where his readers had to deal both with competing Christian messages on morality and with a Catholic hierarchy known for its frequent moral lapses. In these circumstances, he prioritized that his students learn how to recognize evil so as to avoid it and how to know the ways of good so as to pursue them. As such, his lists of sins, vices, virtues, and good works served not as a set of rules or even an examination of conscience so much as a series of guideposts for navigating uncertain moral territory.

To create this unique approach to catechesis, Canisius used standard features of the catechetical and theological tradition of his day. Whether or not any particular feature he employed—from the question-and-answer format to the teaching of the medieval lists and the use of Augustine's catechetical structure around the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love—is of itself valuable for catechesis today needs to

be subjected to the same criteria by which Canisius deemed them useful and valid for his own catechism. In other words, it is more important to consider the relevance and effectiveness of our catechetical pedagogy than to adhere to any particular structures of the catechetical tradition.

That Canisius himself used this same standard to determine the contents of his catechism is evident in his placement of the Ten Commandments under the unlikely category of wisdom rather than

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justice. It also appears in the emphasis, in his second book, on prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, and poverty, chastity, and obedience, since neither of these lists featured significantly in the tradition of catechesis that he inherited.

These examples all suggest that Canisius understood the difference between, on one hand, the necessary elements of church tradition that his catechism needed to transmit and, on the other hand, what specific traditions of catechesis he might have to leave behind in order to catechize the current generation.

Thus, Canisius's catechism leaves us not with a perfect method for catechizing, but with a helpful method for designing catechesis. The starting point is prayerful and honest listening. This is something Canisius learned from his students at Ingolstadt. Evidently, his initial reaction to their ignorance was one of frustration bordering on despair, but he did not remain in that desolate place. Rather, he paid attention to his students, attending to their questions and critiques and striving to assess their needs.

His example invites us to do the same in our efforts to catechize today: to begin not with our catechetical programs in hand, but with attentiveness to the questions, critiques, and needs of those to whom we desire to proclaim the Good News. Thus, for example, in the contemporary North American context, we might consider the reasons our students themselves give for their skepticism and hostility toward the Catholic Church and toward organized religion in general. If our students doubt the relevance of Catholic doctrine to their lives or, in the face of scandal and corruption, question our authority to speak on the

fundamental issues of life, then we need to begin our catechesis by addressing these concerns.

The second step that Canisius took in crafting his approach sprung naturally from this sort of attentive care for his students, in that he elected to respect rather than to pass judgment on them. That his initial impulse tended toward judgment is obvious from the letter, referenced above, that he wrote to Polanco about his experience in Ingolstadt. But when he began to write his catechism, he did not compose out of this judgmental attitude, but rather chose instead to recognize the goodness and intelligence of those whom he taught. In making this presumption, Canisius conveyed to his students a fundamental respect, even if some of what he presumed remained aspirational. Most importantly, he recognized that not making this presumption risked that his preaching of the Gospel could come across as patronizing and thus alienate his audience long before they had a chance to be persuaded.

More generally, Canisius's approach suggests that, if we want to persuade our students of the truths of the faith, then we need to channel this general tone of respect into lively concern for those aspects of the faith that they deem most curious and problematic. And so, we need not adopt his technique of teaching by questions and answers, but rather his interest in giving real responses to the questions that pressed upon the hearts and minds of his students. This approach sometimes entails shifting our focus away from what we ourselves deem most important in Christian doctrine toward the topics that seem most relevant to our students.

This does not mean that we abandon the teaching of the fundamental issues of the faith to focus on topics that we consider less important. Rather, the idea is that we begin by addressing our students' concerns and then lead them to consider more central doctrines. For example, if our students are bothered by aspects of the church's liturgical practice that seem "old fashioned" to them, such as a priest's vestments or the use of candles and incense, we need not dwell on an elaborate explanation of the various interpretations of what these liturgical elements mean. Rather, we might explain why things in the church can be old fashioned and how this relates to the historical nature of apostolic succession, the Incarnation, and the descent of grace from above.

Giving such explanations allows us to imitate another of Canisius's important stylistic choices—namely, steering clear of theological tropes that do not resonate with our intended audience. His decisions not to cite scholastic theology or to use allegorical interpretations of Scripture teach the value of enlisting arguments and explanations that likely will resonate with our audiences while avoiding what might trigger in them a negative response. The idea here is then not to disregard the problematic but to keep from making our teaching more problematic than it needs to be. But when confronting controversy directly, Canisius shows us how not to dwell upon controversial points but rather to address them by leading from them to what is essential.

Perhaps it is possible to do the same today even with the more neuralgic moral questions relating to sexual relations, sexual orientation, and gender. No matter the popular perception, sexual ethics does not stand alone within Catholic doctrine but connects with essential tenets of the faith. Rather than rehearsing a list of prohibitions familiar to our students from media portrayals of the church, we might then consider how to move thoughtfully from sexual ethics to the incarnational theology that lies at the heart of Christian anthropology. This would lead us from the controversial to the profound and might help our students to consider that even moral norms with which they might disagree are rooted in a dramatically positive understanding of Jesus Christ as the exemplar of what it means to be human.

In this vein, Canisius engaged in the similarly controversial problems of his students while also taking the time and care to explain to them why he was teaching what he taught and how it all fit together. As such, there need be no mystery in our pedagogy, and by avoiding such mystery, we allow students to follow our logic more carefully while ourselves gaining credibility. If students know where we are going and how each point fits into the whole, then they might be less likely to suspect that we are attempting to trick them—a suspicion that Canisius faced in his own context just as we face it in ours. Furthermore, this basic pedagogical openness provides the foundation for the central feature of Canisius's catechesis to persuade rather than to command.

