Aesthetics and Asceticism: The Paradox of the Bodily Senses in the Catholic Reformation

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Abstract

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Thomas Joseph Santa Maria

2022

According to most accounts, following the reformations Protestant worship and tradition became asensual by emphasizing encounters with biblical texts through reading the Bible or hearing sermons. Conversely, Early Modern Catholicism became synonymous with the sensuous, meaning it exploited the senses of faithful Catholics through its incense, art, music, sacraments, and practices. This dissertation challenges these assumptions by demonstrating that there were two sides to Catholic piety that existed in a paradoxical relationship. Surely, Catholic worship appealed to the senses to teach the faith, to meditate and contemplate in prayer, and to move Catholics to greater piety by emulating the saints and their predecessors. I argue that these appeals should not be understood as an unreflective and total embrace of the senses and sensuous worship. Instead, there was another part of the Catholic tradition that demanded careful custody of the senses. Both aspects were present throughout Catholic thought and culture as I demonstrate by analyzing the sermons and spiritual writings of Robert Bellarmine the most important Catholic theologian of the time and one of the most significant implementers of the Council of Trent. What post-Tridentine texts and practices indicate is that both Catholic sensuousness and fear of the senses intensified in this period. I show that this intensification reflected the ways in which Catholicism was not only reacting to its impression of Protestant traditions, but also interacting with other dominant cultural forces including the Renaissance
reevaluation of the body and the rise of scientific empiricism. The weight of tradition and the influence of these cultural and religious movements forced Catholicism into embracing this paradox that affirmed the spiritual utility of the bodily senses, but remained wary of them.
Aesthetics and Asceticism: The Paradox of the Bodily Senses in the Catholic Reformation

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School

Of

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Doctor of Philosophy

By

Thomas Joseph Santa Maria

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Introduction

In his final days, Robert Bellarmine the Jesuit cardinal, archbishop, theologian of controversies, catechist, renowned preacher, and acclaimed spiritual author rededicated himself with renewed vigor to his quill and ink. In those days, he ruminated on moving the earthbound soul toward the lofty heavens, the happiness of the saints, the sorry state of the sinner, the last words of Christ, and life’s most inevitable theme: dying. “The first rule of dying well is living well,” he declared. These were rather contemplative reflections for a man whose life overlapped with some of the most chaotic and momentous religious, political, and intellectual events in the history of the modern world. At the heart of Bellarmine’s activities were the Catholic and Protestant Reformations. Fittingly, Bellarmine’s themes reflected the weighty questions robustly debated in the theological arena. How should a Christian live well? What is the good Christian life? Each tradition approached these questions with rigor, and the polemical and controversial nature of the theology in that time could not tolerate and would not permit the notion that practitioners of other Christian sects believed correctly and lived well. As a result, in the eyes of Catholics, Protestants were heretics and iconoclasts; and in the ears of Protestants, Catholics were hypocrites and idolaters. At the core of this impasse was the relationship between right belief and right practice.

For Catholic theologians, reeling from Protestant critiques, redefining theological principles and their complementary norms in devotional life increasingly became a preeminent preoccupation. For this reason, Pope Paul III convened the Council of Trent,

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which met intermittently over an eighteen-year period from 1545-1563. Paul convened the Council to establish right belief and right worship for Catholics, but its mission to reform Catholicism did not end with the deliberations of Catholic theologians at Trent, nor with the publication of the Council’s sessions. In fact, clarifying doctrine was just a beginning. Tridentine doctrine, and more importantly, practice, had to be communicated to the faithful. In this regard, the Council ostensibly laid the burden for Trent’s implementation on bishops, who increasingly resided in their dioceses. In addition to bishops, the Church found many other well-trained and suitable teachers for its process of Catholicization in Europe and throughout the world in mission territories by creating an unprecedented number of new religious orders. The most famous of these, and those to receive the most attention from admirers and detractors alike, are the Jesuits. The task of these agents of change was both to elucidate right teaching, but also to correlate it to right practice. How should Catholics worship, experience their faith, and live? To answer these questions theologians and ministers employed a wide variety of genres, including theological works, scriptural commentaries, catechisms, ascetic (i.e. devotional or spiritual) writings, sermons, hagiographies, works of art, schoolhouse curricula, and even theatrical spectacles. Works of theology targeted learned theologians, while other genres were more appropriate for laypeople or mixed audiences. In most instances, scholars have paid more

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2 Residence in the diocese was one of the major reform issues of the Council of Trent. It was perhaps the most contentious of the reform decrees. The dispute over episcopal residency was among the most significant causes of tension and delay throughout the Council, see John W. O’Malley, Trent: What Happened at the Council (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).

3 While the wide and long-standing interest in the Jesuits has good cause, it is imperative that the other orders such as the Barnabites, Capuchins, Theatines, Ursulines, and Oratorians receive more attention than they do at present.
attention to the theological works in order to access the minds of the most eminent theologians and thinkers of the day.

For this reason, scholars have parsed the nuances of theological speculation extensively searching for continuities and discontinuities, hopeless impasses, and, more recently, potential for ecumenical rapprochement. The fruit of those labors is a very clear picture of what most major, and many minor, theologians thought about religion, the economy of salvation, eschatology, the Scriptures, and the Church. For early modern thinkers, theology was not limited to these topics, but extended to the role of religion in the state, or religion and ways of knowing. Therefore, in recent decades, religious historians have pursued this line of thinking to advocate for the importance of religious history as a major part of social and cultural history and therefore fundamental to the formation of the modern world.

Alone, these theological texts do not give a clear picture of what happened “on the ground.” How did the theological formulations drafted at Trent and approved at Rome impact religious understanding and practice throughout Catholic Europe? In addition to clarifying doctrine, Trent aimed to expunge “superstition” from worship; that is, to reform practice, to eradicate “abuses.” What was decorous in matters of religion and how would the Church teach and communicate the new standards to the faithful? The media to promote these efforts were already in place as noted above (the arts, liturgy, sermons, etc.), but the means were less clearly defined. Nonetheless, most of these media share one characteristic: a broad appeal to the senses. Catholicism’s sensuous aesthetics have long been apparent to worshippers and critics. Indeed, the dominant understanding of post-Tridentine Catholicism is that it maintained and even amplified its sensuous aesthetic, whereas the
perception of Protestant religion is that it abandoned sensuous worship and decried sensuousness as human works fruitless in the pursuit of salvation. Thus, Catholicism became synonymous with a full body experience of tasting, touching, smelling, hearing, and seeing, while Protestant traditions have been associated with the “faith alone” principle. These widespread interpretations do not grapple with the much more complex and paradoxical relationship between the flesh and spirit, problematized in the earliest days of Christianity by the Apostle Paul, nor with that of the senses and the spiritual life in the western world. On the Catholic side, it neglects the prominent tradition of the custody of the senses. For Protestantism it mutes the place of reading - an act of sight - and preaching - an act of hearing – the Word.

This dissertation examines the ambiguous and paradoxical nature of the role of the senses in worship and ethics in post-Tridentine Catholicism. It is true that Baroque Catholicism targeted the senses in an effort to delight, instruct, and move the faithful toward greater piety. This was true not only in the outward manifestations of the religion such as going on pilgrimages, viewing sacred art, the liturgy, and the sermon, but also in the interior life as well. Perhaps the most famous example of this is St. Ignatius Loyola’s meditations from the *Spiritual Exercises*. Ignatius advocated for a method of contemplation that engaged the senses in the “composition of place.” In that form of prayer, he urged retreatants to engage all five senses: “see the persons...listen to what they are saying...smell the fragrance and taste the infinite sweetness of the Divinity...Using the sense of touch, I will, so to speak, embrace and kiss the places where the persons walk or sit.”

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scene. Ignatius appealed to the memory of bodily feelings to construct an experience that was never physically perceived by the senses. As a result, Ignatius has earned a reputation as “sensorially sympathetic.”

At the same time, and in keeping with the Judeo-Christian tradition, there was a strong mistrust of the senses and an awareness of their danger. The senses and their appropriate use were a matter of life and death, and the stakes were no less than eternal salvation and damnation. While the senses could be a vehicle to communicate right teaching and right practice or to inspire piety, they could also be gates for temptation. Therefore, avoiding temptations that could incite vicious activity depended on chastening the senses. Even the “sensorially sympathetic” Ignatius understood this well. For example, in the *Spiritual Exercises*’s “second method of praying” Ignatius wrote that the retreatant “should keep the eyes closed or intent on one place, and not allow them to wander.”

In the third part of the *Constitutions*, Ignatius developed his most thorough treatment of the senses titled “The Preservation and Progress of those who enter the Society.” He decreed: “All should take special care to guard with great diligence the gates of their senses (especially the eyes, ears, and tongue) from all disorder, to preserve themselves in peace and true humility of their souls....” This raises a vexing issue. If sacred art was initially considered

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6 Ignatius, *Spiritual Exercises*, 252 for more analysis see chapter two.

to be beneficial to the soul by inspiring piety. What about art that was not decorous? As Gian Paolo Oliva S.J. explained, viewing an indecorous image could be catastrophic: “Eve failed at keeping temptation far away, for she saw, ate, and fell. In the absence of good Objects every Sight, and every Sound, once admitted into our souls, strike us and knock us down.” With so much at stake it is clear that the appropriate use of the senses was at the forefront of the post-Tridentine effort to establish right doctrine and practice among the laity.

This in-depth examination of the ambiguity of the role of senses in early modern Catholicism is the first of its kind. The topic is especially compelling given its reliance on the genre of sermons and ascetic texts as its primary sources; and, in particular, the sermons and writings of Robert Bellarmine, which remain understudied. This is unfortunate given their enormous appeal throughout Catholic and Protestant Europe. Nevertheless, it is unsurprising given the general lack of attention paid to devotional literature. These writings reveal the thoughts of the foremost theologians of the time and shed light on how they communicated the contents of the faith to lay Christians with little or no education.

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9 For more on Bellarmine’s popularity and the lack of studies on his spiritual writings and sermons, see below. Though it is not within the scope of this dissertation it is also critical to note that Bellarmine’s letters, all of which are typeset and many digitized, thanks to the work of Xavier Marie Le Bachelet, Sebastian Tromp, and the Gregorian Library in Rome, have not yet been comprehensively studied. Studying those letters with Bellarmine’s sermons and spiritual writings offers a very different picture of the man and his times than we currently have and would provide keen insights into a sorely needed modern biography of Bellarmine.

In this case, the author is as important as the genre. Consequently, studying Bellarmine’s approach to the paradox of the senses is useful for several reasons. First, he was highly influential as a churchman, theologian, preacher, and spiritual writer. Second, his life (1542-1621) brackets the period of the Council of Trent Tridentine and its implementation (1545-1621) nicely. He was born a few years before the Council started (and two years after the Society of Jesus was confirmed by Paul III). He entered the Society of Jesus five years before the Council closed. His uncle Marcello Cervini became the short-lived Pope Marcellus II, and contemporaries noted his zeal for reform. Furthermore, Cervini was also the author of a manual for preachers. Finally, Bellarmine died in 1621 about nine months after the death of Paul V, and about six months before the major canonizations of Ignatius Loyola, Francis Xavier, Philip Neri, Teresa of Avila, and Isidore the Farm Laborer. Excluding Isidore, all of those saints participated in and led various aspects of the Catholic Reformation. In short, Bellarmine was to his contemporaries an exemplar of Catholic virtue, and his thought is exemplary for scholars hoping to gain insight into how the ideas of the Council of Trent were implemented.

Unlike other theological and scientific treatises on the senses, Bellarmine’s sermons and spiritual writings avoid complex and nuanced theological statements in favor of offering advice that any Christian could understand and use profitably. The result is not only a comprehensive understanding of a theology of the body and soul, but also a perception of the process of Catholic reform as reform of worship, devotion, and ritual at

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11 For a more in depth understanding of how this dissertation relates to other work on Bellarmine, see below.

the level of every individual Christian’s senses. These texts raise the question: how did preachers and spiritual authors communicate and implement Tridentine doctrine and practice through sermons? As noted above, one answer is that they used the senses. There are some other pertinent questions worth considering though. Were there different expectations for how to use the senses between lay and religious audiences? When and how did a layperson know where it was appropriate to either engage or avoid using their senses? This latter question is especially relevant to sacred art. The Catholic Church had many preachers and art theoreticians including Gabriele Paleotti, and Federico Borromeo decrying many abuses in art even after the Tridentine decrees. What was a lay person in the pews hearing a sermon about custody of the senses to do if confronted with the mostly nude and athletic form of St. Sebastian? Another interesting question to bear is what role the saints play as exemplars of good practitioners of Catholicism at the level of the senses. In the Twenty-Fifth Session of Trent, the Council Fathers upheld the cult of the saints as well as the use of images. How did the reformation era saints live their religion? What role did they play in inspiring the faithful?

This dissertation pursues these questions in four chapters. In the first chapter, I offer a brief account of the paradoxical role of the senses in the western tradition, especially since the late medieval period through the Reformations (including snapshots of some of the early Protestant Reformers). The second chapter picks up where the first ends by examining the role of the senses in early modern Catholic worship and how it changed as a result of Protestant critique. In addition to exploring the Decrees and Catechism of the Council of Trent, the second chapter focuses on the writings of Bellarmine and his most famous contemporaries, Lorenzo Scupoli and Francis de Sales. In the third chapter, I
explore the issue of exemplarity. How did Bellarmine’s portrayal of the saints from the pulpit depict them as sensuous beings? I approach exemplarity from a negative perspective as well by reviewing Bellarmine’s examples of sinners and adding examples from the _Dialogos en los quales se tratan algunos exemplos de personas que aviendo salido de La religion de La Compañía de Jesus han sido castigados severamente de la mano del Senor_ of the Jesuit hagiographer Pedro de Ribadeneyra. In the final chapter, I discuss how the theme of the senses relates to the issue of decorum in art.

