



## German History in Documents and Images

Volume 1. From the Reformation to the Thirty Years War, 1500-1648  
The Plight of the Old Faith – Peter Canisius, SJ, to Giovanni Cardinal Morone (1576)

By the mid-1570s, the Catholic Church had lost vast sectors of the Empire: more than a dozen dioceses, including the archbishoprics of Magdeburg and Bremen, as well as hundreds of abbeys and convents. In the entire north, not one ruling dynasty had remained loyal to the old faith. Meanwhile, more than a decade after the Council of Trent, the Catholic bishops had yet to produce a general program for implementing a reform of themselves and their churches.

In 1576, the Dutch Jesuit Peter Canisius (Kanys, 1521-97) sent Rome his assessment of “means for helping Germany in its present state.” His correspondent was Giovanni Cardinal Morone (1509-80), president of the German congregation that oversaw reform efforts in the Empire and Rome’s leading expert on German affairs. Canisius’ report is above all a grim indictment of the German Catholic prelates of his day. It commanded notice, however, because it was composed by a man who, as a Jesuit and a Netherlander, had no personal stake in existing conditions in the German lands, but who had intimate knowledge of the situation in Rome with regard to the German College, the German Congregation, and papal policy. Lastly, Canisius’s report shows that in 1576, a half-century after the German Peasants’ War, Rome was still receiving realistic assessments of the situation from trustworthy informants.

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Some means by which Germany can be helped today.

Among the abuses which now flourish in Germany in the wake of Luther’s pernicious “gospel,” not least are those that reduce day by day the number of Catholics. These are, chiefly, complete ignorance of the faith and ignorance of and contempt for the Church. Furthermore, not only is the life of the laity ruined, but also that of the whole clergy and, above all, the prelates and the religious orders. These abuses, together with heresy, destroy what is left of the Church like a “boar out of the forest” [Ps. 79:14], so that absent opportune countermeasures, it will be impossible either to rescue the Catholics from apostasy or win back the heretics.

What makes these evils nearly incurable is that the clergy high and low refuse to recognize the Roman church as mother and head of all churches, the admonitions and teachings of which they will not heed. If the entire community would listen to the Roman church, as it should, and if everything were ordered according to its behest, then surely the walls of Jericho would collapse and victory for Israel be won. These injuries, to be sure, have grown like a cancer, so that countermeasures will apparently no longer be tolerated. Yet we must continue to seek the means by which such numerous and great abuses can be overcome and [we must] deploy them, so that the tares will be uprooted, and the fruit will flourish and be borne in abundance into the barns of the Lord [Matt. 13:24-30]. Of such countermeasures I will very briefly mention a

few which can perhaps be introduced sooner, because they are easier, but they will nonetheless once again produce great fruit.

1. The first means and the readiest at hand – as Our Holy Father has already shown – is to supply German youth with a good education in various kinds of seminaries, which he is wisely building at his own expense. To be sure, the existing German College at Rome is already contributing greatly to this goal. Yet because the costs are higher there, and many, who can't tolerate the climate, fall ill again and again, and because of other disadvantages, it seems more advisable to keep only a small number of Germans at Rome and to erect several seminaries in Germany itself. In this way, more students can be supported; it will be easier to form them in the truly Christian way of life; they will make faster progress in their studies; and the Apostolic See will become better known and more honored. From such seminaries, surely, will emerge not only scholars but also young men who have been tested in every way. Through such means, ignorance will disappear, along with the desire for material advantage and immorality, plus all of the other evils they produce. Once this is accomplished, what can we not expect for Germany! The unexpected beginnings of the seminary at Vienna are a good example of what can be done.

2. The second remedy is that the Holy Father continues to negotiate with the German bishops for the establishment of such seminaries until they finally take the matter in hand. If the prelates cannot or will not construct entire seminaries, then each should at the very least pay for eight, ten, or more students at one of the papal seminaries. In addition to learning about scholastic theology and current controversial questions, these students should especially hear lectures on matters of the conscience, for this is the area of greatest ignorance. One should also have particular concern for the way of life and see that alcoholism, a root of many outrages in Germany, is eliminated. For what a tragedy it usually is when an inferior way of life has the guise of learning!

3. Another remedy is to restore the monasteries to their earlier condition and reform them, for they bring forth much good when they are in good order and produce many abuses when they are in disorder. This will be, especially given the current state of affairs, extremely costly work. One could start in a province in Germany to which virtuous monks have been sent from elsewhere with the consent of secular princes. Moreover, it would be entirely appropriate if one not only gave the seminarians the opportunity to enter a religious order but also urged them to do so. Because they come from the seminary well mannered and well trained, and they could easily reform the monastery they entered over the course of time, if not immediately. The apparent effectiveness of this measure is confirmed by experience.

