



Militantis Ecclesiae

Encyclical Of Pope Leo XIII On St. Peter Canisius

August 1, 1897

To the Archbishops and Bishops of Austria, Germany, and Switzerland.

1. The interest as well as the honor of the church militant demands that We celebrate frequently with solemn ceremonies the memory of those whose eminent virtue and piety have elevated them to a glorious rank in the church triumphant. These public honors recall their holiness, and this ever-salutary recollection is particularly beneficial in periods of hostility to virtue and faith. This year, by the favor of divine providence, We are permitted to celebrate the third centenary of the death of the great Saint Peter Canisius. Our only desire is to see good men inspired by the same qualities which this man devoted with so much success to the service of Christian society.

2. There exist, in effect, certain analogies between our age and the period in which Canisius lived: a period when the spirit of revolution and looseness of doctrine resulted in a great loss of faith and decline in morals. To deliver youth especially from this double scourge was the goal of this man who, after Boniface, is the second apostle of Germany. He achieved this purpose principally by establishing schools and publishing good books as well as by effective sermons and penetrating debates.

3. Following his example, many of you have energetically used these same weapons against your educated enemies by continually studying all the finest sciences and enthusiastically cultivating the liberal arts in order to defend the honor of religion. You were sustained in this by the desire and approval of the popes whose constant preoccupation has always been to preserve the ancient majesty of the arts and to promote the constant progress of culture. You are aware that Our greatest desire has been to see to the proper education of youth. We have everywhere made all possible provisions to ensure it.

4. We now gladly take advantage of this occasion to present the vigorous leader Peter Canisius as a model to all who fight for Christ in the Church's army. By realizing that they must ally the weapons of knowledge with the weapons of justice, they will be able to defend the faith more vigorously and effectively.

5. We will easily understand how great was the task undertaken by this strong defender of the Catholic faith in the interest of the Church and of society if we consider the situation in Germany at the beginning of the Lutheran revolt. Moral standards had changed and as they continued to worsen, it was easy to fall into error - but this very error hastened the final collapse of morals. The number of those leaving the Catholic faith gradually increased. Soon the poison spread to most of the provinces and infected all classes. Many considered the cause of religion in that realm to be desperate and doubted that any remedy remained to be tried. Indeed it is clear that all would have been lost if God had not intervened with powerful aid.

6. In Germany there still were men of solid faith, remarkable for their knowledge and love of the faith. There were still the leaders of the house of Bavaria and Austria and, at their head, the King of the Romans, Ferdinand I. These men were resolved to preserve and to defend the Catholic faith with all their might. But the greatest new help which God sent to Germany in this period was the Society of Loyola which was formed during this troubled period. Peter Canisius was the first German to enter this society.

7. This is not the place to recall in detail the life of this man, so eminent in sanctity, the zeal with which he labored to restore harmony and union to his country torn by dissension and revolt, the ardor of his public debates with the teachers of error, his inspiring sermons, the persecutions he suffered, the many countries he travelled through, and the difficult missions he undertook in the interest of the faith. However, to return to the weapons of knowledge which we have mentioned: how constantly, readily, wisely, and fitly he employed them! Upon his return from Messana where he went as a teacher of rhetoric, he committed himself to the teaching of the sacred sciences in the academies of Cologne, Ingolstadt, and Vienna. Here he followed the royal road of the most approved learned men of the Christian school and revealed to the Germans the treasures of scholastic philosophy. As this philosophy was shunned at that time by the enemies of the faith because it was a great support of Catholic truth, he had it taught publicly in the schools and colleges of the Society of Jesus for whose establishment he had worked so hard.

8. He did not hesitate to descend from the heights of wisdom to the basics of writing. He undertook the instruction of children and even composed elementary writing books and grammars for their use. Indeed just as he often came back from preaching to the courts of kings to address the people, so, after learned writings on dogma or morals, he used to compose pamphlets destined either to strengthen the faith of the people or to arouse and nourish their piety. He had wonderful success

in preventing the inexperienced from getting caught in the nets of error. The Summa which he published for this purpose is a compact and tightly-knit work, written in beautiful Latin and not unworthy of the Fathers of the Church. This remarkable work was enthusiastically received by learned men in almost all the countries of Europe. Less voluminous but no less useful were the two famous catechisms which this blessed man wrote for less cultivated minds: one for the religious instruction of children, the other for young men already involved in the study of the arts. These two works had such a great success among Catholics immediately upon publication that almost all professors charged with teaching the basics of the faith had them in hand. They were used not only in the schools as a spiritual milk for the children, but they were also explained publicly in the churches to the benefit of all. Thus, during three centuries Canisius has been regarded as the teacher of Catholics in Germany. In popular speech "knowing Canisius" was synonymous with "preserving the Christian faith."