Before pursuing these themes there are three main historiographical points that undergird this study and therefore are worth highlighting. The first is the field of early modern Catholicism. In general terms, early modern Catholicism has increasingly become a field of inquiry for academics especially since the 1990s. Today the extent of these studies is voluminous and ranges through many different sub-genres such as popular culture; material culture; literacy and education; women, gender, and sexuality; institutional history; and supernatural history; that is, the saints, mystics, and miracles. One major problem that has occupied scholars has been defining the period and its spirit. On the one hand, it seems superfluous to rehash a decades-long terminological debate in a short historiographic essay. On the other hand, it seems almost obligatory to contribute to that debate for two reasons. First, the debate is not in the past, but is still ongoing. Luke Clossey and Carlos Eire have each offered notable contributions in the last decade. Second, that

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13 Pedro de Ribadeneyra, “Dialogos en los quales se tratan algunos exemplos de personas que aviendo salido de La religion de La Compañía de Jesus han sido castigados severamente de la mano del Senor” (Unpublished manuscript, Alcala, 1592), ARSI, Fondo Gesuitico, ms. 67. Hereafter, I refer to the text as the _Dialogos_.

debate has had ramifications for the study and pursuit of early modern Catholicism; and, I will argue, for the genre of devotional literature, scrutinized here.

In some ways, the debate to define an era in Catholicism was as much a contemporary concern as it is a historiographical issue today. As soon as the Council of Trent concluded historians began evaluating it. The most famous of these early contributions was from Paolo Sarpi (1552-1623), a Venetian prelate, who wrote the *Istoria del Concilio Tridentino* originally published in 1619. Sarpi’s account was almost entirely polemical to the degree that the Vatican opened its archives on the Council to the Jesuit, Sforza Pallavicino (1607-1667), who wrote his own apologetic history of the Council to refute Sarpi’s. Two modern historians of Trent, Hubert Jedin and John O’Malley are among the chief protagonists of the naming debate for Early Modern Catholicism. Was it a “Catholic Reform,” “Catholic Reformation,” or “Counter-Reformation?” O’Malley began to interpret and eventually recreate Tridentine terminology. In his historiographical essay he explores the term “Counter-Reformation,” used most often by English historians. He suggests that the Protestant background of those historians explains their preference for the term “Counter Reformation.” Nevertheless, an English Jesuit, J.H. Pollen (1858-1925) preferred the term “Counter-Reformation.” Yet in his work he used

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15 Paolo Sarpi, *Istoria del Concilio Tridentino*, (1629). This account is famous for treating the happenings of Trent in an exclusively political way. The text was soon translated into English, see Paolo Sarpi, *The history of the council of Trent. Containing eight books in which besides the ordinary acts of the council are declared many notable occurrences which happened in Christendom, during the space of forty years and more. and particularly the practices of the court of Rome, to hinder the reformation of their errours, and to maintain their greatness*, trans. Nathaniel Brent (London: Printed by J. Macock for S. Mearne, J. Martyn, and H. Herringman, 1676).


18 O’Malley, *Trent and All That*, 40.
Counter Reformation and Catholic Reform interchangeably. Up through the 1930s there was a great deal of ambiguity about the significance of these terms in addition to their inappropriateness. The result was that scholars, such as H. Outram Evennett (1901-1964), decried the simplicity of the term “Counter Reformation,” in his *The Cardinal of Lorraine and the Council of Trent*. Still, he used the term persistently in his other publications, such as *The Spirit of the Counter-Reformation*.19

O’Malley describes Hubert Jedin’s breakthrough article of the 1940s, “Catholic Reformation or Counter-Reformation,” in this context.20 He notes that Jedin recognized the inadequacy of the contemporary terminology, and his solution was simply to combine terms. Instead of one or the other Jedin would argue for the term “Catholic-Reformation-and-Counter Reformation.”21 Eric W. Cochrane, influenced by Jedin, added his own formulation to the mix: Counter Reformation or Tridentine Reformation?22 Of course, the issue with that perspective is that it can only hold for Catholic Reform in the period after the Council of Trent.23 Ronnie Po-chia Hsia’s book had greater chronological depth and so he chose the term “Catholic Renewal.”24 Before Po-chia Hsia, John Olin also participated

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20 For the original article by Jedin, see Hubert Jedin, *Katholische Reformation Oder Gegenreformation?* (Lucerne: Josef Stocker, 1946).

21 O’Malley, *Trent and All That*, 42.

22 O’Malley, *Trent and All That*, 44.


in the terminological debate by hitching his wagon to the “Catholic Reformation” horse. In
his view, Catholic Reform predated the Protestant Reformation as his edition of primary
sources indicates.25 Indeed, in the *Festschrift* written in honor of John Olin, the editor,
Richard DeMolen, also used the term Catholic Reformation.26

A term that I have excluded to mention up until now is one that O’Malley coined
himself in his research guide and defended in *Trent and All That, Catholicism in Early
Modern History,* “Early Modern Catholicism.”27 While this term is certainly not specific
or exciting as O’Malley admits, it does not have the ambiguity or clumsiness of
others. O’Malley describes an all-encompassing term that includes reaction to
Protestantism, formerly denoted by “Counter Reformation,” but also factors in the real
desire for reformation that was intrinsic in the Church formerly denoted by “Catholic
Reformation,” or “Catholic Renewal.” O’Malley’s “Early Modern Catholicism” gained
considerable traction particularly with the publication of the *Festschrift* dedicated to him.28
Despite the utility of this new terminology, and its relative success among scholars, there
remain several terms used to describe this period.

More recently, Luke Clossey, examining Jesuit missionary activity, coined the term
“Global Salvific Catholicism.” In his view, the term is more appropriate for its relationship

25 John C. Olin, *The Catholic Reformation: Savonarola to Ignatius Loyola; Reform in the Church 1495-1540,*


to Research (St. Louis: Center for Reformation Research, 1988).

28 Kathleen M. Comerford and Hilmar M. Pabel, eds., *Early Modern Catholicism: Essays in Honour of John
to the self-understanding of its subject, the Jesuits. They were, as Clossey argues, bent on
the salvation of souls, their own, through ministry and even martyrdom; and others, through
preaching, sacramental ministry, and conversion.\(^{29}\) O’Malley remarked that the term
seemed too obvious to him in a review of Clossey’s book.\(^{30}\) While O’Malley may be
accurate, Clossey’s instinct to underscore the salvific mentality within the Jesuit order is
insightful. Too many books eschew spiritual and religious concerns for the exciting world
of politics. For example, the title of Stefania Tutino’s study on Bellarmine’s political
theology, \textit{Empire of Souls} misleads a reader into assuming it has anything to do with the
salvific nature of early modern Catholicism. Instead, she focuses on the political theology
of Robert Bellarmine.\(^{31}\)

Perhaps the most recent contribution of note is from Carlos Eire. The title of his
\textit{magnum opus}, \textit{Reformations} showcases his perspective. Both the Roman Catholic Church,
and newly formed Protestant churches were reforming. Catholic reform began long before
Martin Luther’s posting of the 95 \textit{Theses} and, in some ways, continued independent of
developments in Protestant theology in the mission fields and after the Council of Trent.\(^{32}\)
It should be noted, that despite the long-standing and ubiquitous nature of this debate some
authors and editors avoid the semantic arguments altogether by stating that they use these
words interchangeably. Others, such as David M. Luebke, have even suggested that the

\(^{29}\) Clossey, \textit{Salvation and Globalization in the Early Jesuit Missions}.


\(^{32}\) See Eire, \textit{Reformations}. 
terms really do not matter, and that the scholarly debate is over. This is mistaken. Incorrect terminology, I believe, has fostered mythological understandings of both Protestantism and Catholicism. It encouraged the now-debunked idea that Jesuits were merely “shock-troops” of the Church, until John O’Malley wrote his revisionist, *The First Jesuits* where he demonstrated that the Jesuits emphasized pastoralism over controversialism. It also promotes misguided interpretations of critical thinkers, like Bellarmine.

Terminology is clearly important, but perhaps it is time to put the debate to rest. The best approach is to use the terms interchangeably, so long as they are rigorously defined. They each express different aspects of the era, movement, religion that are critical for understanding the whole. So many books in the last few decades have stressed the multiplicity of expression in Catholic thought, and have insisted that Catholicism, especially during the period in question was not monolithic. If that is true, why impose a single term onto it. Its multiplicity, depth, and breadth require many.

Just as Catholicism has enjoyed many expressions so too has the field of history in the last several decades. Historians have found many new hermeneutics and modes for historical interpretation that they have applied to religious history. All of these have enriched our understanding of Early Modern Catholicism. Indeed, the intense debate waged around the appropriate terminology for the period in Catholicism from 1400-1700 reflects the changes in the historical field. Before the cultural and social turn in the 1960s and 1970s the very idea that one should study religion instead of politics and war was anathema. Since

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then, many new areas of study have developed. Perhaps the most important of these are in women, gender, and sexuality studies, and cultural studies, which includes topics such as education, sainthood, preaching, and devotion.

One of the more profound developments across disciplines has been the inclusion of gender and sexuality. Historians have directed more attention not only to women as authors in their own right, but also to how women and people of nonconforming sexualities were perceived and expressed themselves in the period. Patricia Crawford for example asks how women approached beliefs about their inferiority, but transcended those misogynistic ideas through rich devotional and spiritual lives. At the same time, female asceticism, and mysticism frequently aroused suspicion.35 That suspicious certainly marked the life of Lucrecia de Leon, who used a prophetic career to achieve her political ambitions, until the Inquisition impeded her, that is.36 The relationship between women and male religious was also tenuous, and even caused the Jesuits a certain amount of grief, especially since their very first ministries were to prostitutes and their daughters.37 Life for women, especially vulnerable girls was dangerous even with the help of religious orders.

In the field of education, Paul Grendler reigns as the outstanding expert of schooling in Italy. He has shown how schools in early modern Italy served the students of their time by creating two school cultures. One Latin culture for those preparing for


37 Lance Gabriel Lazar, *Working in the Vineyard of the Lord: Jesuit Confraternities in Early Modern Italy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005). Recently Patricia Manning has indicated just how careful Jesuits were in their relationships with women, see Patricia W. Manning, *An Overview of the Pre-Suppression Society of Jesus in Spain* (Boston: Brill, 2021), 54-58.
ecclesiastical, academic, or courtly life, and vernacular schools for men preparing for trades and business. Both emphasized Christian dimensions in their focus on morals. Recently he has turned his attention to the Jesuits and their relationship to Italian Universities. On the whole, that history is a mixed one full of political intrigue. In some instances, the Jesuits collaborated with local ecclesiastical and political authorities to found schools, in other municipalities invited them to teach in their universities, in others still the founded they founded their own universities because the local established university barred them from teaching. In general, Grendler found that the clash was over “secular” versus “Christian” Aristotelianism. He also notes that the Jesuits had more luck with princely families than republican governments, and the papacy frequently avoided defending Jesuit ambitions for their universities.

Just as today, learning in the early modern world took place outside of the classroom as often, if not more often than within it. Catholics frequently saw images of and heard about the saints, heroes of Christianity, whose lives they knew and endeavored to imitate. Peter Burke’s essay on the saints as revealers of culture most succinctly summarizes their importance. To Burke, the period in which a saint is canonized suggests what that time values. For the Counter-Reformation Church he suggested that missionary activity, pastoral duties, and mystical experience were the hallmarks of saints. Since then,

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38 Paul F. Grendler, *Schooling in Renaissance Italy: Literacy and Learning, 1300-1600* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989).


40 Peter Burke, “How to be a Counter-Reformation Saint,” in *The Historical Anthropology of Early Modern Italy: Essays on Perception and Communication* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987). Noticeably absent from Burke’s account are the political machinations involved in the canonization process, though those have been discussed at length by others.
numerous studies have explored saints and their lives to unlock the religious culture of Europe in any given period. More recently, a trend in Early Modern Catholicism has been to study “aspiring saints;” that is, those who were not ultimately canonized, or even declared heretics instead. Anne Schutte studied cases of pretense of holiness in Venice in her book *Aspiring Saints*. She notes that women were far more likely to be deemed pretenders especially those who were unmarried, uneducated, and from the lower class. Nearly all the men involved were priests.41 Investigating the same subject in the Spanish context, Andrew Keitt’s microhistory focused on the lives of Mateo Rodriguez, Maria Bautista, and Eugenia de la Torre, deals with feigned visionaries. He demonstrates that the Inquisition found itself in a difficult position: how could one discern between true visions and feigned ones? They turned toward medical science, which proved to be problematic because they did not want to totally reject evidence of the miraculous.42 It is this problem that Bradford Bouley has picked up on in his recent monograph *Pious Postmortems*. Attempting to empirically prove sanctity the Church carried out autopsies on the bodies of saints and recently deceased holy people. The assumption was that holy lives manifested themselves corporally. For example, the autopsy of Carlo Borromeo revealed his ascetic tendencies insofar as he had hardly any fat on his frame. Similarly, his genitals were abnormally small. To his hagiographers that became a sign of his chastity and extreme purity and therefore sanctity, even if the medical doctors did not share in that assessment.43


Preaching and sermon culture has been another topic explored by historians. In the Italian context, the work of Roberto Rusconi stands out.\textsuperscript{44} For English-reading audiences, the works of John O’Malley and Frederick McGinnes paint a good picture of preaching in Rome from the Renaissance through the post-Tridentine period. O’Malley argues that the preaching of the Renaissance eschewed the content of the medieval thematic sermon focused on theological dispute. Instead, the sermon influenced by classical epideictic focused on moving an audience and stirring their emotions. In content they focused on God’s providence, the works of mercy, and moral reform of the Roman Curia.\textsuperscript{45} McGinnes’ account differs little from O’Malley. What changed more than anything was their content, which was focused more heavily on curbing criticism to Rome, and the clearest dogmatic and doctrinal statements possible without any room for theological nuance.\textsuperscript{46} The issue of theological nuance in preaching is the subject of both Giorgio Caravale’s \textit{Preaching and Inquisition} and Emily Michelson’s \textit{Pulpit and the Press}. Caravale’s work is a microhistory of Ippolito Chizzola (1521-1565), a Lateran canon. Caravale delineates the methods of heretical preachers in Italy, who avoided clearly defining theological ideas by submitting both Lutheran and Catholic ideas of justification without clearly noting the correct way. Ultimately, this led to preacher’s aids and Inquisitorial trials that demanded that preachers

\textsuperscript{44} See, for example, Roberto Rusconi, \textit{Immagini Dei Predicatori e Della Predicazione in Italia Alla Fine Del Medioevo} (Spoleto: Fondazione Centro italiano di studi sull’alto Medioevo, 2016); Roberto Rusconi, \textit{Predicazione e Vita Religiosa Nella Società Italiana: Da Carlo Magno Alla Controriforma} (Torino: Loescher, 1981). The issue of preaching is considered in greater depth in chapter three.


avoid difficult subjects in favor of the clearest explanations of doctrine. Similarly, Michelson’s book focuses on the role of Scripture in preaching. She shows how there were many different opinions as to how preachers should use the scriptures. For example, she found that Marcello Cervini did not refer to Scripture as the foundation of a sermon, nor did he refer to the explication of the Gospel as the purpose of preaching; however, after Trent the Jesuits and Mendicant orders believed that it was their duty to preach Scripture in such a way that the laity would understand it.