4. Most bishops were censured by the church because of their ignorance of church law. I do not wish to discuss the fact that a fair number of them have entered their offices not through the open doors but have slipped in via other ways. [ . . . ] Therefore, the best thing would be for the pope to absolve them initially of all censures. Furthermore, lest they quickly fall again under such censures, the pope should instruct those who wish to avoid incurring censure by being

ordained by or receiving other sacraments from a bishop they know to be himself under censure. For in that case, they, too, would fall under censure.

5. In Austria and Bohemia, more than elsewhere, there are many abbots and superiors, who, though canonically elected, had never been monks. As laymen nominated by a secular prince, they laid on vestments and took vows on the same day, though without having requested or received confirmation or dispensation from the Apostolic See. The princes take the largest part of the income for themselves, and the laymen, once appointed as monastic superiors, not only live in a worldly manner but also permit their subordinates to do the same. Thus arise offenses so numerous they can scarcely be named. Would it not be advisable for the Holy Father to negotiate with the princes, so that in the future they should renounce such, or should they retain the right of presentation [to such offices], provided they abide by the stipulations of the Council of Trent?

6. Not only do the bishops seldom visit their dioceses, but their visitations, when held, are rarely beneficial. This is the principal reason why they are ignorant of what needs to be reformed or regulated. Then, too, they lack the necessary zeal and the spiritual force to accomplish these duties. Therefore, it would be good if the Holy Father would negotiate with at least those bishops and learned men who are prepared to conduct visitations, have zeal for God, and distinguish themselves by the purity of their lives. Under the full authority of the Holy See, these men should be empowered to give absolution from most censures and ecclesiastical punishments; to visit dioceses, together with the local bishops and vicars-general, and, if possible, also the monasteries; to suppress the abuses that have crept in and reintroduce the holy habits coming from custom and practice regarding the dress and tonsure of the clergy, the decoration of churches, the celebration of the Holy Mass, and the dispensation of the sacraments. From such actions the local bishops will learn how the visitation of a diocese is carried out, so that in the future such visitations may quite often be successful. Attaining this goal will be helped along if, on the pope's order, instructions for the visitation of a diocese are written and sent to individual bishops in Germany. In order to carry out the visitation and write instructions, it is first necessary to obtain from experienced men full knowledge of the pernicious abuses that have crept into the religious houses and clergy. To name each and every one of them would be a difficult task.

7. Great damage arises wherever unworthy men are indiscriminately chosen and appointed as priests. This happens because there is a shortage of clergy, and because prelates are ignorant and careless. The first shortcoming is easily corrected with the establishment of the seminary; the second is remedied when, at the behest of His Holiness, regulations for holy candidates and those who are to be appointed as priests are issued and sent to bishops.

8. Since we see many books from Satan's workshop appearing daily to seduce the poor people with their poison, it will be very beneficial if some distinguished men are selected by the Apostolic See to refute and fight back against the books of the heretics, above all, Calvin's

*Institutes* and [Martin] Chemnitz's *Condemnation of the Council of Trent*,<sup>1</sup> both of which cause considerable damage. To this end, it would be entirely appropriate for the pope to establish a printing house or entrust an existing one with the publication of books to refute the heretics.

9. So many incur the censures and punishments reserved to the Apostolic See that this can hardly be regarded as a venial sin. Since it is rather difficult to request absolution or dispensation from the Apostolic See – people are often afraid of or do not want to communicate with Rome – two aids seem necessary to help the souls that still have not completely shaken off the yoke of obedience. First, the papal nuncios to the emperor should become well acquainted with the controversial questions, possess more than an average command of the Latin language, be wise, lenient, and zealous, and live virtuously and without any appearance of greed. They should receive extensive authority for granting absolution and dispensations and should also be authorized to confer these powers on others. Second, because it is difficult and nearly impossible to make people appeal to the papal nuncio if they have not already turned to Rome, the pope needs to have in different areas of Germany some reliable and knowledgeable representatives to whom he should also grant extensive authority. However, to grant such extensive authority to bishops, who are burdened with an ignorance second to none in all of these matters, amounts not to dispensing but rather to squandering grace.

10. It is difficult for anyone to comprehend the woeful situation in Germany and its plight, unless he has it with his own eyes and becomes acquainted with it from his own experience. It would thus be beneficial, so as to resolve the many questions properly and to conduct German affairs with the Apostolic See quickly and easily, if the pope were to choose as secretary for the business of the northern lands someone from the College of Cardinals who knows about Germany's affairs. The nuncios and others should write to and consult this person, from whom they could obtain a quick settlement of the business at hand. They would in this case not be obliged to wait so long for a reply from the Secretary of State, who already has enough work to do.