9. These details from the life of this great saint indicate clearly enough to all good people the way which they must follow. We know that your nation is particularly famous for the wise and fruitful way in which you dedicate your talent and activity to promoting the greatness of your country and ensuring both public and individual prosperity. But, above all, the wise and virtuous among you should make vigorous efforts for the faith, and they should dedicate all their insight and expressive energy to its glory and defense. For the same purpose they should understand and utilize at once every advance made in the arts and sciences.

10. If there ever existed a period which demanded abundant science and knowledge to defend the Catholic faith, it is assuredly ours in which the rapid progress in all branches of study often furnishes the enemies of the Christian faith with an occasion for attacking it. We must therefore commit the same forces to repel their attack. We must occupy the position first and snatch from their hands the weapons with which they are trying to destroy all links between God and man.

11. Catholics, thus fortified and fittingly instructed, will clearly be able to show that the faith, far from being hostile to human culture, constitutes in fact its apex and summit; that even on points where there is seeming opposition or contradiction, it can be so closely harmonized with philosophy that each enlightens the other; that nature is not the enemy but the companion and helper of religion; finally that the inspiration of religion not only enriches all types of knowledge but also gives literature and the other arts new strength and new life. The splendor and dignity which the sacred sciences draw from the profane sciences derive from the fact that human nature is more affected by teaching which is pleasingly presented. For this reason among nations with a more refined civilization, hardly any confidence is placed in a coarse wisdom, and learned men especially leave aside all that is not imprinted with a certain beauty and charm. "We are indebted to the wise men" no less than "the ignorant," so we should stand in the battle line with the wise and if the ignorant falter, we should lift them up and strengthen them.

12. This area of activity in the Church has indeed been very wide. As soon as the long slaughter ceased and the Church regained its strength, wise men devoted their talent and their learning to glorifying the faith which had been sealed in the blood of its heroes. First the Fathers worked together at this task with their mighty strength. And in general their learned speech was worthy of the attention of the Greeks and the Romans.

13. Aroused by their teaching and their eloquence, many dedicated all their zeal to sacred studies and amassed such a rich patrimony of Christian wisdom that in every age Catholics have been able to draw weapons from it to destroy ancient errors or to annihilate new myths invented by heresy. No age has dissipated these treasures amassed by learned man, not even the age which was exposed to the ravages of the barbarians, when all lovely things were uncared for and forgotten. Consequently if the ancient wonders produced by human mind and hand, if the things which were once held in great esteem by the Greeks and the Romans have not entirely perished, it must be attributed entirely to the zeal and effort of the Church.

14. Even though the study of the arts and learning sheds so much glory on religion, those who dedicate themselves to these studies should use all their intellectual power and all their efforts to ensure that their knowledge not be selfish and sterile. Learned men should direct their studies to the profit of the Christian community and dedicate their own free time to common pursuits so that their knowledge may not seem an enterprise undertaken haphazardly but one which has practical application. Now such an obligation is especially clear in the instruction of youth, a work which is so important that it requires the greatest part of one's cares and effort.

15. That is why We strongly encourage you to keep the schools in the fullness of the faith or to restore this fullness if necessary, and to bestow your cares on old as well as new schools, not only on primary schools but also on secondary schools and on colleges. As for the rest of the Catholics in your country, they should strive to preserve safe and intact the rights of the parents and those of the Church in the teaching of youth.

16. These are the things to ensure on this point. First, Catholics should not choose mixed schools but have their own schools especially for children. They should choose excellent and reputable teachers for them. For an education in which religion is altered or non-existent is a very dangerous education. We often see both cases occurring in mixed schools. No one should be ready to believe that instruction and piety can be separated with impunity. In effect, if it is true that We cannot exempt ourselves from the duty of religion at any period of life, in private or public affairs, so much the less should this duty be omitted at any age which is thoughtless, in which the spirit is ardent and exposed to so many inducements to evil.