The second historiographical field is that of the senses. Scholarship on the senses, which has been at “the forefront of a number of disciplines since the mid-1980s...” is expansive. The interest has not been without merit. Studies on the senses have recaptured human experience and uncovered elements of past culture. Many of these studies emphasize how studying past sensual experiences illuminate quotidian life. What they do


not do is explore how thinkers approached the senses as a means to salvation, or as a bridge between life on earth and the afterlife. Yet, more recent studies have explored the role of the senses in religious practice, especially the liturgy. Matthew Milner, for example, is more concerned with change and continuity in the sensory culture of early modern England, and especially the English liturgy. This study instead focuses much more closely on the Catholic sensory world, especially as it was in Rome following the Council of Trent.

Furthermore, this dissertation emphasizes the paradoxical relationship between application and avoidance of the senses, and will argue that this dichotomy was a long-standing characteristic of the western tradition largely unchanged either during or by the Reformations. Wietse de Boer’s efforts to highlight the theme of custody of the senses stand out. Interest in the theme has also led Sean Otto to examine two of Wycliffe’s sermons on the senses. Otto not only demonstrated that Wycliffe’s moralized the senses demanding their careful custody, but also that this approach was a continuation of the

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Matthew Milner, _The Senses and the English Reformation_, (Burlington: Ashgate, 2011); Wietse de Boer and Christine Göttler, eds., _Religion and the Senses in Early Modern Europe_, (Boston: Brill, 2012); Sensing the Sacred in Medieval and Early Modern Culture, eds. Robin Macdonald, Emilie Murphy and Elizabeth Swann (New York, Routledge, 2018).

Franco Mormando raises this point in reviews of various art historical works, see Franco Mormando, Review of _The Sensuous in the Counter-Reformation Church_, edited by Marcia Hall and Tracy Cooper, http://www.caareviews.org/reviews/2145#.Vv7FqzaBD7Y. Mormando argued that the avoidance of this question is endemic, thus far, to art historians, see Franco Mormando, Review of _The Catholic Rubens: Saints and Martyrs_, by Willibald Sauerländer, _Journal of Jesuit Studies_, 2.4 (2015): 696-697.

See, De Boer, “The Counter-Reformation of the Senses,” 255, for a full list of these questions: “…can the cultural offensive against the illicit religious practices…against visions and other spiritual experiences – be understood as a way to control sensory experiences?...”

medieval tradition.\textsuperscript{56} Robert Bellarmine in part inherited this tradition by exhibiting how the senses ought to be applied for eternal profit as well as insistently exhorting his audience to guard their senses.

The third is the history of the Society of Jesus, and especially studies on Robert Bellarmine. Jesuit history has blossomed especially since the publication of John O’Malley’s \textit{magnum opus}, \textit{The First Jesuits}.\textsuperscript{57} That work did much to dispel the centuries old-misnomers of the Society of Jesus as “shock-troops” of the Church, who were concerned with nothing but theological controversy and eradicating Protestant heresy. Bellarmine himself, who was a controversialist by trade, fell victim to these trends, emerging principally as a controversialist, political theologian, and inquisitor, rather than as an acclaimed author of devotional texts and a prodigious preacher. The popular image of Bellarmine created by admiring historians and detractors alike make him the “enemy of science” and enemy of Protestantism.” Most interpreters of Bellarmine have muted the role of these spiritual texts in favor of emphasizing Bellarmine’s controversialism, his role in the Galileo affair, and his political theology. This perspective, while skewed, is not entirely incorrect. In his best-known works, the \textit{Controversies}, Bellarmine refutes Protestant theological critiques and defends traditional Catholic ones including justification, the role of the saints, and defense of biblical truth and the Church’s authority in interpreting it. In fact, Pietro Tacchi Venturi’s 1923 publication, \textit{Il Beato Roberto Bellarmino: Esame Delle Nuove Accuse Contro la sua Santità}, which promoted Bellarmine’s canonization, included

\textsuperscript{56} Otto, “The Perils of the Flesh,” 174. In fact, the point could be pushed further to include the ancient tradition.

a woodcut from the earliest biography of Bellarmine by the Jesuit Giacomo Fuligatti (1577-1653) and published in 1624 on its front page.\textsuperscript{58} The woodcut’s caption reads “Cardinal Robert Bellarmine of the Society of Jesus, you obliterate all the errors and cunning of Luther and Calvin.”\textsuperscript{59} In the early twentieth century Bellarmine represented a triumphant Church able to obliterate its enemies. The renewed interest in Bellarmine that lead to his canonization in the twentieth century was motivated primarily by papal politics. Early in his papacy, Pius XI suffered from Pius IX’s self-inflicted and self-proclaimed status as “\textit{captivus vaticanus}.” To Pius, Bellarmine represented a triumphant and intellectually rigorous Church combatting secularism. The Italian theologian became a symbol of constancy and national identity in the effort to declare Roman Catholicism the official religion of Italy.

What are the sources of this caricature of Bellarmine as rabid polemicist? To some degree it stems from a long-standing tradition among the Jesuits themselves, who personally developed the myth of the Society as the great counter-reformation order. This is evident in Ribadeneyra’s lives of Ignatius, which increasingly portrayed him as a hyper-orthodox defender of Catholicism, and miracle working saint while concealing Ignatius’ frequent conflicts with the Inquisition.\textsuperscript{60} Similarly, biographers, beginning with Giacomo

\textsuperscript{58} Pietro Tacchi Venturi, \textit{Il Beato Roberto Bellarmino: Esame delle Nuove Accuse Contro la Sua Santità} (Roma: Grafia, S.A.I. Industrie Grafiche, 1923). Since Tacchi Venturi was both the Society’s historian and secretary, this response was thus considered the official Jesuit interpretation of Bellarmine’s sanctity.

\textsuperscript{59} Tacchi Venturi, \textit{Il Beato Roberto Bellarmino}, title page “Robertus Cardinalis Bellarminus e Societate Jesu Anagramam Luteri Errores Ac Astutias Calvini Omnes Delebis”.

Fuligatti in 1625, also emphasize the Bellarmine myth. In general, the Bellarmine biographies were hagiographic works intended to inspire devotion and promote his cult leading up to his beatification in 1923 and his canonization in 1930.⁶¹ James Brodrick’s two-volume biography of Bellarmine published in 1928, and revised in 1961, is also a victim of the hagiographic tendency. He did not amend this problem despite his lament that the early version was not critical enough.⁶² The most recent Bellarmine biography by Aimé Richardt devotes multiple chapters to Bellarmine’s Controversies and his involvement in the Galileo trial while reducing the devotional works to one short chapter.⁶³

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⁶² See James Brodrick, *The Life and Work of Blessed Robert Francis cardinal Bellarmine, S.J.* (1542-1621) (London: Burns, Oates, and Washbourne, 1928); and, James Brodrick, *Robert Bellarmine: Saint and Scholar* (Westminster: Newman Press, 1961), ix “flaunt[ing] his love for his hero…He hardly admitted to a single spot on his sun which was not the best way to honour a saint, who though very lovable, had like all the saints his definite human limitations.” In general, the works of Brodrick tend to shed a positive light on the Society of Jesus and its members.

In the field of critical analysis scholars have largely maintained the same interest in the *Controversies*, the Galileo affair, and Bellarmine’s political theology, with few exceptions. E.A. Ryan’s study of Bellarmine’s historical scholarship explored how historical context and development of theological positions influenced Bellarmine’s *Controversies*. More recently, three collections of essays were published on Bellarmine and his writings in 1990. The first was a collection of papers from a conference on Bellarmine held at Sora in 1986. The other two volumes are the fruits of a conference held at Capua in the fall of 1988. Excepting two essays all three volumes are devoid of attention to Bellarmine’s preaching and spiritual writing. Jan Slaski mentioned the spiritual writings in a few paragraphs underscoring their popularity. He noted that the writings were rapidly translated from Latin to Polish, and that the Polish audience, already accustomed to the Spanish mystical writings, took to Bellarmine’s spiritual works. Robert Hagan referred to the spiritual writings in a two-page coda to his essay on Spiritual Doctrine. At least he demanded further inquiry into Bellarmine’s spiritual treatises. Hagan’s proclamation that Bellarmine’s works “express the vision of the spiritual life of a spiritually

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68 See Robert A. Hagan, “La dottrina spirituale negli scritti di Roberto Bellarmino,” in *Roberto Bellarmino: Arcivescovo di Capua*. In particular he called for modern translations of Bellarmine’s texts, though many now have modern translations, see Hagan, “La Dottrina spirituale,” 231.
rich person: an Italian humanist of the 1500 and 1600s of great humanity, a learned theologian, priest of the Catholic Reform and the post-Tridentine era, a man strongly rooted in his times,” alludes to how these texts are critical to understanding Bellarmine and his times better.69

The two most recent English language monographs on Bellarmine also do not address Bellarmine’s spiritual writings and sermons. In his book, *Saint as Censor*, Peter Godman examined Bellarmine as a censor in high profile cases, with special emphasis on the Galileo trial.70 More recently, Stefania Tutino took up Bellarmine’s career as a political thinker.71 As Paul Stapleton has noted, both of these accounts are efforts to reclaim a more accurate picture of the historical personage, but they fall short.72 Godman criticizes the “hagiographers of science” arguing that Bellarmine was not a severe figure squashing freedom of thought, and claims that Galileo received only a “gentle wrap over the knuckles.”73 Tutino also downplays his role as a censor identifying him as a serious thinker whose ideas transformed early modern political theory.74

69 Hagan, “La Dottrina Spirituale,” 232 “esprimono la visione della vita spirituale di una persona spiritualmente ricchissima: umanista Italiano del ‘500 e del ‘600 di grande umanità; teologo dottissimo; prelato della Riforma Cattolica, dell’epoca post-tridentina; uomo fortemente radicato nei suoi tempi,”


73 Godman, *Saint as Censor*, xc, 217-221

74 Tutino, *Empire of Souls*, 5-6.
While these traditional interpretations of Bellarmine’s significance are partially correct, they fail to capture the full extent of his role in the Catholic Reformatio
Among the few exceptions to this general trend are the early twentieth century works of Xavier-Marie Le Bachelet and Emmerich Raitz von Frentz. Bachelet studied the influence of the Spiritual Exercises in Bellarmine’s life and spiritual works, which is still the most comprehensive study on the topic.75 Frentz dedicated an article to Bellarmine’s devotional texts. It is still the most in-depth study of the texts, offering summaries of their content and theological leanings.76

Bachelet and Frentz are the only interpreters who reflect the thrust of the first life of Robert Bellarmine, which was an autobiography from his own hand finished in 1613.77 While there is some debate regarding Bellarmine’s intention behind the work, Bellarmine’s emphasis is clear. He did not focus on his controversial theology but offered a detailed account of his preaching activity in every city he visited.78 What is more, it was rare for his sermons to include points of theological disputation. Indeed, the Jesuits had shunned nuanced theological arguments in sermons since Ignatius himself admonished them to

75 Xavier-Marie Le Bachelet, Bellarmin et les Exercices Spirituels de S. Ignace (Paris, 1912). Bachelet was also one of the few scholars to properly credit the spiritual depth of Bellarmine. His monograph began with the declaration that Bellarmine was more than a controversialist: “Le cardinal Bellarmin ne fut pas seulement un grand controversiste; les opuscules de piété qu’il composa sur la fin de sa vie, lui ont donné rang parmi les auteurs ascétiques. Mais ces opuscules ont cela de spécial, qu’ils se rattachent aux retraites faites chaque année par le Vénérable Serviteur de Dieu, à partir de 1608. Ils intéressent, à ce titre, l’histoire des Exercices spirituels de saint Ignace,” see Bachelet, Bellarmin et les Exercices, 1.


78 Giblin, Introduction. 5. Giblin called Bellarmine’s considerations of the Controversies an “afterthought.” To this Ryan added that Bellarmine insisted on mentioning his preaching activity through every part of his life, see: Ryan, Historical Scholarship, 196. Bellarmine mentioned his catechetical works and explanations of the psalms. Bellarmine’s contributions to preaching are considered in greater detail in chapter three.
avoid disputation in preference for sermons that moved audiences to compunction: “I would not touch on points that were problematic or presented any difficulty, but would simply correct faults and sins in a modest and orderly way.”  

Francis Borja (1510-1572) codified Ignatius’ preference for preaching in his manual *Ecclesiastes sive de ratione concionandi instructione*, published in 1592. He emphasized moving audiences from vice and virtue, as did many preaching aids.\(^79\)

While teaching at Mondoví, Bellarmine preached weekly on Sundays and regularly during Lent and Advent before he was ordained.\(^80\) Bellarmine, like his contemporaries, relied on theatricality to convey his message.\(^82\) On occasion he stood on a stool to make himself appear taller, and hence more imposing or authoritative.\(^83\) Discussing one episode where his audience had suggested the subject matter for his sermon, Bellarmine noted that,


\(^80\) Frederick J. McGinness, *Right Thinking and Sacred Oratory in Counter-Reformation Rome* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 32. This is not to say that preachers were not concerned with orthodoxy, nor that preachers in the past had not focused on vice and virtue.