This is what Canisius learned about catechesis from the Spiritual Exercises. The Exercises do not direct the persons making them into a

particular way of life, but rather provide tools by which persons learn to be free from disordered affections and to orient their affections more fully toward the service of God in imitation of Christ. As such, the Exercises attest to a distinct vision of life and of the kinds of decisions that will lead people “to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by means of doing this to save their souls.”⁶⁵ But far from suggesting that all people should aspire to only one way of life, the Exercises propose to help people make an election regarding the specific way of life to which they feel suited and called.

On this note, the introductory annotations make clear that there is no one uniform experience of the Exercises. Rather, the one giving the retreat needs to keep in mind that the Exercises “should be adapted to the disposition of the persons who desire to make them, that is, to their age, education, and ability.”⁶⁶ And when it comes to the outcomes of the Exercises, it is similarly important that “the one giving the Exercises should not urge the one receiving them toward poverty or any other promise more than toward their opposites, or to one state or manner of living more than to another.”⁶⁷ Ultimately, according to the logic of the Exercises, in place of the plans that the giver of the exercises has for the retreatant, “it is more appropriate and far better that the Creator and Lord himself should communicate himself to the devout soul.”⁶⁸ In this way, the Exercises provide a vehicle by which the one making them can encounter God. What God will ultimately call forth from the life of the retreatant is not something predetermined but rather is left up to the prayer of those who seek the will of God in their lives.

Canisius’s application of this spiritual paradigm creates three basic movements in his catechetical program. First, he presents God’s vision of life in all its beauty by casting the wisdom of God and God’s plan of salvation as attractive and responsive to the deep longings of the human heart. Here, Canisius invites us to respond to the needs, questions, and critiques of our students with respect, attentiveness, and openness.

⁶⁵ *SpEx* 23; ed. Ganss, 32.

⁶⁶ *SpEx* 18; ed. Ganss, 26–27.

⁶⁷ *SpEx* 15; ed. Ganss, 25.

⁶⁸ *SpEx* 15; ed. Ganss, 25.

For if we cannot create a vision of Christian doctrine that addresses the actual needs and circumstances of those whom we wish to catechize, then we have failed in the enterprise of catechesis before the conversation has even begun. But if we can use their concerns and questions as means to enter into a discourse about the grandeur and goodness of God, then we can entertain the hope of tapping into that human restlessness that finds rest only in God.

The second movement of his catechesis focuses on the human response to God's vision. Here, rather than instructing students in

Showing our students how Christ lived seems the surest path to a truly human moral vision.

their moral obligations, Canisius proposes to empower students to live a moral life, which he does by offering an argument for the harm that sin inflicts. On this point, he suggests that instead of

telling our students that they should not sin, we should give them knowledge of evil and its wiles and thus show them why they should not sin. In so doing, we provide our students with the most fundamental tool for avoiding sin: knowledge of what sin is, so that they can reject it when they recognize it.

This leads naturally to the third movement of Canisius's catechetical pedagogy, by which he presents the good persuasively. Here, Canisius argues that there can be no more effective and compelling moral vision than one centered on the accompaniment and imitation of Christ. From this perspective, showing our students how Christ lived seems the surest path to a truly human moral vision. In other words, rather than focusing on the myriad good things that they ought to do but often fail at doing, Canisius provides us with a paradigm for moral catechesis with Christ at the center and by which we can invite students to discover ways of doing and pursuing good on their own. As such, we need not limit the pursuit of justice to a list of activities that we have developed in advance. Because if we suggest that the key to a moral life is to know Christ and Christ's Spirit well enough to distinguish it from other spirits, then we have given our students a much more useful tool for living in a world of marked uncertainty.

Peter Canisius's frustration at how ill-prepared he was to confront the challenges of his mission in Ingolstadt bore great fruit because he confronted that frustration prayerfully and honestly and then allowed his Jesuit formation to guide his response to it. As it turned out, he was much better equipped to respond to the challenges of the day than he thought. For it did not take a new degree in theology or special training to produce his catechism; it simply took the care, creativity, and discernment that he had learned through the Exercises and the rest of his Jesuit formation.

Certainly, Canisius faced a daunting task, as we do today when we confront the challenge of evangelizing and catechizing those who are ignorant and hostile as well as those persuaded that there is neither truth nor goodness in belief in God, let alone in belief held within the context of a complex and sinful Church. Yet Canisius's witness remains valid and poignant whether we face with the skeptical, the hostile, or the indifferent. In each case, we are invited to presume good will, to listen to concerns, and to share the beauty of God's wisdom in a manner both gentle and coherent. In other words, we are invited to meet them where they are and to give them reason to consider why faith in Jesus Christ speaks good news amid the particular challenges that they face.

Perhaps the members of the Society of Jesus today are, like Peter Canisius, better equipped than we realize to respond to the unique challenges of proclaiming the Good News and forming people in Christian teaching. Perhaps the key is to allow our catechesis to transcend the limits of whatever particular schools of theology we have studied, and instead to delve into the spiritual riches that we have inherited from our Jesuit formation. In this way, a renewed Jesuit catechesis might offer something unique and uniquely relevant to the church and the world today.

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