**St. Peter Canisius, SJ**

**Feast Day: December 21**

**Apostle of Germany and Doctor of the Church**

**Prayer to St. Peter Canisius**

*Saint Peter Canisius, you saw the* [*good*](http://www.catholic.org/encyclopedia/view.php?id=5257) *in even the most troublesome of people. You found their talents and used them. Help me to see beyond the behavior of others that may bother me to the* [*gifts*](http://www.catholic.org/shopping/?category=10)[*God*](http://www.catholic.org/encyclopedia/view.php?id=5217) *has given them.* [*Amen*](http://www.catholic.org/encyclopedia/view.php?id=644)*.*

**Summary of Character**

The principal trait of his character was love for Christ and for his work; he devoted his life to defend, propagate, and strengthen the Church. In the midst of all his activities, Canisius remained essentially a man of prayer; he was an ardent advocate of the Rosary and its sodalities. He was also one of the precursors of the modern devotion of the Sacred Heart.

**Formation**

He was born in 1521 in Nijmegen in the Duchy of Guelders in what is now the Netherlands. His father was a wealthy burgermeister and his mother died shortly after Peter's birth. He earned a Master’s degree at the age of 19 from the University of Cologne. While there, he met Peter Faber, one of the founders of the Society of Jesus. Through him, Canisius became the first Dutchman to join the newly founded Society of Jesus in 1543. He spent several months under the direction of Ignatius in Rome and made his final vows in his presence. Later, at Canisius’ desire, St. Ignatius decreed that all the members of the order should offer monthly Masses and prayers for the welfare of Germany and the North. With apostolic zeal he loved the Society of Jesus; the day of his admission to the order he called his second birthday.

**Interesting Factoids**

* He was delegate to the Council of Trent and in 1565, Pope tasked him with a dangerous assignment to carry the decrees of the council from Rome to Germany through territories of hostile Protestants and vicious thieves.
* Canisius acted as confessor to the "Queen" Magdalena, daughter of Ferdinand I, and as [spiritual adviser](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05024a.htm) to her sisters
* He is credited with opening several Catholic educational institutions and today several high schools are named after him as well as Canisius College in Buffalo, New York.

**Gifted Preacher**

His preaching was said to have been so convincing that it attracted hundreds of Protestants back to the old faith. From 1561-62 he preached about two hundred and ten sermons, besides giving retreats and teaching catechism. In the cathedral, his confessional and the altar at which he said Mass were surrounded by crowds, and alms were placed on the altar. His manuscripts show the care with which he wrote his sermons. Against the influence of evil spirits he recommended the means of defense which had been in use in the Church during the first centuries—lively faith, prayer, ecclesiastical benedictions, and acts of penance.

**Evangelist and Apologist**

Canisius lived during the height of the Protestant Reformation and dedicated much of his work to the clarification of the Catholic faith in light of the emergence of the new Protestant doctrines. The restoration of the Catholic Church in Germany after the Protestant Reformation is largely attributed to the work there of the Society of Jesus, which he led. Canisius was a prolific writer, penning several volumes on Church history and theology. His catechisms were his most important works. For many years during the Reformation, Peter saw the students in his universities swayed by the flashy speeches and the well-written arguments of the Protestants. Peter was not alone in wishing for a Catholic catechism that would present true Catholic beliefs undistorted by fanatics. Finally King Ferdinand himself ordered Peter and his companions to write a catechism. The first issue of the Catechism appeared in 1555 and was an immediate success, and he followed these catechisms with versions directed to younger age groups. During his lifetime his "Catechism" appeared in more than 200 editions in at least twelve languages. It was one of the works which influenced St. Aloysius Gonzaga to enter the Society of Jesus. Canisius’ catechism is today recognized as a masterpiece even by non-Catholics.

**Pastoral Approach**

As intent as Peter was on keeping people true to the Catholic faith, he followed the Jesuit policy that harsh words should not be used, that those listening would see an example of charity in the way Catholics acted and preached. He requested Catholic authors to advocate the truth with modesty and dignity without scoffing or ridicule. The names of Luther and Melanchthon were never mentioned in his "Catechism". Peter believed in the importance in learning and understanding the Catholic faith. His approach to the evangelizing the German people is summarized in an excerpt from a letter he sent to the Vatican: *“If you treat them right, the Germans will give you everything. Many err in matters of faith, but without arrogance. They err the German way, mostly honest, a bit simple-minded, but very open for everything Lutheran. An honest explanation of the faith would be much more effective than a polemical attack against reformers.”*

**Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary**

Canisius taught that, while there are many roads leading to Jesus Christ, for him the veneration of the Blessed Virgin Mary is the best. His sermons and letters document a clear preoccupation with Marian veneration. Under the heading "prayer" he explains the Ave Maria (Hail Mary), as the basis for Catholic Marian piety. He is credited with adding to the Hail Mary the sentence: “Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners,” which was included in the Catechism of the Council of Trent of 1566. Canisius defended Roman Catholic Mariology in his 1577 book, considered to be one of the best theological achievements of the 16th century.

**End of Life**

By the time he left Germany, the Society of Jesus in Germany had evolved from a small band of priests into a powerful tool of the Counter Reformation. Canisius spent the last 20 years of his life in Fribourg, Switzerland, where he founded the Jesuit preparatory school, the College of Saint Michael, which trained generations of young men for careers and future university studies. According to his own account, it was then that **St. Nicholas**, the **patron saint of Fribourg**, made known to him his desire that Canisius should not leave Fribourg again. In 1591, at the age of 70, Canisius suffered a stroke which left him partially paralyzed, but he continued to preach and write with the aid of a secretary until his death in Fribourg. Shortly before his death he declared that he had never regretted becoming a Jesuit, and recalled the abuses which the opponents of the Church had heaped upon his order and his person. After his death, reports spread of the miraculous help obtained by invoking his name.