



The Holy See

**LETTER OF HIS HOLINESS
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO THE GERMAN BISHOPS**

Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate,

1. When on 2 September 1549 St Peter Canisius obtained Pope Paul III's blessing for his mission in Germany, he knelt to pray at the tomb of the Prince of the Apostles, Peter. What he inwardly experienced impressed him so deeply that in a passage of his confessions he states: "You know, O Lord, how intensely you entrusted Germany to me that day. Since then Germany has always occupied my thoughts and I have ardently desired to offer my life and death for her eternal salvation".^[1] This was the plan of life to which he remained heroically faithful until his peaceful death on 21 December 1597.

In his Encyclical *Militantis Ecclesiae*, of 1 August 1897, my esteemed Predecessor Leo XIII rightly honoured with the title "Second Apostle of Germany" him whom Pope Pius IX had beatified on 20 November 1864.^[2] When on 21 May 1925 he was raised to the honours of the altar by Pope Pius XI, he was awarded the title of doctor of the Church.

In his loving providence, God made St Peter Canisius his ambassador at a time when the voice of the Catholic preaching of the faith in the German-speaking countries risked being silenced. These were two defining elements in the development of the Church doctor's personality and work: Germany, which then covered a much larger area than it does today, and the truth of the Catholic faith, which was faced with various challenges.

2. As a "fellow worker in the truth" (3 Jn 8), Peter Canisius served the Church in Germany in many ways. Even when he devoted himself to political and organizational activities, preaching the truth remained the goal of his work, and catechesis and pastoral care the leitmotiv of his creative

energy. Both the extraordinary appreciation he received from religious and secular authorities and the obstacles that his adversaries sought to put in his way demonstrate the way in which honesty and shrewdness were combined in him.

The saint paid particular attention to young people, whose intellectual and religious formation he saw as an essential condition for Germany's Catholic future. It was this activity which was recognized by his confrères in the Society of Jesus and which resulted in the creation a few decades later of a spiritual élite who became the foundation of that cultural era, when what the Council of Trent had sowed produced its abundant harvest.

Such an encouraging experience shows us the great importance that a school imbued with the Gospel spirit could have today: closely connected to the life of the Church and committed to lofty cultural ideals. Therefore, dear Brothers, I strongly recommend support for the Catholic school system, which in Germany has been exemplarily organized for quite some time. Those who serve young people are serving the future of the Church and of culture. For this reason a youth formation in the spirit of the Church is an indispensable service for Germany's cultural and religious flourishing, for which it is also worth making long-term sacrifices of a financial and spiritual nature.

3. The fact that Peter Canisius, despite his tireless ecclesial activity, left extensive theological writings causes wonder and admiration. If theologians are evaluated on the basis of their creative and speculative qualities and their critical-historical talents, it is difficult to find in him particular originality or great intellectual depth. That the saint was far removed from such pretensions can certainly be attributed to the fact that in the confused conditions of the time in which he lived he saw himself as a pastor sent to men in service to the truths of the faith: "I want to reawaken in others and in myself a greater fervour so that the Catholic deposit of faith, which the Apostle did not entrust to us without reason and which is preferable to all the riches of this world, is kept treasured, intact and authentic, because on it depend Christian wisdom, overall peace and human holiness".^[3] Peter Canisius consciously immersed himself in the flow of sacred Tradition, which the Apostles had begun and handed down, so that as a living tradition it would link every new generation of believers to the sources of Revelation in Jesus Christ. Canisius combined intellectual learning with holiness of life and — according to an ideal of his age marked by humanism and the Renaissance — with the refinement and elegance of the spoken word, so that soon after his death he was known as the "Augustine of his time".

Bringing theological knowledge closer to Scripture and Tradition in accord with the Church's Magisterium and witnessing to it in one's personal life —that is a message for all those today who devote themselves to teaching theology. The work of Peter Canisius shows that scholarly theology becomes fruitful only if it serves revealed truth. This task can only be carried out by theologians who do not create a critical distance between themselves and the Church, but make their home in her as believing, hoping and loving members. For this reason the theologian, like a seismograph, must follow the sudden changes in the human sciences, and instead of becoming a slave to them,

he must regard their discoveries in the light of faith and evaluate them from this standpoint. Only in this way can he be an honest and reliable interlocutor for the secular sciences seeking ethical direction. The Church is therefore the proper environment for the theologian.