#### **Addendum to the Summer of 1576 Letter to Giovanni Cardinal Morone**

The Holy Father, whom Germany owes so much, will render even more outstanding services to Germany if he establishes – as I stated above – at least three apostolic nuncios there. These can certainly help to rouse the sleepy-headed bishops from their deep slumber and to strengthen the Catholic princes in their devotion to their faith. Indeed, the German bishops and princes would welcome it if nuncios native to their own lands were sent to them from time to time because, on the one hand, they would prefer to speak and give their opinions to them in German rather than Latin – many can barely speak Latin – and, on the other hand, they usually mistrust other nationalities. Perhaps this could be made possible over time if, at the very least,

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Chemnitz (1522-83) of Brandenburg, the foremost Lutheran theologian of his time. Lutheran tradition asserted: "If Martin [Chemnitz] had not come along, Martin [Luther] would not have survived." Cited here is his fiercely polemical analysis and condemnation of the canons and decrees of the Council of Trent – trans.

“secret nuncios,” who are Germans, seek out princes and bishops or are added as advisers to the other nuncios.

In my opinion, one must focus on remedying the serious abuses that emanate from the cathedral churches and that infect the entire German clergy.<sup>2</sup> If this cause of so many grievances is not repaired, there will be no hope whatsoever of finding for Germany good bishops and prelates instead of those who are currently selected from the degenerate nobilities.

Some even believe that the Apostolic See now has better reason to revoke the privileges, which had earlier been granted to the German nobility to fill positions in the cathedral churches, than it had when it granted these privileges. For the canons make the entire clergy hated among the people. They claim rights based on these privileges, rove around like soldiers without discipline, and give offense everywhere.

If the difficult times do not presently allow for the nobles to be removed from the cathedral chapters or thoroughly reformed, then the particular distress at least requires that, following canonical procedures, no heretical nobles should in the future be allowed into the cathedral chapters, and that those who already possess seats in the cathedral chapter should have neither active nor passive votes in episcopal elections. To accomplish this, one should, in my opinion, listen to the proposals of His Imperial Majesty and the archbishops. The election of good bishops will be facilitated if it proceeds unhindered and in accordance with canon law and is not burdened with the stipulations and provisions which, in current common practice, produce unsuitable results.<sup>3</sup> The bishops are thereby fettered and tightly constricted in their duty with respect to visitations and the reform of the clergy.

Moreover, it would be necessary to point out to these noble canons what qualities the elected bishops must possess. Also, that in the future an election is only confirmed by Rome if it was correctly conducted. The ignorance of the newly consecrated bishops is especially crass in questions of canon law and church discipline.

As noted above, bishops are generally elected from the ranks of the degenerate nobility. Before confirming the election, the Apostolic See should examine both the vote of the canons and the judgment of other priests. At the confirmation, the newly consecrated bishop should bind himself to the following points:

They are allowed neither to consecrate nor confer a benefice on anyone who has not previously sworn the confession of faith.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Refers to the cathedral chapters, colleges of priests who elected bishops and, in principal, shared with them the governance of the episcopal territories (in which the bishops exercised temporal authority). Most such chapters were predominantly or absolutely in the hands of regional nobilities – trans.

<sup>3</sup> Refers to the electoral capitulation, a set of written concessions required by the cathedral chapter at the election of a new bishop – trans.

<sup>4</sup> Refers to the Tridentine Profession of Faith, a statement of doctrine compiled by the Council of Trent and administered to ordinands, new bishops, and holders of other ecclesiastical offices – trans.

They must also demand the confession of faith from their councilors and officials. Each bishop must also have in his company a priest versed in theology and canon law, whose advice he can call upon in difficult cases and in making decisions.

They may not tolerate married or heretical priests among their clergy. They must use special care when approving confessors, who may give absolution only if the penitent confesses his sins individually.<sup>5</sup>

The dispensing of confirmation and last rites should be resumed in the parishes where they have passed out of practice. Nowhere is it permitted to introduce communion under both kinds, and, where this is already customary, it should be abolished again if possible.

Where one's own seminary does not exist, a new one should be established, or the bishop should support at least eight to ten stipendiaries to study at a Catholic university.

Heretics may not be buried in the churchyards.

Above all, Our Holy Father must call the newly consecrated bishops' attention to these matters and still others, because in Germany people care very little about them and allow everything to fall into decay. Church discipline is in utter disarray, and the canonical visitation of parishes is scarcely conducted any more.