\(^81\) Bellarmine, *Autobiography*, 12. Bellarmine’s practice of frequent preaching was consistent with the decree of the Council of Trent on preaching that set a high bar for the regularity of preaching, which was to occur on Sundays, feast days, and more often if possible, see: *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils vol. 2*, Norman Tanner, ed. (London: Sheed and Ward, 1990), 5.2.11, 669. According to Roberto Rusconi it was customary in Italy for a church to have sermons at least three times a week especially during Advent and Lent, see: Roberto Rusconi, “Rhetorica Ecclesiastica: La predicazione nell’Età Post-Tridentina fra Pulpito e Biblioteca,” in *La Predicazione in Italia Dopo il Concilio di Trento*, ed. Giacomo Martina, S.J. (Rome: Edizioni Dehoniane, 1996), 19. The Jesuits in particular gave many sermons, and John O’Malley set rather incredulous standards for their performance claiming that some would preach multiple times a day with some sermons that might last up to four hours, see: O’Malley, *The First Jesuits*, 92.

\(^82\) Theatricality was important to the early modern sermon as a performance piece, a sermon’s words were more efficacious when coupled with appropriate costumes, mannerisms, and gestures since audiences were able to see a preacher from farther away than they could hear him, see Emily Michelson, “Dramatics in (and out of) the Pulpit in Post-Tridentine Italy,” *The Italianist* 34.3 (2014): 449.

“the words, the work of memory, and the gestures were [mine].” By paying close attention to gestures and verbal factors, Bellarmine knowingly placed himself within a rhetorical tradition dating back to Cicero, who recommended attention non-verbal aspects of speech making. Another tool used by the preacher was language. For learned audiences a sermon in Latin was most effective; whereas a popular audience could expect a sermon in a vernacular language they understood. Bellarmine used Latin in his university sermons at Louvain. Even so, he was known for drawing enormous crowds, numbering in the thousands. The point to underscore is that Bellarmine, who otherwise evaluated his work with modesty, labored to establish his prowess as a preacher. After one sermon given in Florence, he moved the audience such that “they wished to kiss his hand.” We need not only trust self-congratulatory remarks as evidence of his oratorical skill. When Bellarmine departed Florence for teaching obligations at Mondoví Juan Polanco wrote him

84 Bellarmine, *Autobiography*, 7. Bellarmine writes of himself in the third person in this text hence the use of brackets. This use of the third person was later interpreted as arrogance and presented a major roadblock in the canonization effort of Bellarmine.

85 “The control and training of voice, breathing, gestures and the tongue itself, call for exertion rather than art; and in these matters we must carefully consider whom we are to take as patterns, whom we should wish to be like,” see Cicero, *De Oratore*, E.W. Sutton, trans., (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1942), I, xxiv.156.

86 Corrie Norman, “The Social History of Preaching: Italy,” in *Preachers and People in the Reformations and Early Modern Period,* ed. Larissa Taylor (Boston: Brill, 2001), 151-152. It is important to note that sermons had already been shifting to the vernacular since the late medieval period; see Carolyn Muessig, “The Vernacularization of Late Medieval Sermons: Some French and Italian Examples,” in *Medieval Multilingualism: The Francophone World and its Neighbors,* eds. Keith Busby and Christopher Kleinhenz (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), 267-284.


88 Fuligatti, *Vita Bellarmino*, 35.
a letter admiring his skill as a humanist and a preacher.\textsuperscript{89} At a mere twenty-one years of age, his sermons earned him the respect due to a living saint.

The spiritual writings are noticeably absent from Bellarmine’s autobiography; however, this is simply a question of chronology. Bellarmine recorded the details of his life three years before he began writing his spiritual texts. Nonetheless, he revealed his appreciation for these writings as well as their importance to him within the prefaces and letters of dedication for each text. Even though the prefatory note was (and remains) a highly stylized and formulaic genre, it can still reveal true sentiments. That certainly seems to be the case regarding Bellarmine’s appraisal of his own works. Take for example his Mind’s Ascent to God, in many ways an interpretation of Bonaventure’s Itinerarium Mentis Deo, which he wrote during the month-long retreat at the novice house of Sant’Andrea al Quirinale.\textsuperscript{90} This was the first of five texts written during the last five retreats of his life. Typically, Bellarmine published these texts up to a year after each retreat.\textsuperscript{91} In the dedicatory letters Bellarmine indicated that the texts were meant for men in public affairs, as well as for personal use: “Although I wrote the book for my own use…it will be mainly useful for men engaged in public affairs, especially princes of the Church…”\textsuperscript{92} He

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\textsuperscript{89} Emilio Ardu, S.J., “Roberto Bellarmino Professore e Predicatore in Mondoví (1564-1567),” in Vita e Cultura a Mondoví Nell’età Del Vescovo Michele Ghislieri (S. Pio V) (Torino: Palazzo Carignano, 1967), 169–95. Ardu offers a detailed view of Bellarmine’s preaching and teaching activities during his three years in Mondoví that include the reception of his preaching.

\textsuperscript{90} While the Society of Jesus passed a decree in 1607 that mandated at least an annual eight-day retreat, Robert’s retreats soon evolved into some version of the month-long spiritual exercises, which he took as his summer vacation, see Brodrick, Saint and Scholar, 380-382. Though I have not seen notes that describe exactly what he did during these retreats, he refers to them as the long retreat, or the exercises. It is likely, that it was an adapted form of the Exercises.

\textsuperscript{91} Brodrick, Saint and Scholar, 382.

\textsuperscript{92} Bellarmine, Mind’s Ascent, 49.
reiterated his intentions in the preface of *The Art of Dying Well*: “A few months ago I wrote a little work on the art of dying well both in order to prepare myself for my own coming death and in order to share willingly with my brethren and lords, as is my custom…”93 The personal nature of the texts perhaps explains why Bellarmine prized these writings, among all his others.

In the *Mind’s Ascent* Bellarmine wrote to Aldobrandini: “I do not know how others will judge this book, but I have found it very useful compared to my other smaller works. I do not read my other books unless I am forced to; this one I have already gladly read three or four times, and I have resolved to reread it frequently in the future. Perhaps I am more fond of it, not because of its merits, because I love it as a child, a second Benjamin, which I produced in my extreme old age.”94 Similarly he claimed that the practice of the art of dying well is the “greatest of all tasks.”95 If one is to take Bellarmine at his word, then, it seems that in his own estimation, his achievements as a spiritual writer and caretaker of souls outranked his work as a controversial theologian.

Much like his preaching, which the treatises frequently draw on, his spiritual writings were also popular and enjoyed a wide distribution.96 The *Mind’s Ascent* underwent five Latin editions and one Italian translation in its first year of publication. By 1930, there were sixty editions of the work in fifteen languages, including English, French, German, Spanish, Russian, and Chinese. Not only do the number of editions speak to the success of

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94 Bellarmine, *Mind’s Ascent*, 49.
95 Bellarmine, *Art of Dying*, 233
96 Donnelly, “Introduction,” in *Spiritual Writings*, 20.
Bellarmine’s first spiritual writing, but also the voices of many commentators. In fact, both Mathias Casimir Sarbiewski (1595-1640) and Maffeo Barberini (1568-1644); later pope Urban VIII, wrote poetry in honor of Bellarmine’s book. While the other spiritual writings were not quite as successful, they too were widely read. *De gemitu*, for example, the only writing of Bellarmine not to be translated into English, has been published in forty-one editions and seven languages. The *Seven Words* was a considerable success with thirty-five editions in nine languages. Finally, the *Art of Dying*, the second most widely-disseminated of Bellarmine’s works, found its way to the hands of readers in over fifty-six editions and ten languages.  

97 Regarding Bellarmine and his works, Hilarion de Costa (1595-1661) wrote in 1621: “A great man who is one of the most distinguished and prominent members of the Parlement of Paris has said that he reads *The Ascent of the Mind to God* four times every year, and that it is not inferior to the *Imitation of Christ*. Similarly, Monsignor the Bishop of Geneva, who died eighteen months ago, used never to tire of reading and praising the *Mourning of the Dove*.”  

98 Perhaps the most telling sign of the popularity of these works is that they were translated and widely read by Protestant readers.  

99 The ability of these texts to cross confessional lines was probably due to their minimal anti-Protestant polemics, though Protestant editors occasionally abridged sections they deemed “papist.”  

100 These objections notwithstanding, Bellarmine’s devotional texts enjoyed an ecumenical

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98 Cited in Brodrick, *Saint and Scholar*, 390. Francis de Sales was Bishop of Geneva in name more than deed. Brodrick citing a legend that he had formerly mentioned in his earlier editions of Bellarmine’s lives mentioned the allegations that James I, an ardent enemy of Bellarmine’s, was fond of the *Mourning of the Dove*.


reception. As one English bookseller declared, “I have made more money out of this Jesuit than out of all other divines put together,” and this despite the government prohibition on Catholic texts. Europe’s thirst for Bellarmine’s devotionals coupled with his positive appraisal of his own spiritual works suggests that the impact of Bellarmine on his own time ought to be reassessed. He was famous for his involvement in politics in his own time, but he was equally famous for these texts. Furthermore, due to the widespread dissemination of these treatises, and spiritual writings in general these became a major contributor in the lived experience of religion and Christian reflection.

With this new understanding of Robert Bellarmine and his age, it is time to turn to the theme of this dissertation: the paradoxical relationship between the flesh and spirit described by Christian writers as the use and custody of the sense.

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101 Brodrick, Saint and Scholar, 387.


Chapter 1

Situating the Senses in the Western Tradition

The theme that this dissertation explores, the role of the senses in the spiritual life of Roman Catholics following the Council of Trent was part of a complex and venerable tradition. In this chapter, the goal is to orient the reader to just how complex, and in some cases paradoxical a problem the role of the senses was for thinkers of the past. At its root, the key issue was understanding the appropriate relationship between the body, the mind, and the soul. Thinkers frequently commented on, and disagreed about, the precise relationship and relative strengths of those entities. The difficulty stemmed from two opposing sentiments. On the one hand, the soul – considered eternal - was always believed to be more important than the body. On the other hand, the body was undeniably essential for acquiring knowledge (material, as well as, spiritual, philosophical, etc.) through the senses. Furthermore, the Judeo-Christian tradition revered the body as the creation of God made in his own image and likeness.

What follows is an overview of the interplay between these ideas from the Biblical tradition up to the dawn of the Reformations with attention to the Biblical, Classical, Patristic, Monastic, and Medieval Traditions.¹ The sketch is by necessity a mere outline, but it demonstrates the constancy of the problem. The role of the body and its senses in

¹ Anthony Synnott, “Puzzling over the Senses: From Plato to Marx” in David Howes, ed., The Varieties of Sensory Experience: A Sourcebook in the Anthropology of the Senses, Anthropological Horizons (Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1991): 61-78. Synnott has briefly considered some aspects of this history in his chapter, to which I am greatly indebted, but he neglects the Old Testament tradition and develops the theme deeper into the future. As a point of departure, I make with Synnott, who says “While the Greeks gloried in the senses, particularly sight, Christian thinking about, and practice of, the senses has been deeply ambivalent” (64), I note that the Greeks had their own share of ambivalence toward the senses as well.
Christian orthopraxis was always paradoxical. Hence, by the period of Tridentine implementation it was a deeply ingrained habit to denigrate the body and its senses, even though their utility to the spiritual life was undeniable. This brief history should underscore that, for Robert Bellarmine and his contemporaries, it would have been nigh impossible to controvert these concurrently held paradoxes. Following this chapter, Bellarmine’s contributions to the post-Tridentine approach to sensuousness will appear similar, almost as reiterations instead of innovations of an enduring problem. The ambivalence toward the senses permeated Catholic culture and thought in a way that was too deep seated to permit much change. Yet, the approach was not unchanged entirely. The sensescape of Catholicism following the Council of Trent, as characterized in Bellarmine’s writings, was simultaneously more sensuous and interested in engaging the senses and warier of the senses and drawn to rigorous penitential practice than it had been in ages prior.

While both the Biblical and Classical traditions had always enjoyed a prominent place in the intellectual and ethical life of Christianity, the influence of the latter may have actually increased, at least to some degree, after the so-called rediscovery or rebirth of the Classics during the Renaissance. In the telling of many historians, the Renaissance was an era that shed the heavy yoke of dogged medieval Christianity in favor of the valorization of humanity. In this telling, the Renaissance ushered in a novel appreciation for not only the human mind, but also the human form. This notion is particularly pervasive among art

2 See Lucien Febvre, The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century, the Religion of Rabelais (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982); Stuart B. Schwartz, All Can Be Saved: Religious Tolerance and Salvation in the Iberian Atlantic World (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008). The very assertion clearly shows sympathy to the perspective of Lucien Febvre, who argued rather persuasively that it was practically unthinkable to disagree with the mentalités of an age. Stuart Schwartz, on the other hand, demonstrated just how many individuals might hold opinions contrary to those that prevail. Still, it seems that where the issue of the senses in the spiritual life is concerned there are far more continuities in thought than disparities, as I will show.
historians of the Renaissance. François Quiviger, for example, falls victim to this trap when he discusses the reception of Michelangelo Bounarroti’s (1475-1564) *Last Judgment* (completed in 1541):

Michelangelo’s immense fame as a painter and sculptor rested principally on his work on the human figure. For his friend and early biographer, Ascanio Condivi, the *Last Judgment* at the Sistine Chapel reveals all that nature can do with the human body, while the *Moses* at the Roman church of San Pietro in Vincoli stands out because ‘beneath the beautiful robes covering [Moses], appears the nude; and the clothing in no way detracts from the beauty of the body; one sees this in all of [Michelangelo’s] clothed figures, both painted and sculpted.’