Just as a fish cannot live outside water, so the theologian can only remain faithful to his identity if his investigations and questions, his research and his work are firmly rooted in the life of the Church.

4. Peter Canisius did not care only for the "great ones" in the Church and political life. He also addressed the "little ones", especially children. He writes in one letter: "Others can use their work as a pretext; they can aim at higher roles that render the greatest services to the Church.... They can even justify themselves by saying that they themselves do not want to become children among children. Christ, the Wisdom of God himself, did not shy away from children but treated them with trust".^[4] When he had the opportunity, he devoted himself personally to instructing children in the faith; at the same time he sought the opportunity of addressing the new generations of the German-speaking Catholic countries, expounding doctrinal and moral teaching in written catechisms. His profound capacity for understanding the learning abilities of his readers led to three different catechisms aimed, on the basis of language, at three different age and educational groups, but which were substantially identical in their structure and content. Although the time when Canisius worked was tense and full of trials, the saint remained faithful to his principle of avoiding exaggerated polemics so as not to encourage further polarization but to put Catholic teaching in the forefront, without even naming enemies much less attacking them.

In this regard I call to mind my Apostolic Exhortation *Catechesi tradendae* which continues the legacy of the "Church doctor of preaching" and develops the principles of contemporary catechesis. Structured in a systematic way, catechesis should offer the essentials of Catholic doctrine with the necessary completeness and, depending on the educational level of its audience, apply it to all areas of Christian life.^[5] If a mature conscience presupposes sound knowledge, then a solid knowledge of the faith is necessary so that during his life, which today makes him sometimes feel as if he were walking on the edge of a precipice, a person can distinguish between true and false, good and evil, the saving path and the wrong path.

To the many men and women who are involved in the frequently difficult ministry of catechesis I express my deepest gratitude. After the political changes in the Eastern countries, the task of catechesis has taken on a new dimension. This service of the Church is not only addressed to children and young people, but also to adults. In your country there are many people who have been deprived of the truth about Jesus Christ or who, once having believed in it, have now deliberately excluded this truth from their lives. I am grateful for the many catechetical efforts you are making to offer those searching for meaning in life a spring to draw water from that not only quenches their burning thirst, but "gives eternal life" (Jn 4:14).

5. The first source from which Peter Canisius drew as if from an elixir of life was Sacred Scripture. He referred to it especially when he preached. Whether he was in a cathedral or a princely court, in a parish church or in a convent, the pulpit was his preferred place in the service of the truth. He himself once said that in the Church of God there was no more worthy, effective and blessed role than that of the preacher who carries it out faithfully and who sets forth and explains to the people the correct interpretation of God's Word. Vice versa, Christianity is never so gravely harmed as when preaching is entrusted to those who teach error.^[6] A reflection on the great preacher Canisius reminds us that the sermon has a prominent place among the forms of religious discourse. In fact it is not only a way to create communion through communication, but is the echo of the very voice of Jesus Christ, who urges men: "This is the time of fulfilment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the Gospel" (Mk 1:15).

In our age the role of preacher is especially challenging. Because of the message of the mass media, whose impact — often strengthened by images — man finds hard to resist due to a tendency to present the values they communicate in a simplistic and questionable way, the preacher often feels like one "crying in the wilderness" (cf. Mt 3:1-3). All the same, even today a sermon represents a great possibility for transmitting the faith. In this regard, the personal contact established between preacher and listener takes on special importance. The immediacy of the encounter permits the message to prove its authenticity. The preacher is not only a teacher but first and foremost one who bears witness. The Word is expressed through an intermediary so that the homily resounds in a way like an echo of Christ's preaching: "He who hears you, hears me" (Lk 10:16). For this reason it is imperative that the priest himself, especially on the occasion of the Eucharistic celebration, exercises the ministry of preaching.

On the basis of this great duty, I encourage everyone to whom the office of preaching is entrusted to prepare himself thoroughly for this task by study, prayer and reflection. If the Word of Sacred Scripture becomes the preacher's daily bread, it will be easier for him to present the Good News to his faithful as the Word of life.