The Church can gain great help from the universities if they are reformed. Therefore, the Holy Father should summon the authorities so that the theological faculty and seminaries receive consideration. The extreme shortage in Germany of clergy entrusted with pastoral care and of members of the religious orders would thereby be eased, if at least some vacant benefices and other incomes were used for this purpose. It is sad that so few universities remain, and those pathetic, to the Catholics in Germany.

At the present time, the Catholic princes are concerned, above all, to assure that they get along with the bishops, and they attend to the disputes between the ecclesiastical and secular authorities, such as have commonly existed for a long time in several states. For this reason, not only is the freedom of the Church and its jurisdiction considerably hindered, but the concern for religion even suffers huge losses, and sects and heresies benefit. The Imperial Majesty could also assist a great deal with this problem, or one could refer the disputes, with the consent of both parties, to arbitration.

Equally deplorable is the arbitrariness of the Catholic princes and nobles who tax church property and oppress the clergy, as we see everywhere. Perhaps we can see in this, however, how God punishes the clergy for their excesses and other deplorable behavior. The princes seek to excuse themselves on account of tradition, which if anything is an abuse, and to elude,

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<sup>5</sup> And not in common, as the Protestants generally did. This refers to auricular confession, which the Council of Trent defended – trans.

where they only can, the authority of bishops, even in matters which clearly lie under ecclesiastical jurisdiction.

Because the religious orders in Germany are directly threatened with ruin, the highest superior-generals<sup>6</sup> at Rome must, in my opinion, emphasize the following. It must be made clear to them that, if they, after a stipulated period of time, do not support the disintegrating monasteries and staff them adequately with monks, the monasteries with all their incomes will be allocated to other good purposes. It is a disgrace and disaster for the Catholic Church to have monks living in such luxury and looking only after the interest of their estates and disdaining to make time for religious life. It would be better to immediately deploy these places, which are dedicated to piety, as seminaries than to have them either taken over by heretics or employed by secular rulers for profane purposes. It should also be suggested to the generals in Rome that they should found seminaries of their orders in Italy and recruit to them young Germans who can, after being well trained, be appointed to head German monasteries. A financial contribution from the German monastery would allow this plan to be more easily realized.

Some monasteries and collegiate foundations<sup>7</sup> truly annoy the people because they are places of drunkenness and debauchery. If such centers of disease do not allow a doctor's healing hand to come near them, may they be utterly wiped out.

It would also perhaps aid reform in Germany to have the worst abuses and outrages of the clergy, those that especially catch the common people's attention, summarized briefly in writing. His eminence, the papal legate, should negotiate these things closely with the representatives of the four archbishops,<sup>8</sup> who should inform him of their opinion as to how this dreadful and no longer bearable depravity can be eliminated from the German churches before the salt that has lost its savor is cast out and trodden [Matt. 5:13].

Moreover, one could enquire among the archbishops how, in their opinion, the current position of the church could in the midst of great danger and persecutions be maintained undiminished. This is particularly pressing in areas where neighboring heretics present a particular danger and threat as, for example, in the parishes of Westphalia. They should also be asked as to which dioceses need bishop-coadjutors, and, finally, which states most need immediate aid from Catholic preachers, so that the people do not entirely renounce their faith. Furthermore, as to how these states can otherwise be strengthened in their faith, whether through the authority of His Imperial Majesty or words and deeds on the part of the pertinent metropolitans and the bishops.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The highest officers of religious orders – trans.

<sup>7</sup> Collegial foundations [*Kollegiatstifte*] were corporations of secular clergy, who were normally individually beneficed – trans.

<sup>8</sup> It is uncertain which four are meant. The seats of the following archbishoprics lay within the Holy Roman Empire in the narrower sense (i.e., excluding Imperial Italy, the kingdom of Bohemia, and the Baltic region): Mainz, Cologne, Trier, Bremen, Magdeburg, and Salzburg – trans.

<sup>9</sup> Metropolitan = archbishop – trans.

If one should speak earnestly about these and similar points with the archbishops, perhaps they would seize the opportunity, whether here at Regensburg or in their own sees, to think over the matter, hold visitations, and urge and somehow undertake reform. The miserable, deplorable abuses among the clergy, both secular and regular, cry out for such a reform. Because of the clergy, Catholics and heretics alike mock and curse every ecclesiastical office and even the very name of God. It has finally come to pass that men of the church – even when they see the extreme need and the destruction of the church immediately approaching – nonetheless continue to slumber and commit sins, moving knowingly, willingly, and without fear toward their own destruction.

May Christ illuminate the blind in the deep darkness that has come over Germany.

Source of original German text: Albrecht P. Luttenberger, ed., *Katholische Reform und Konfessionalisierung*. Darmstadt: WBG, 2006, pp. 313-21.

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