From Quiviger’s commentary and the quotation from Condivi, it is evident that he reads the Renaissance artist’s proclivity toward painting nude human figures as symptomatic of the age. The Renaissance championed the glory of the human body, and therefore, Michelangelo expressed that notion in the robust human nudes that seem to rejoice in his art. While he is surely not the only art historian to write to that effect, Quiviger’s work is especially provocative because he demonstrates that artists were primarily interested in “the generic sensory character of the human figure in Renaissance art before [art] even receives its iconographic identity.” To what extent does this perspective bear out in the thought patterns of early modern Catholics? And from where did their ideas about the value of the body and its senses derive? These are the guiding questions behind this chapter, and their answers gesture toward a different conclusion than Quiviger and others have proposed. I argue that their perspective is not only one-sided but is also a misrepresentation of Classical culture from which sensuous ambivalence was born.

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4 This sentiment will be challenged in the fourth chapter of this dissertation.

5 Quiviger, *The Sensory World*, 63.
I. Biblical and Classical Tradition

*Hebrew Scriptures*

The Hebrew Scriptures offer a fitting beginning for this survey of sensorial ambivalence because of their prominence in the Christian tradition and their chronological precedence. The writings of the Ancient Israelites established the foundation upon which Christian culture drew since the first century. The group of texts that compose the Old Testament honor and vilify the body and its senses simultaneously. Some biblical stories valorize the sense organs as vehicles through which to perceive an unknowable God and act throughout his creation. Others commend those who deny their senses and live in self-abnegation. Others still warn about the dangers that befall those who would fall prey to their sensual appetites. Some passages even communicate their meaning through the senses as powerful symbols.6

While no one biblical text directly commends the senses, many verses offer reasons to be optimistic about them. From the very beginning, the book of Genesis clarifies that the body, its senses, and all objects that the senses perceive are works of God. In the creation account in Genesis 1, God creates man and woman in his image and likeness, bestows on them dominion over animals for their sustenance, and evaluates all of his work as “good” (Gen. 1: 27-30). Throughout the Hebrew Bible, many prophets confirm the divine origins of the sense organs as in Proverbs 20:12 “The hearing ear, and the seeing eye, the Lord made them both.”7 In turn, the senses, especially sight and hearing are valued

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7 All translations of Biblical texts are my own and drawn from the Weber Gryson Vulgate, unless otherwise noted, see Bonifatius Fischer, ed., *Biblia Sacra: Iuxta Vulgatam Versionem*, Editionen quintam emendatum retractatam (Stuttgart: Duetsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2007).
for their ability to testify to the existence of the divine. For example, Samuel urges the Israelites to be grateful for God’s faithfulness, and to give thanks to him for making Saul their king. He commands the people to “stand and see the great things the Lord will do in [their] sight” (1 Sam. 12:16). The eyes and the power of sight are witness to God’s greatness. Seeing, in this case, is believing. This is similarly true for Job, who finds himself face to face with God and addresses him saying, “with the hearing of my ear I have heard you now, however, my eye sees you” (Job 42:5). Thereafter, Job does penance and the Lord blesses him with abundance of years and offspring. Of course, it is not hearing and sight alone that permit knowledge of and belief in God. The senses are also a way of communicating God’s commandments and providing instruction in faith and morality. This is made clear in Deuteronomy when Moses addresses the Israelites saying “Hear, O Israel, the ceremonies and judgments, which I speak in your ears this day…” (Dt. 5:1).

Taste can play a role as well as the Psalmist alludes: “taste and see that the Lord is sweet: blessed is he who hopes in him” (Ps. 33:9). Similarly, Ezekiel plays on this tradition when God commands him to heed his word. In the third chapter of Ezekiel, God commands the prophet to eat a scroll and digest his Word, which Ezekiel reports tasted sweet as honey (Ezek. 3:1-3). While these are more likely metaphorical understandings of the sense of taste rather than physical actions, what is clear is that the prophets employ language related to the gustatory sense to demonstrate its ability to know the Divine. Even through taste a human being can act in the world and know God. In Latin, and later Romance languages, the words for tasting and knowing have the same root, sapere, and as a result tasting is one of the most common metaphors for understanding. Smell does not quite have the instructional or faith affirming quality of sight, hearing, and taste, yet the olfactory sense
also meets with positive appraisal in the Hebrew Scriptures. Smell is most relevant in relation to temple sacrifice. The sacrificial offering was not intended for God to eat, but to smell it’s “sweet odor” (Lev. 1:9).

At the same time, many verses of the Hebrew Scriptures indicate that the senses ought not be trusted. David, whom Bellarmine and his contemporaries attributed with authorship of the Psalms, excoriates the unbelief of idolaters who have mouths that do not speak, eyes that do not see, ears that do not hear, and hands that do not feel (Ps. 113: 13-15). The sense organs can mislead. Alone they are not sufficient to know and serve God perfectly. In fact, many biblical stories allude to this shortcoming, and warn readers of the dangers of falling victim to desires of the earth through the senses. For example, drunkenness, an overfondness for alcohol, is frequently linked to immorality. Two telling examples come from the book of Genesis. The children of Noah and Lot both sexually exploit their drunken fathers (Gn. 9:20-26, 19:30-38). In the case of Lot, the sexual transgressions result in the birth of offspring from incestuous relations. This presents a major theme: the good use of the senses is critical for maintenance of social order.

A number of other passages indicate how dangerous temptations of the senses might be. The fall narrative in Genesis, for example, elucidates how demonic temptation happens at the level of the senses. It all begins when Eve hears the serpent’s question “why did God command that you not eat from every tree in paradise” (Gn. 3:1)? Eve clarifies that God commanded them not to eat nor touch the fruit of the tree in the middle of paradise

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8 Tradition attributed the Psalms to David, and that attribution was maintained through the pre-modern and early modern world.

9 Many of these passages referred to here receive fuller attention by Bellarmine and other preachers mentioned in chapters two and three below.
(Gn. 3:3). Thereafter, Eve inspects the tree in question, she sees it, sees that it is beautiful, she plucks the fruit, and eats it. Through hearing, sight, taste, and touch, Eve contravenes the divine commandment and sins against God. In a similar way, King David falls into a series of loathsome transgressions with Bathsheba (2 Sm. 11:1-27). Captivated by the mere sight of Bathsheba bathing nude, David begins an adulterous relationship, and plots the death of Bathsheba’s husband, Uriah the Hittite.¹⁰ There is no shortage of such stories in the Hebrew Scriptures.¹¹ They all point to the dangers of being embodied, and the shortfalls of relying too much on the senses and sensual pleasure. This despite the inherent value of the senses as tools for coming into a closer relationship with God.

*Classical Greece and Rome*

While the relationship between the senses and morality first perturbed Semitic cultures in the ancient world, the Greeks contended with nearly the same difficulties in their philosophy. In the Greek context, the tension stemmed from a dualistic understanding of human nature, which valued soul, mind, and spirit over the body. Perhaps the most influential thinker behind the separation of body and soul was Plato who espoused this doctrine in his idea of forms. Ultimately, for Plato, any visible object was merely a lesser version of the idea of that object. Indeed, in his view, the idea was more real than the physical object. As a result, he categorizes humans into three types, gold, silver, and

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¹⁰ This passage concerning the sins of David became one of the stories preachers alluded to in the early modern period to underscore the necessity of most strict custody of the senses. It was a particular favorite of many Jesuit preachers including Robert Bellarmine. All of these drew on the *Glossa Ordinaria* and its references to Augustine and Job. See chapters, 2, 3, and 4. The story of Susannah and the Elders also features prominently in Bellarmine’s sermons, see chapter 2.

¹¹ For example, see *Proverbs*, which is replete with instructions about the appropriate use, and more importantly the importance of the custody of the tongue. See also Carla Casagrande and Silvana Vecchio, *I Peccati Della Lingua: Disciplina ed Etica della Parola Nella Cultura Medievale* (Rome: Istituto della enciclopedia italiana, 1987).
bronze, which correspond to reason, courage, and the senses. Those ruled by the sensual appetites could only ever be lesser men.\textsuperscript{12} Yet, in the \textit{Timaeus} Plato argued that the senses, especially sight, had inherent value, and were critical for man’s greatest end: knowledge of Truth: “had we never seen the stars and the sun ..none of the words which we have spoken about the universe would ever have been uttered.”\textsuperscript{13} In a similar way, in the \textit{Symposium}, Plato argues that when physical beauty draws the attention of the eye, it motivates the soul to contemplate higher realities. Thus, what is physical and sensual is a necessary vehicle for what is transcendent. It is important to note just how influential these Platonic ideas were on the later Christian tradition. Plato’s dualism strongly influenced the early fathers and mothers of the church, and medieval thinkers adopted this idea of a “divine ladder” from the sensuous to the transcendent. This included Bonaventure, and Robert Bellarmine.

Of course, for the medieval and early modern context, it was Aristotle that reigned supreme in Christian thought. Like his peer, Plato, Aristotle admired all the senses for their utility in epistemological pursuits, though sight was by far most important.\textsuperscript{14} By creating a hierarchy of the senses that cherished sight above all he also moralized the senses. In his \textit{Dialogues} he identified the human senses of sight, hearing, and smell, with purity, largely for their role in understanding.\textsuperscript{15} Here is where later Christian authors could find

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\textsuperscript{13} Plato, \textit{The Collected Dialogues of Plato}, 1174–75.


\textsuperscript{15} Aristotle, \textit{The Complete Works}, 2412.
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themselves in disagreement with Aristotle, as they were concerned of the potential danger of even these higher senses.

In *On the Soul*, Aristotle added that these higher senses were special to humans insofar as other animals did not have these sensuous capacities.\(^{16}\) The animal senses, taste and touch, were those that depended on proximity. He considered them necessary for well-being in the form of nutrition and being itself in the action of procreation.\(^{17}\) Yet, these two were also less pure, as he notes in the *Nicomachean Ethics*: “sight is superior to touch in purity, and hearing and smell to taste.”\(^{18}\) Taste and touch render humans incontinent and intemperate through lust and gluttony.\(^{19}\)

Cicero’s writings reveal his reliance on Greek philosophy and its dualism. In his *Tusculan Disputations* he made marked distinctions between the soul and the body, between the life of the philosopher and the life of sensuous pleasures. For Cicero, the life of the mind and the ability to think holds a cherished preeminence. He considers the faculties of each sense in an evaluation of Epicurus’ idea that the wise man has more pleasures than the fool. Cicero claims that one can be wise without the sense of sight or hearing because “he despises such things in themselves.”\(^{20}\) In fact, he claims that sight itself, unlike the other senses is unable to bring pleasure to its corresponding sense organ, the eye without the working of the mind, rather “it is the soul which receives the objects

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\(^{17}\) Synnott, “Senses from Plato to Marx,” 63.


we see…” Cicero refers to a number of outstanding blind thinkers, Homer chief among them. On a final note, he reflects on how the senses bring as much misfortune as they do pleasure. For example, the deaf may not be able to hear a beautiful singer, but they also cannot hear themselves defamed nor other offensive noises. At the same time, and in some ways contradictorily, Cicero, the famed rhetorician, cannot avoid remarking on how useful the senses are to make a point. In his De Oratore, he dwells on how alluding to the senses in metaphors elicit powerful responses in audiences. He claims, “every metaphor, provided it be a good one, has a direct appeal to the senses, especially the sense of sight, which is the keenest: for while the rest of the senses supply such metaphors as ‘the fragrance of good manners,’ ‘the softness of a humane spirit,’ ‘the roar of the waves,’ ‘a sweet style of speaking,’ the metaphors drawn from the sense of sight are much more vivid, virtually placing within the range of our mental vision objects not actually visible to our sight.” Despite his claims to the futility of the senses he notes how powerful and effective they are for conveying meaning, and therefore understanding. Conveying meaning is the epicenter of the persuasive force of rhetoric, and it relies on sensuous metaphors.

Cicero’s influence spread through much of Roman philosophical thought, as many other thinkers inherited his dualistic views on the body, its senses, and the mind. Chief among these was Seneca, who, in a letter on virtue, frequently separates body and soul by

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21 Cicero, Tuscan Disputations, 537.

22 Cicero, Tuscan Disputations, 537.

23 Cicero, Tuscan Disputations, 541.

displaying the superiority of the former to the latter: “the soul is not disfigured by the ugliness of the body, but rather the opposite, that the body is beautified by the comeliness of the soul.” On the restraint of the bodily desires, Seneca insinuates to Lucillus, the recipient of his letter, that if a man is incautious he will become more a slave to his appetite than the slaves he keeps to serve him food: “The master eats more than he can hold, and with monstrous greed loads his belly until it is stretched and at length ceases to do the work of a belly; so that he is at greater pains to discharge all the food than he was to stuff it down.” The reproach here is clear, given that Seneca mocks these same masters for feeling superior to their slaves. In fact, their gluttony enslaves them to their bodies and makes them lesser than their slaves, who stoically stand beside the table hungry, but mute.

*New Testament*

The New Testament, which to some degree represents an amalgam of Jewish and Greek thought, is replete with iterations about the validity and utility of denying the flesh, or the unworthiness of the flesh. Indeed, its central figure, Jesus Christ personifies the problem, as the incarnation makes the *Logos*, that is the Word, or reason, assume physical flesh. In Jesus, God and Holy Spirit become man. The ambivalence of the role of the senses was not a question of essence for New Testament writers alone, but also one of deeds. Indeed, one of the first biblical figures that the evangelist Matthew introduces is the cousin of Jesus, John the Baptist, who Matthew extols for eating only locusts and wild honey (Mt. 3:4).  

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27 It is worth noting that Luther summarily avoids discussing this passage, perhaps because of his disavowal of works righteousness.
Thus, John the Baptist is the first model for rejecting the body’s need for food in favor of an asceticism that prepares the soul for God.