6. As I already recalled at the beginning of my Letter, the Second Apostle of Germany drew inspiration for his life's work by praying at the tomb of his great patron saint, the Apostle Peter, and he received the blessing for his mission from the latter's successor, Pope Paul III.

With deep gratitude today we can say that the unity between the Holy See and the German Bishops is very strong. The signs of this solidarity and spiritual communion, which you offer me again and again, fill me with joy. Numerous priests and faithful also show me their generosity and devotion. For its part, the Holy See has always put the highest value on its close relationship with the Church in Germany and has expressed to her many times its particular appreciation. I too, during my three Apostolic Visits, spoke of my closeness to the Church in Germany. As you know, the Successor of Peter, to whom the Lord entrusted the task of strengthening his brothers, feels committed to the example of St Paul, Apostle of the Gentiles, and cares for the whole community.

For this reason, what Pope Pius IX said during the First Vatican Council applies: "This supreme authority of the Bishop of Rome, Venerable Brothers, does not oppress, but helps; it does not destroy, but builds up; it reinforces in dignity, unites in love, strengthens and protects the rights of his Brothers, the Bishops".^[7] The many people who have experienced political or ideological oppression know how true this is.

The role of the Bishop of Rome also comes to mind when it is a question of Christian unity. Since the days of Peter Canisius, when the painful division of faith in the West was established, the Catholic Church's relations with the Ecclesial Communities resulting from the Reformation have radically changed. I am referring to the Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis redintegratio* of the Second Vatican Council and my Encyclical *Ut unum sint*, and I urge you to study the principles of true ecumenism contained in them and to explain them honestly. The primacy of the Bishop of Rome is an indispensable ministry of service to unity. To "preside in truth and love so that the ship ... will not be buffeted by the storms and will one day reach its haven",^[8] is an urgent task for the Successor of Peter. For this reason I urge you to assume spiritual communion with me as a criterion for your efforts directed to the unity both of the Church in Germany and with the separated Ecclesial Communities. At the same time, I renew the prayer that I offered 10 years ago in the presence of the Ecumenical Patriarch, His Holiness Dimitrios I, asking "the Holy Spirit to shine his light upon us, enlightening all the pastors and theologians of our Churches, that we may seek — together, of course — the forms in which this ministry may accomplish a service of love recognized by all concerned".^[9]

Venerable Brothers!

During the 50 years of his relentless work, in heroic obedience to the service of the truth, often in tears, St Peter Canisius, doctor of the Church, sowed what shortly after his death yielded abundant fruit. His travels in the service of the Catholic faith brought him to all the lands of Central Europe, from his native city of Nijmegen through Rome to Messina, from Strasbourg to my place of birth, Kraków, and finally to Fribourg. National borders were foreign to his work; he regarded himself as serving the Church that transcends nations. What he could only have imagined in the confusion of his time is our hope today, on the threshold of the third millennium: with our help God is about to create "a great springtime for Christianity",^[10] a young Church on the old European continent. May the Mother of God and Mother of the Church, whom the Second Apostle of Germany venerated by his speech, writing and prayer, give you and those entrusted to your care the good advice: "Do whatever *he* tells you" (Jn 2:5). I cordially impart to you my Apostolic Blessing.

From the Vatican, 19 September 1997.

IOANNES PAULUS PP.II

Notes:

[1] *Petri Canisii Epistulae*, I, 54.

[2] ASS 30 (1897), 3-9, espec. 3.

[3] *Meditationes seu Notae in Evangelicas Lectiones* in: *Societatis Iesu Selecti Scriptores II*, Freiburg i. B., 1955.

[4] *Petri Canisii Epistulae* VII, 333 sg.

[5] Cf. *Catechesi tradendae*, n. 21.

[6] *Petri Canisii Epistulae et Acta*, VI, 627.

[7] *Collectio Lacensis*, VII, 497ff.

[8] *Ut unum sint*, n. 97.

[9] Homily of John Paul II during the Eucharistic celebration in St Peter's Basilica, in the presence of Dimitrios I, Archbishop of Constantinople and Ecumenical Patriarch (6 December 1987), n. 3: AAS 80 (1988), 714

[10] *Redemptoris missio*, n. 86.

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