



PETER CANISIUS 1521-1597

Peter Canisius was the first superior of the German Province of the Society of Jesus. He worked as a missionary to win back the lands that had declared allegiance to Martin Luther's reforms. An understanding of the political structure of the Jesuits allows us to see why these early missionaries were so prized during the Catholic Reformation. Unlike the medieval world, Ignatius's time needed a mobile, highly educated, rhetorically skilled, and independent religious order to confront a transformed society. The land-based economy with its inherit-ed privileges was fast giving way to an economic system based on the exchange of goods and capital. The age of discovery had opened up the Americas and the Far East to European interests. The stationary, isolated, monastic communities that had served the middle ages as the primary institutions of transmission of culture and of education could clearly not adapt to these new needs. Even the great preaching orders, the Franciscans and Dominicans, founded in the thirteenth century, were not structured to serve a universal church faced with the challenge of the Protestant Reformation. Ignatius established an order defined under canon law as Canons Regular. The vow of stability (adherence to a specified place) and the performance of common prayers said in a monastic choir so characteristic of medieval monasticism were replaced with Ignatius's emphasis on the vow of obedience. Obedience to one's superior, and a hierarchical but international structure leading to the Jesuit General and therefore to the Pope, allowed the Jesuits to respond to apostolic work in far-flung lands and to work singly or in groups.

Canisius is one of the first great examples of the efficacy of the Society's structure and of its educational ideals. He was born in Nijmegen, the Netherlands, to an aristocratic and highly educated family. While in Cologne from 1536 to 1546 he associated with a group of priests who had been influenced by internal reform movements within the Catholic Church, such as the *Devotio Moderna*, which emphasized simplicity of life style and the personal experience of Christ through meditative prayer. After attending a retreat given in 1543 by Peter Faber, one of the original six companions of Ignatius, Canisius entered the Society and, in 1556, was appointed by Ignatius as the first superior of the German Province.

For thirty years he labored in Germany, setting up schools, reforming church hierarchy and preaching, especially in Ingolstadt, Vienna, Augsburg and Munich. Of primary importance for such reforms were his catechisms. These consisted of clear questions with precise answers, and were offered in different formats for students, clerics and lay adults. They



went through more than two hundred editions during his lifetime. He was inevitably a trusted adviser to Pius IV, Pius V and Gregory XIII, and was later called by Leo XIII (1878-1903) the "second Apostle to Germany after Boniface."



In the narrative scene we see Canisius instructing two seated men while a crucifix shines brightly before him. The scene is based on a painting by Cesare Fracassini, 1864. Vatican Museum. Canisius advises Emperor Ferdinand I and Cardinal Otto Truchsess of Walburg, Bishop of Augsburg. Canisius knew Ferdinand well and served him as an adviser, particularly during Ferdinand's negotiations concerning the Peace of Augsburg (1555) that ended the warfare between Catholic and Protestant forces in the Holy Roman Empire.

In the central image Canisius is robed in the plain sixteenth-century clerical garb the Jesuits wore. A cape is worn over his belted vestments, and a string of rosary beads, a devotion of which he was very fond, with the IHS crest hangs on his belt. He points to a book of Catechisms in his hand. Next to his head is a seated white dog, haloed with a red circle. The dog was a distinguishing attribute of Canisius because his name is derived from the Latin root canis (dog). The border symbols are the open book inscribed Catechismus the IHS impressa of the Society of Jesus, the dog, and a hammer. The latter symbol derives from the name he was given, malleus haereticorum (hammer of heretics).