Jesus Christ himself follows John’s example shortly after his baptism in the Jordan by fleeing to the wilderness where he fasted for forty days and forty nights until he was famished (Mt. 4:3).\(^2\) To this extraordinary feat Jesus continued to deny what the world esteems in his spiritual combat with the devil and his sensuous temptations. First, Jesus refuses to transform stones to bread saying, “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Mt. 4:4). Then Jesus rejects Satan’s proposal to rule all the kingdoms of the earth (Mt. 4:3-10). In Matthew’s Gospel angels descend from heaven and provide Jesus with nourishment as a divine reward for his heroic asceticism and faithfulness (Mt. 4:11), a feature of the narrative that Luke’s Gospel lacks. To his feats of self-denial Jesus adds several statements that suggest the utility of guarding the senses from temptation and the futility of the human body. One of the more prominent of these occurs after Jesus exorcises an epileptic boy. He explains to his disciples that their exorcism attempts were unsuccessful because, “this kind [of demon] can come forth by nothing, but by prayer and fasting,” (Mk. 9:29).\(^3\) In other instances Jesus approaches the theme of custody of the senses in a more subtle way, notably when he teaches the crowd about adultery. For Jesus, the sin is not committed in the act of fornication, but in merely gazing at a woman with lust (Mt. 5:28). Jesus’ remedy for this sin is to pluck out the eye that sins rather than lose the soul to hell for the sake of one sensory organ (Mt. 5:29). Though this exhortation has always been read as hyperbole, commentators and moralist preachers

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\(^2\) Luke maintains that Jesus ate nothing at all in those forty days (Lk. 4:2).

\(^3\) This story is also in Matthew 17:21.
consistently took the admonition seriously.

At the same time, it is undeniable that Jesus’ ministry was vitally sensual. He had a true concern for the needs and care of the human body. He feeds the hungry, heals the sick, turns water into wine, and he dines with friends. He teaches his disciples to pray: “give us this day our daily bread,” (Mt. 6:11); and he judges souls on their sensory care of others: when I was hungry, you gave me food; when thirsty, you gave me drink” (Mt. 25:34-5). He heals by touch, laying hands on the afflicted and downtrodden as in the case of the leper whom he cleanses (Mt. 8:3). He even restores sight to the blind as in the case of the man, who was born blind. Jesus spits on the earth and rubs clay in the man’s eyes. After the blind man washes, he can see (Jn. 9:1-13). Many of the works of Jesus’ ministry rely on sensuous care; his power manifests itself through the senses; and he restores sense capacities to those who lack them. These all testify to the appreciation for the body and its senses in Jesus’ ministry.

The epistle writers, especially Paul, seem to emphasize the denial of the flesh as part of a tradition handed down from Jesus Christ. While there are too many such passages to cite, a few are worthy of note. Peter, for example, warns that the Lord will punish the unrighteous, which he explains are those who indulge in the flesh in depraved lust because with their eyes full of adultery, they are insatiable for sin (2 Pt. 2:10-14). The passage from Peter clearly builds on the foundation established by Jesus in Matthew 5:28 exhorting the listener to practice custody of eyes and abstain from desires of the flesh. In the Pauline corpus, the apostle chastises several Christian communities urging them to reject the body and deny the flesh. In Romans 8:6-7 Paul writes, “To set the mind on the flesh is death, but

30 Synnott, “Senses from Plato to Marx,” 64.
to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For this reason, the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God.” If this was not enough Paul includes an entire passage on the works of the flesh followed by another on the fruit of the spirit. In the works of the flesh (Gal. 5:16-21), Paul demands that the Galatians spurn “fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these”. He urges them instead to pursue the fruit of the spirit in order to belong to Christ, the prerequisite for which is to “have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires” (Gal. 5:24, Paul echoes many of these sentiments in 1 Cor. 6:13-20).

Paul’s thought on this issue reaches a climax in Roman’s 7 where he suggests that the body is at war with the spirit: “According to the inner man I delight in the law of God, but in my members I see another law, fighting against the law of my mind, and captivating me in the law of sin that is my members” (Rm: 7:22-23). Paul displays the mistrust of the body and its senses as antithetical to Christian good. With this dichotomy between spirit (pneuma) and flesh (sarx) Paul set the tone for centuries of Christian aesthetic practice.  

II. Medieval Tradition

At the conclusion of the apostolic age it became the job of the next generations of Christians to interpret how best to live the Christian life. Early Christianity’s Patristic theologians betray an affinity to Greek philosophy and its dualism that surpasses all other Christian generations. While some of the early Christian heterodox sects, such as the Manichees or

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Gnostics, interpreted dualism to deny the body in favor of the spirit, orthodox thinkers maintained the utility of both flesh and spirit.

*Patristic and Monastic*

The heroes of early Christianity, the desert hermits, put these theories about custody of the senses into action. They displayed heroic virtue by total denial of the body. The most famous of the early desert monks was Antony of Egypt (251-356), whose life was memorialized by Athanasius (296-373), the sometimes bishop of Alexandria. Antony’s spiritual path is a spiral into deeper isolation and more stringent asceticism in an effort to escape the world; however, this is precisely what exposes him to demonic attacks. Antony’s tactic to defend himself from the demons was to offer over his body, reminding the demons that it was his soul he cared for.32 Athanasius claims that Antony found the strength to repel demons because he empowered his soul by denying his body.33 Antony’s aim was to perfect the control of his body, and he believed it was through the solitude of the desert that the monk “is delivered from three conflicts: hearing, speech, and sight; there is only one conflict for him and that is with fornication.”34 Thus the devil attacks the faithful soul not only at the level of the body, but also at its senses. In fleeing the world, the monk confronts and learns to avoid the many temptations that seep to the soul through the senses.

Other holy ascetics took their cue from Antony, and further developed ascetic theories on the dangers of the senses. One Abba Arsenius, for example, even willingly

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endures olfactory suffering by refusing to change the water in his palm leaves lest fragrant aromas tempt him.\textsuperscript{35} In one of the more fascinating passages, a certain desert father, Abraham, shows just how seriously problematic the senses were for these monks. He chastises an old ascetic for claiming that he trained himself to perfect custody of the senses. When the old man admits that he would notice a woman on his mat, Abraham chastises the old man “[you have not] destroyed the passion, but it still lives in you although it is controlled.”\textsuperscript{36} This anecdote elucidates the notion that the custody of the senses must be practiced at all times, and that its end is to eradicate the desires of the body completely, not merely control them.

To some degree this ascetic tradition that included renunciation of the senses and mortification of the flesh lead to a culture of competitive sensory deprivation that was moderated by leaders of the cenobitic monastic movement. The cenobites codified the tenets of ascetic practices, while adding a moderating influence. For example, Pachomius (292-348), an Egyptian monk and founder of cenobitic monasticism, insists that monks at work should maintain custody of the eyes, “Let no one look at another twisting ropes or praying; let him rather be intent on his own work with eyes cast down.”\textsuperscript{37} In a similar way, Benedict of Nursia (480-547), citing Psalm 39 encourages monks to guard their tongue and be silent; insists that monks should sleep clothed and in separate beds; provides for different meal options depending on infirmities though cautions that monks avoid excess in eating and drinking; and prescribes corporal punishment for sin only after exhausting

\textsuperscript{35} Ward, \textit{The Sayings}, 11.

\textsuperscript{36} Ward, \textit{The Sayings}, 33.

less harsh means. This sensory deprivation notwithstanding, it is clear that monks depended on the sensuous. They convene prayer by ringing bells, and their entire lives’ work, chanting the office relies on the sound of music. It is no coincidence that the first exhortation in Benedict’s Rule is to “listen.”

The theme permeates the other patristic authors who participated in active ministry in the world as well. First among these was the famous preacher, John Chrysostom (347-407). Where sensory deprivation was concerned he writes: “let not my mouth only fast, but also the eye, and the ear, and the feet, and the hands, and all the members of our bodies. Let the hands fast by being pure from raping and avarice…Let the ear fast also…in refusing to receive evil speakings and calumnies…Let the mouth too fast from disgraceful speeches and railing…The beauty of woman is the greatest snare. Or rather, not the beauty of woman but unchastened gazing!” In many ways, Chrysostom’s concern with attraction to feminine beauty reflected the writings of Tertullian’s (155-220) On the Apparel of Women (197). Tertullian rails against all attempts women make to adorn themselves with dress, makeup, and jewelry, fearing, above all, that they might attract the male gaze and inspire lust with their attire: “But why are we a source of danger to others? Why do we excite concupiscence in others? If the Lord in amplifying the Law does not make a distinction in

40 Tertullian, The Apparel of Women, trans., Rudolph Arbesmann, Emily Joseph Daly, and Edwin A. Quain (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1959). It must be noted that it is impossible to read this text today without noting its gross misogyny as exemplified when Tertullian blames women for original sin “The sentence of God on this sex of your lives on even in our times and so it is necessary that the guilt should liv on, also. You are the one who opened the door to the Devil, you are the one who first plucked the fruit of the forbidden tree…you are the one who persuaded him whom the Devil was not strong enough to attack….” Tertullian, The Apparel of Women, 1.1.2 (numbers refer to book, chapter, and paragraph not pages.).
penalty between the actual commission of fornication and its desire, I do not know whether He will grant impunity to one who is the cause of perdition to another. For he perishes as soon as he looks up your beauty with desire…”⁴¹ As Chrysostom argues, it was not the eyes alone, but the entire body, all its sense organs, and members were actors in the cause of sin, and therefore needed careful guarding. Yet, those same senses, especially the eye, have the capacity to instruct the human soul: “God, the Supreme Artist…hath been able to make an eye so beautiful…and to implant in it such power, that it can at once survey the high aerial expanse, and…embrace the mountains, forests, hills, the ocean, yea, the heaven…The heavens may be silent, but the sight of them emits a voice that is louder than a trumpet’s sound; instructing us not by ear, but through the medium of the eyes.”⁴² Not only is the eye a valuable organ as God’s creation, but, as we have seen from many others, for its power as a medium of instruction. The awe that the power of the eye inspires is enough, as Chrysostom shows, to contemplate the power of the divine.

Chrysostom’s Latin counterpart Augustine also maintains the dualisms present between mind and body. In the de Continentia, Augustine draws on several biblical passages to form a position on the issue that reflects many of the prevalent perspectives: “Even now in this state of corruption and mortality, when the corruptible body still weighs down the soul (Wis 9:15) and, as the apostle says, The body is dead because of sin (Rom 8:10), he gives that testimony in support of our flesh, that is, the inferior and material part of us, with the words I quoted just above: No one ever hates his own flesh; and he immediately adds, but nourishes and nurtures it, just as Christ does the Church (Eph

⁴¹ Tertullian, Apparel of Women, II, 2.4.
For Augustine, the body and the senses are not inherently evil, but they could awaken desires that corrupt the soul. He expressed these ideas most eloquently in book ten of his soul-searching autobiographical masterpiece, *The Confessions*. He describes God, as a divine being that makes himself known to man through the senses: “You called me; you cried aloud to me; you broke my barrier of deafness. You shone upon me; your radiance enveloped me; you put my blindness to flight. You shed your fragrance about me; I drew breath and now I gasp for your sweet odour. I tasted you, and now I hunger and thirst for you. You touched me, and I am inflamed with love of your peace.”

In the very same book of the *Confessions*, he attributes fondness of the senses to sin, noting that his eye tempts him as do pleasures of sounds such that he wavers. At the same time, he admits that it was the sound of St. Ambrose’s voice preaching in Milan that drew him to Christianity in the first place, and the sound of a voice urging “*tolle, lege,*” which compelled him to convert. Not all temptations were bad, especially not the allure of sweet smell, which he finds little fault with.

**Cistercians**

Many thinkers of the later monastic tradition continued to dwell on these very issues. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) was a reformer of the Cistercian order, and a favorite of

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45 Augustine, *Confessions*, 233–41. While scent did not concern Augustine very much. It was a major part of early Christian ritual life. Harvey’s fascinating study discusses the many ways in which scent was related to holiness, from the sweet odor of a holy body to liturgical incense, to the holy stench of the ascetic stylites. See Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Scenting Salvation: Ancient Christianity and the Olfactory Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).
early modern preachers. Bernard was one of the first to give sermons specifically on the custody of the body and its senses. On his first sermon “Concerning the Triple Custody of the Hand, The Tongue, and the Heart,” Bernard begins by posing the question, “how can we be concerned about our heart if we are not yet cautious about our mouth or do not yet keep ready custody of our hand?”

Beginning with the custody of the hand, interpreted best as the custody of touch, Bernard instructs the listener with Biblical pericopes advising him to flee fornication (1 Cor. 6:18), and steal no more (Eph. 4:28), if he hopes to obtain the kingdom of God (Gal. 5:28). From there he moves to the custody of the tongue, which counterintuitively is not rooted in indulgence in food and drink. Instead, Bernard is worried about wanton speech that serves lust or arrogance. If the tongue is in peril for wanton speech, then the ear is in the crosshairs. As a result, Bernard admonishes the listener to avoid “being corrupted by the poison; the wise will not let themselves be perturbed by scandal.” Bernard is thus presented with the paradox that while the tongue is dangerous for forming words; the words he offers on the dangers of the tongue, by use of his tongue, are salutary. It is important to note that the tongue in the formulation of most all these premodern thinkers is an organ of multiple senses including taste, touch, and even hearing.

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48 Bernard, “Concerning the Triple Custody,” 95.

49 Bernard, “Concerning the Triple Custody,” 96. Later Bellarmine opines that the custody of the tongue is critical to avoid spreading heresy, see chapter two.

50 Bernard, “Concerning the Triple Custody,” 98.
It is useful for spreading orthodox teaching, but dangerous for letting loose thoughts that could corrupt the ear.\textsuperscript{51}

Bernard is also notable as one of the more important commentators on the \textit{Song of Songs}, a work of erotic poetry whose presence within the Hebrew Scriptures has puzzled biblical scholars for centuries. Commentators in the Christian tradition have interpreted the sensuous and indeed erotic tones of the \textit{Song of Songs} variously, but one constant was to avoid literal interpretations in favor of allegorical ones. Interpreters have read the lovers’ ode as a description of the love between God and the soul, Christ and the Church, and even between the superior of a religious order and members of the order.\textsuperscript{52} Bernard’s interpretation is no exception. Consistent with the sensuous overtures of the text, Bernard introduces his first sermon on the \textit{Song of Songs} as “bread that is fine and flavorsome.”\textsuperscript{53} He engages his audience with the sensory metaphor, and then reminds them that the “two chief evils” of the world are the “wickedness and excess of body” and the “deceptive look” of the world.\textsuperscript{54} Given his distaste for the world and its traps his reading of \textit{Song of Songs} avoids the sensual, and he argues that the face of the kissing lover is not physical, but describes the face of Scripture.\textsuperscript{55} From there he plays on the title \textit{Song of Songs} itself to frame the sense paradox. On the one hand, Bernard claims that the reader rejoicing in

\textsuperscript{51} Bernard, “Concerning the Triple Custody,” (100-101).