17. To organize teaching in such a way as to remove it from all contact with religion is therefore to corrupt the very seeds of beauty and honor in the soul. It is to prepare, not defenders of the nation, but a plague and a scourge for the human race. Once God is suppressed, what can keep young people dutiful or recall them when they have strayed from the path of virtue and fall into the abyss of vice?

18. Secondly, it is necessary to teach religion to children, but not only at specified times. All their teaching should occur in an atmosphere of Christian piety. If it is otherwise, if this sacred inspiration does not penetrate the spirits of the teachers and of the students, the instruction will produce only little fruit and will often even have seriously harmful consequences. Every discipline has its own dangers and the young people will not know how to avoid them unless certain divine restraints are imposed on their intelligence and their heart. So We must beware that the essential thing, the practice of justice and piety, not be relegated to second place; that youth, restricted to those things alone which are visible, not crush the strength of virtue; that while the teachers carefully spell out the basics and the intricacies of some tiring discipline, they have no concern for the true wisdom whose "beginning is the fear of the Lord" and whose precepts should govern the whole of life. The knowledge of many subjects should always go hand in hand with the care of the spirit. Religion should give shape and direction to all branches of knowledge. Its majesty and sweetness should strike home and inspire the souls of the young.

19. Since the intention of the Church has always been that all types of studies be concerned with the religious formation of youth, it, is necessary that this part of teaching not only have its own place - and a principal place at that - but also that nobody should exercise such a serious office without having been judged suitable and authorized to perform it by the Church.

20. But it is not only in the education of children that religion claims her rights. There was a time when the government of every university (especially the University of Paris) subordinated all branches of study to theology to the extent that nobody was considered to have reached the heights of knowledge unless he had obtained a doctorate in theology. The restorer of the Augustan age, Leo X and after him the other popes, wanted the Roman Athenaeum and the other universities to be like strong fortresses at a period when impious wars raged against the church. Here, under the guidance and the inspiration of Christian wisdom, youth would receive its education. This system of studies which put God and religion in first place produced excellent results. Certainly it ensured that the youth thus educated remained more faithful to their duties. These happy results will be repeated among you if you strive energetically to have the rights of religion respected in your secondary schools, gymnasia, lycaea, and academies.

21. But never forget that disunity of spirit and lack of harmony in action render vain the best intentions and useless all efforts. What can the divided forces of people accomplish against the united attack of our enemies? What good is

individual bravery if there is no common tactic?

22. That is why We exhort you to abandon all stubborn controversy, every partisan contention, for these are causes of disunity. Thus everyone should act in harmony to define the Church. They should concentrate their forces and direct them toward the same goal, with the same intention "concerned with preserving unity of spirit in the bond of peace."^[1]

23. The memory of a great saint has persuaded Us to give this advice. May his illustrious example remain fixed in your minds and arouse the love of wisdom which he himself possessed. May this same wisdom always work for the salvation of man and for the defense of the Church's authority.

24. We are confident, venerable brothers, since this matter is your special concern, that you will find among learned men many helpers to share in the glory of this work. Those to whom Providence has given the noble duty of educating youth will be of most assistance on account of the nature of their work.

25. If they remember the saying of the ancients, that knowledge merits the name of cleverness rather than wisdom when it is separated from justice, or better yet if they meditate on the words of Scripture: "They are vain, those men in whom there is no knowledge of God,"^[2] they will learn to use the weapons of knowledge less for their personal gain than for the general good. They can expect their efforts to produce the same fruits as Peter Canisius long ago obtained in his colleges and institutions: obedient young people who are eager to learn and are vigorous who detest the example of the impious, and are equally attracted to knowledge and virtue. When their piety has grown deep, there will practically be no need to fear that their souls will be affected by error or turned away from virtue. It is on them that the Church, on them that society base their fondest hope. They will be the eminent citizens of the future on whose wisdom, prudence, and knowledge will depend both the salvation of the social order and the tranquility of domestic life.

26. In conclusion, let Us offer Our prayers to God who is the Lord of Knowledge and to his Virgin Mother, called the Seat of Wisdom through the intercession of Peter Canisius who served the Church so well by his teaching. May He see fit to answer Our prayers for the growth of the Church and the good of youth. Filled with this hope, We impart to each one of you, venerable brothers, to your clergy and to all your people our apostolic blessing as a pledge of heavenly favors and a testimony of Our paternal good wishes.

Given in Rome at St. Peter's the first day of August, 1897, the twentieth year of Our Pontificate.

Endnotes

1. Eph 4.3.
2. Wis 13.1.