\textsuperscript{52} It must be noted that this latter interpretation is rare, and perhaps, unique to Gian Paolo Oliva, see Gian Paolo Oliva, \textit{In selecta Scripturae loca ethicæ commentationes: in Genesim, cui accessere commentationes item ethicæ: in Canticum Canticorum: tomus primus} (Lyon: sumptibus F. Fr. Anissoniorum et Joannis Posuel, 1677).


\textsuperscript{54} Bernard, \textit{Song of Songs}, I.I.2.

\textsuperscript{55} Bernard, \textit{Song of Songs}, I.IV.6.
revelations from the *Song of Songs* must delight “ears with the voice of exultation and praise (Ps. 4:5), the sound of one who feasts in gratitude for the food of the bread of heaven he has given you.” On the other hand, he notes that “in the daily trials and battles from which those who live a holy life in Christ are never free, for they come from the world, the flesh, and the devil (2 Tm. 3:12), you learn by your experience that…it is necessary to renew your song every day, for every victory that is won: each time temptation is overcome, or vice subdued…” Tasting the sweet words of divinity, Bernard’s imagined reader uses the power of his tongue to sing God praises and resist the temptations that assail the flesh.

*High Medieval Thought and Affective Mysticism*

Aquinas was the first mediaeval thinker to approach the senses systematically due to his preference for Aristotle. Like the philosopher, it is sight that he commends above all others. Souls could expect the fulfillment of their sense of sight in heaven when they could gaze upon the beatific vision which is “the highest and perfect felicity of intellectual nature.” Aquinas’ juxtaposition of the fulfillment of sight in the heavenly realm with the intemperance of the other senses is stark. He makes clear that human happiness is not attainable through the senses, “pleasures of the flesh,” nor “goods of the body.” The

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problem stems from his high esteem for the mind over the body. As a result, vision is prioritized over taste and touch, which he believes impede contemplation.\textsuperscript{60}

In his epic \textit{Commedia}, Dante Alighieri surpassed Thomas Aquinas’ theological enumeration of the senses by enfleshing the height of Christian imagination in \textit{terze rime}. His imaginative journey through the realms of the afterlife rely entirely on the senses. \textit{L’Inferno} and \textit{Purgatorio} are spaces of horrific assault on the senses just as the Garden atop the mountain of purgation and \textit{Paradiso} are places of sensory delight. Those who misused and indulged the senses (as well as other vices) in earthly life are doomed to sensuous torment in hell, and those who practiced good custody of their senses (as well as other virtues) on earth experience perfect pleasure in heaven. From the very first moment of descent into Limbo the Pilgrim’s senses are tortured with “sighs, weeping, loud wailing…horrible tongues, words of pain, accents of anger, voices loud and hoarse…tumult that turns forever in that air.”\textsuperscript{61} As his guide Vergil explains it is the place where he “will see the grieving peoples.”\textsuperscript{62} The torment only becomes worse as he descends further the sighs and weeping of limbo become the “shrieks, the wailing, the lamenting” of hell.\textsuperscript{63} The souls who gave in to sins through their sense of touch, taste, hearing, sight, and even smell all receive divine punishment. The gluttons feast on vile filth and fester in their own stinking excrement. Those who spoke and heard heresy burn in flaming tombs.

\textsuperscript{60} Aquinas, \textit{Summa Contra Gentiles}, 113.


\textsuperscript{62} Alighieri, \textit{Inferno}, III, 16–17 “Noi siam venuti al loco ov’ i’ t’ho detto che tu vedrai le genti dolorose”.

\textsuperscript{63} Alighieri, \textit{Inferno}, V, 35 “le strida, il compianto, il lamento”.
Demons whip the seducers. All the while they endure horrific smells, blinding darkness, and agonizing tortures. The message could not be any clearer: those who would submit their intellect, their reason, and good Christian living to the unadulterated pleasure of the senses, will find all of those senses tortured for eternity.

Were this not enough to convince the casual reader to abandon their vices, Dante contrasts the stark horror of hell with the serene beauty of heaven. Even as Dante emerges from hell to discover the torturous purgation of Purgatory the sensuous atmosphere already changes. The world is again one of song, and the “sweet color of eastern sapphire.”64 The shrieks of hell transform into the song of Purgatory as the souls sing “In exitu Israel de Aegypto”.65 The songs of the blessed only become clearer and more beautiful as the lady sings “Beati quorum tecta sunt peccata,” and all the more perfect when Dante’s ears rejoice in the sound of the heavenly choir.66 The Pilgrim’s senses not only rejoice in the spectacle of heaven, but their ability to perceive transcends all their capacity on earth even to the point that he is able to “fix [his] eyes on the sun beyond our wont.”67 The climax of the poem, its ultimate canto, is an extended description of the fulfillment of and perfection of the sense of sight viewing the one true God in the beatific vision. This is the reward for those like Benedict of Nursia and other holy ascetics, who abandon the world and its enticements, keep their hearts pure, and remain in their cloisters.68

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65 Alighieri, Purgatorio, II, 46.
67 Alighieri, Paradiso, I, 54.
68 Alighieri, Paradiso, XXII, 49-51.
The growing class of affective mystics, meaning those spiritual people who experienced strong emotional reactions in their devotional lives, also aspired to see the face of God in their afterlives.\(^6^9\) In this life, their devotional practices and spiritual experiences epitomize the complexity of the sense paradox as a balance between the use of the senses for spiritual meditation and the custody of the senses to ward off the temptations of the world. In his *Fire of Love*, Richard Rolle (1300-1349), takes on the clear and consistent message of the spiritual writers before him: beware the traps of the world. And yet, there remains the ever-present awareness that human beings understand through their senses. As a result, Rolle, consistent with tradition, repeats the metaphors of Bernard of Clairvaux describing the spiritual life as a banquet of “heavenly sweetness.”\(^7^0\) This concession to the earthly senses notwithstanding, Rolle warns against the dangers of the world, and maintains its goodness as God’s creation, “A human soul cannot know the fire of eternal love unless first he has completely cut adrift from worldly vanity of every kind…For if it is for God’s sake that we love everything, we love God in it rather than the thing in itself…evil men…are always seeking things to do with worldly pleasure.”\(^7^1\) His criticism is all the more powerful for those who succumb to carnal lust, “they are firmly earthbound by the very weight of their desires. Quite rightly there is no mitigation of their grief, nor any alleviation of the pain of damnation: of their own free will they made sensual pleasure their good, and for a love that deceived they wantonly lost the love of their eternal lover.”\(^7^2\) To


\(^{71}\) Rolle, *Fire of Love*, 55.

\(^{72}\) Rolle, *Fire of Love*, 55-58.
make matters clearer Rolle cautions, “a true lover of God never lets his eye linger on the
world.” Rolle cautions, “a true lover of God never lets his eye linger on the
world.”73 From heavenly sweetness as a reward for applying the senses well to infernal
pain for neglecting careful custody, Rolle’s inflamed lover encapsulates the breadth and
depth of the paradox of the senses.74

III. Reformations

From Dante’s sensuous epic journey whose peak is the very climax of the universe, to the
divine encounters of the mystic, most other reflections on the senses in the Christian life
can seem less poetic. Nonetheless, the senses continued to attract attention. This was
especially true in the years leading up to the Reformation. Since the rise of the Mendicant
orders, their insistence on an apostolic lifestyle, and changing habits in devotional life as a
result of the Devotio Moderna in the 15th century, there was cause to call some traditional
practices into question. An increased emphasis on interiority encouraged many to deny the
benefits of sensuous aspects of worship.75 Perhaps there is no better text that exemplifies
the practices and attitudes of the Devotio Moderna than the Imitation of Christ by Thomas
à Kempis.76 Yet, even despite this emphasis on interiority, there are many instances in
which à Kempis wades into the paradox of the senses: “we chatter most freely about our
favorite topics, about what we would like to have, or about those things we especially
dislike! What a mistake! … If it is proper to speak, speak of what will benefit others

73 Rolle, Fire of Love, 74.

74 For more on the senses in the afterlife, see chapter three.

75 See John Van Engen, Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life: The Devotio Moderna and the World of
the Later Middle Ages (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

76 See Thomas à Kempis, The Imitation of Christ, trans., William C. Creasy (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press,
1989).
spiritually. Bad habits and neglect of our spiritual progress contribute much to our endless chatter; however, devout conversation on spiritual matters greatly helps our progress…”

Using the tongue and its power over speech and hearing, à Kempis encourages custody of the senses, but also explains that speaking of spiritual matters results in spiritual benefit. What is more, even the most vociferous opponents of traditional worship practices maintained many of the complex paradoxes between mind and body between the practice of religion and the senses for the good Christian life. For example, the heretic, John Wycliffe, who, in accordance, with tradition believed sight to be the greatest of the senses argued that it was greatest for its close relation to the interior senses. At the same time, “a base look can lead to pride and envy, a wanton look to wrath, acedia, gluttony, and lust.” Wycliffe insists that hearing is critical in order to hear the sweet sound of the spirit and dangerous by permitting the words of the devil and blasphemers to enter the ear.

Wycliffe reiterates that meritorious deeds emit sweet scents to heaven, and fetid ones emanate from evil ones. Furthermore, the scent of foods or perfumes can lead to gluttony and lust. These should all sound familiar, and yet the beliefs of their proponent were rather different than the Christian thinkers, who preceded him.

*Erasmus*

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79 Otto, “Perils of the Flesh,” 166.


Much the same could be said of Erasmus. His beliefs were markedly different from those of scholastics, such as Thomas Aquinas; yet, in his writings he covers familiar ground despite being one of the most abusive and vocal critics of traditional religion. His rebuke of the exterior dimensions of religion was scathing. He ridiculed, pilgrimages, fasts, and relics all as outer exaggerations and superstitions that had nothing of real faith behind them.\(^{82}\) That turn to interiorization itself shows his indebtedness to the long-standing tradition of preferring the mind and spirit over the body. Like Saint Paul, Erasmus saw the Christian life as a war between the body and the spirit as he says: “we must wage war with ourselves. We must contend fiercely with our vices.”\(^ {83}\) What is more, it relates to the strong mistrust of the senses as both unreliable and as gates of sin.\(^ {84}\) He denounces those who rely on the senses alone for knowledge because that limits the contemplation of God and other abstract concepts. As a litmus test to determine veracity Erasmus recommends checking sense data against Scriptures: “convince yourself that nothing you perceive with your senses is as true as what you read in the Scriptures.”\(^ {85}\) It is somewhat surprising that Erasmus does not comment on the irony that reading the Scriptures is an act of sense perception.

Erasmus also faults reliance on the senses, or seeking sensual pleasure, with intemperance. He argues that such a reliance enslaves a person to his senses.\(^ {86}\) The remedy


\(^{85}\) Erasmus, *Enchiridion*, 53.

\(^{86}\) Erasmus, *Enchiridion*, 47.
for this problem was also traditional: “abstain from overindulgence in drink and to give up
the company of women”; “overcome temptation and crucify your flesh.” Erasmus drew
these tenets directly from the ascetic tradition. Crucifying the flesh by means of donning
hairshirts, self-flagellation and the like are hardly asensual acts, they merely attempt to
achieve custody over wanton uses of the senses. For him, the stark contrast between sensual
gratification and mortification of the flesh was the very difference between belonging to
the Christian community and avoiding it: “But if the world is for you ambition, desire for
honor, promotion, or authority, if the world consists of pleasure and lust, then I doubt if
you are even a Christian.” Time and again throughout his Enchiridion Erasmus exhorts
the reader to abandon the desires of the flesh and the senses entirely, and to replace them
with vigilance and mortification. All of these firm declarations might give the impression
that Erasmus denied entirely the utility of the senses for spiritual profit.

Yet, Erasmus did not advocate for the abolition of any of these practices. Instead,
he decried superstition and priests who would prey on the ignorant and encourage certain
devotions for profit. He defended auricular confession as a good custom, thought he did
not make a final confession himself. His most poignant reflections on the good of the body
stem from his contemplation on Preparing for Death. In that work he maintains that
interiority far surpasses superiority, yet he appeals to his Christian reader many times at
the level of the body and its senses. He asks the reader to meditate on death as an
abandonment of the bad things of the word such as the physical pains and stenches, instead

87 Erasmus, Enchiridion, 47–49.
88 Erasmus, Enchiridion, 54–55.
89 Erasmus, Enchiridion, 61.
of the good things such as the sight of the sun and the beauty of the firmament. On the whole, Erasmus’ thought presents some difficulties to the tradition, yet he largely maintains the familiar paradox of dualism. The idea that the mind and spirit are superior to the senses and the body does not yield a total unconcern for the senses, far from it. For Erasmus the dualism demands serious attention to motivations and the sensuous desire for pleasure. He levied many radical attacks against outward religion, and yet he maintained that he admired those good practices if not their abuses.

Luther

If Erasmus frequently lampooned physical outward religious practices common to Christianity, then Luther outright rejected them, or at least their utility in salvation. His Reformation purported to be a transformational approach to Christian religion. Much of his reputation as a reformer hung on his sensorial outlook and practices. His followers lionized him as the founder of a true way of Christian living that mitigated the role of the body and its senses in favor of an interiorized faith. To his opponents, he was a resuscitator of heresies and lived to indulge his sensual appetites. No doubt, this stemmed in part from his attack of celibacy as “unnatural,” indicating license over the sense of touch. In

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90 Desiderius Erasmus, Spiritualia and Pastoralia; Disputatiuncula de Taedio, Pavore, Tristicia Iesu: Concio de Immensa Dei Misericordia; Modus Orandi Deum ; Explanatio Symboli Apostolorum Sive Catechismus ; De Praeparatione Ad Mortem, ed. John W. O’Malley, v. 70 (Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 406.

91 Jacob M. Baum, Reformation of the Senses: The Paradox of Religious Belief and Practice in Germany (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019); Matthew Milner, The Senses and the English Reformation (Burlington: Ashgate, 2011). In many ways, Baum's study is a continuation of Milner's study for the German context. Milner had argued that the sensorial landscape changed little in Reformation England. While Baum does maintain the idea that there was a lot of change related to the sensuous practice of religion, he spends the majority of his book demonstrating a strong continuity between mediaeval and reformation Christianity. In fact, he argues that the sensorial paradigm shift was more the product of mythologizing than reality on the part of Protestants.

92 See Steven Ozment, When Fathers Ruled: Family Life in Reformation Europe (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983) 1-12. Ozment also concedes that even Luther “believed that sexual intercourse
England, Thomas More questioned whether Luther’s senses functioned properly, or if he outright misused them. He concludes that they were corrupted, which led to his faulty theology. To this, the preacher, Roger Edgeworth, adds that the dissemination of Luther’s heretical opinions actually had deleterious effects on society by replacing reason with sensuality. His first Catholic biographer, Johannes Cochlaeus, decries Luther for abrogating and omitting all the good works of the Church including hours, fasts, and chastity. In Cochlaeus’ view, Luther replaced those virtuous practices with beastly deeds. He claims that during Lent, Lutherans “ate flesh and banqueted not out of necessity, but out of their unadulterated wantonness in defiance of the Church.” Moreover, he personally attacks Luther rhetorically asking, “what actually is there of sanctity or of a miracle that every evening after supper, sumptuously prepared and bountifully received with belly stretched asunder by food and drink, he looked through the window of his home, and prayed a little bit?” Cochlaeus is at his most animated when discussing Luther’s revocation of his vow of chastity: “Luther perverted all these sayings of Paul in a manner that is equally the most shameless and most irreverent and distorted them to advocate for defiled lust…” In other words, Cochlaeus argues that Luther distorted Pauline doctrine to serve his own libido, and lead other souls into the same error. To some degree, both of

between spouses, while not ‘unchaste’ and to be enjoyed with a good conscience, still remained to some degree sinful” Ozment, *When Fathers Ruled*, 11.


95 Johannes Cochlaeus, *Commentaria Joannis Cochlaei de actis et scriptis Martini Lutheri Saxonis* (Apud S. Victorem prope Moguntiam, ex officina Francisci Behem Typographo, 1546), 162

96 Cochlaeus, *de actis et scriptis Martini*, 316.

97 Cochlaeus, *de actis et scriptis Martini*, 69.
these characterizations were straw men. Neither captures the way in which Luther reformed the senses for Protestant Christianity.

The theological chasm described by these critics tempts the reader to believe that the role of the body in the Christian life was radically different for Reformers and Catholics, but to accept this is to fall into the trap of sixteenth century polemicists. Some scholars today have succumbed to it as well. As scholarship has turned its interest to questions of the body, and, more recently, the senses, Lyndal Roper has tried to uncover the meaning behind the ubiquitous portrayal of Luther as the stout reformer. At the outset she grapples with the problem of the stout body, noting that depictions of the holy man (excepting Thomas Aquinas) emphasized gaunt features that symbolized victory over the temptations of the flesh. From her reading into these images, she argues that Luther and his artists recreated the holy man as family man with wife and children whose stoutness lent him larger presence and greater authority and “represented a different approach to the flesh.” What is more, the Table Talk founded Lutheran sanctity with four new pillars foreign to late medieval piety: eating, drinking, conversing, and doing theology. She concludes that Luther, embraced physicality, redrew the relation between flesh and spirit, and separated himself from other Christians by his “remarkably positive attitude toward the body, in all its aspects.” There is some truth to what she says, Luther frequently displayed a shocking unconcern for the actions of the body and traditional pieties. He famously applied this


100 Roper, “Martin Luther’s Body,” 364.

controversial doctrine in a letter of consolation to his friend, Jerome Weller, who was beset by melancholy and demonic assaults. He recommends showing the devil contempt and mocking him. Should that not suffice he says, “Sometimes one must drink more, play, or make nonsense, and even commit some sin in defiance and contempt of the devil.”

Luther’s advice was contrary to the norm and the tradition that encouraged greater rigor and asceticism when faced with demonic onslaught.

From these assertions, the origins of Roper’s Luther are clear. Yet, amidst all these remarks, Roper all but discards a crucial figure in unlocking the real Luther: the devil. Indeed, she opines that Oberman overemphasized the role of the devil in Luther’s life and theology. Roper’s response to Luther’s devil is to emphasize one of Luther’s tactics, farting at demons. In this way, she condenses a complex issue by adding yet another “sola” to the Lutheran repertoire “sola pedendo,” flatulence alone. To this position Ronald Rittgers, citing Roper, adds some nuance. He concludes that while Luther did embrace physicality, Lutherans still understood that the Christian life entailed suffering “for this-worldly purification” on the one hand, and a demotion of the role of the body on the other. Lutheran’s would eventually develop the genre of “Devil books” that assigned sensual sins to specific devils.

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103 Roper, “Martin Luther’s Body,” 372.
104 Roper, “Martin Luther’s Body,” 375.
106 Rittgers, The Reformation of Suffering, 196.
107 Rittgers, The Reformation of Suffering, 203.
Luther’s ‘faith versus works’ theology, which undercuts the emphasis on asceticism, and his aggressive attack on monasticism and monastic vows could never affirm that human action leads to salvation. Catholics naturally shone a very bright spotlight on this excessive rhetorical polemic of Luther. Yet, reading Luther’s writings and sermons, and examining his liturgies and devotional practices reveal that he clung to the sensuous paradoxical ambivalence of his predecessors. He believed that Christians could profitably employ their senses in inspiring and demonstrating faith. For Luther hearing, for example, is fundamental to, perhaps a prerequisite, for faith. Luther did not wholly reject many sensuous practices, nor did he dispel custody of the senses. In fact, he frequently employed the senses for spiritual profit. He believed that they were useful to inspire and demonstrate the faith. Luther’s understanding of sin and temptation did not entirely shed its medieval skin. In Luther’s worldview, the devil continually assails the flesh and the conscience, causing spiritual distress.109

Many of Luther’s writings indicate that hearing and sight were both critical for Christian faith and perhaps salvation. For Luther, the auditory sense rewarded the ears with two irreplaceable assets: music and preaching. The primary importance of music, as Luther’s letter to Jerome Weller indicates, was to lift the spirits.110 It was a physio-emotional tool at the disposal of Christianity. Therefore, if you are sad and your [sorrows] try to take the upper hand, then say aloud, ‘I have to play a song for my Lord Christ on the keyboard … because the scriptures teach me that God likes to hear cheerful singing.’

109 Oberman, *Luther*, 175, see also Carlos Eire, “Bite this Satan!: The Devil in Luther’s Table Talk,” *Piety and Family in Early Modern Europe: Essays in Honour of Steven Ozment* ed. B. Kaplan and M Forster (Burlington: Ashgate, 2006), 70-96.

110 Martin Luther “Letter to Weller,” in *Luther’s Spirituality*, ed. and trans. by Philip D. W. Krey and Peter D. S. Krey (New York: Paulist Press, 2007), 12. “Therefore, if you are sad…say aloud, ‘I have to play a song for my Lord Christ on the keyboard … because the scriptures teach me that God likes to hear cheerful singing.’”
keyboard (perhaps it could be the *Te Deum laudamus* or the *Benedictus*), because the scriptures teach me that God likes to hear cheerful singing and the lyre.”

Luther’s anthropology emphasizes that music is good for the human being because he is human. At the same time, Luther makes a theological statement arguing that music is pleasurable even to God. Ultimately, Luther does not see music as a human work, but as a work of God. In a sense it is God’s gift to humanity. What is more, Luther argues that God has preached the Gospel through music. Thus, music is a source of revelation. Luther reads certain biblical passages as endorsements of music by the Holy Spirit. In the character of Elisha (II Kings 3:15), Luther believes that music instilled him with the all virtues. Luther’s unconcern toward the sensuous qualities of music represents something of an irony if indeed music was effective for influencing human behavior: “She is a mistress and governess of those human emotions…For whether you wish to comfort the sad, to terrify the happy, to encourage the despairing, to humble the proud, to calm the passionate, or to appease those full of hate—and who could number all these masters of the human heart, namely, the emotions, inclinations, and affections that impel men to evil or good?—what more effective means than music could you find?”

Read in a certain light, music’s sensuous qualities were put to work to suppress the human passions and appetites.

Similarly, Luther prioritizes hearing in the Christian life. He even lionizes hearing sermons over sight-based forms of revelation such as reading Scriptures or viewing images.

111 Luther “Letter to Weller,” 12.
112 “Table Talk Recorded by John Schlaginhaufen,” in *LW* 54: 129-130.
113 “Preface to Georg Rhau’s *Symphoniae Iucundae*,” in *LW* 53: 323.
114 “Preface to Georg Rhau’s *Symphoniae Iucundae*,” in *LW* 53: 323.
For example, Luther asks his audience not to “look for Christ with your eyes…but put your eyes in your ears;” to understand that “‘the Kingdom of Christ is a hearing kingdom, not a seeing kingdom;’” to recall that the apostles preached much, but wrote little – and that Christ wrote nothing; and he even quips that the church is a “‘mouth house’” not a “‘pen house.’”

115 From these statements, Christensen concludes that Luther has reversed the long-standing tradition prioritizing hearing above sight because of his conviction that God chose the spoken word to reveal himself directly to his people; God’s word is a living word that establishes a relationship with man; it gives the Christian message life in lieu of interpreting the Bible as a past event; the sermon is a vehicle that takes what the Bible says and imbues it with personal meaning for the hearer; and it establishes a community because God contacts humanity through another man in the preacher.

116 This is not to say that the Scriptures were useless. Their import, as Pelikan and Kooiman have argued, was to safeguard the purity of the sermon.

117 In this way, “through the Word – upon the ears of his hearers the preacher comes…into…the heart of believers.”

118 In Luther’s reckoning the ears become a necessary tool for salvation through which the hearer receives the knowledge of Scriptures and the contents of faith.

While hearing reigned supreme, sight was critical and complimentary to hearing in Lutheran theology and rite where visual arts played a major role. In his *Invocavit Sermons*

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116 Christensen, *Art and the Reformation*, 63-64.


118 Martin Luther, “Of the Office of Preaching and of Preachers and Hearers,” 2.

119 Christensen, *Art and the Reformation*, 64.
of 1522, Luther reacted to the iconoclastic tendencies of his contemporaries, asserting that images were not inherently bad, but must not be worshipped nor considered salutary. Luther claims that images are fundamental to human anthropology, “we must form thoughts and images of that which is conveyed to us in words, and can neither understand nor think of anything without pictures.” Additionally, he comments “ordinary people…would rather look at a well-drawn picture than a well-written book.” Luther identifies that images are more appealing and instructive than theological arguments, and hence could even lead to devotion. In his commentary on Psalm 111, he imagines the ideal altar image as a depiction of the last supper accompanied by text describing the action portrayed. He concludes that through such an altarpiece the actions of Christ: “would stand before our eyes for our heart to contemplate them, and even our eyes, in reading, would have to thank and praise God.” In this way, the physical and mental faculties are both stimulated to contemplate God and enliven faith. To this point, Steven Ozment argues that painting placed “the gospel message before the viewers’ eyes as effectively as Luther’s sermons planted it in their ears,” and that images enjoyed the added benefit of not being restricted to times of liturgical worship. To many, Luther’s praise of hearing and sight sounded typically Catholic. Members of the radical reform, for instance, forbade art and

120 “The Third Sermon,” in LW 51:82-83

121 In Christensen, Art and the Reformation, 220.

122 “Lectures on Galatians Volume One” in LW 26:359

123 “Commentary on Psalm 111” in LW 13:376.


music in their Churches. It hardly represents a stark break with the tradition of fruitfully employing the senses for spiritual profit.

Luther was as delighted by the body as he was wary of it. Luther’s anthropological outlook betrays his Augustinian training to the degree that he agonizes about the omnipresence of sin that he argues, “remains in our flesh after baptism.” These sins include “the inclination to anger, hatred, pride, unchastity, and so forth…” And Luther laments that the sins are evidence of the “evil spirit assai[ng] us unceasingly….”126 On the eyes in particular, Luther writes: “they want first one thing, then another, and when they obtain it, the heart still is not satisfied.”127

Luther applies a traditional remedy for sin: custody of the senses through mortification of the flesh. To combat sin, the Christian warrior must shun idleness and work diligently throughout his life in “taming the body, slaying its lusts, and compelling its members to obey the spirit and not the lusts.”128 In his Preface to Paul’s Letter to the Romans, Luther even recommends fasting for breaking and controlling the body.129 Luther also understood the ends of these efforts in a traditional way as noted in his paraphrase of Paul’s Letter to Timothy: “I want you to be pure, but the preservation of purity requires the chastising of the flesh so that it is free of drinking, laziness, sex, etc.”130 To those who would call this works righteousness, Luther responded: “freedom of faith does not give

126 “The Blessed Sacrament of the Body of Christ,” in LW 35:53. Interestingly, in this passage Luther suggests invoking the cult of the saints as well as turning to the eucharist for help against all these sources of sin.


128 “Preface to Paul on Romans,” LW 35:375.


license to sin, nor will it cover sin, but gives us the license to do all manner of work and to suffer everything just as it presents itself.” In sum, Luther saw gaining salvation through faith and resisting the devil as separate ends that required different means. For this reason, his attitude seems simultaneously “progressive” and “regressive,” but perhaps it is easiest to say he maintained the status quo fastening himself to a long Christian tradition.

Reformed Traditions

In the years and decades following Luther other religious reformers also considered the role of the senses in the spiritual life, and in many instances, they presented a more radical departure from the Christian tradition toward the senses. Chief among these were Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531), the Swiss reformer and humanist and John Calvin (1509-1564), the French Reformer of Geneva. It was perhaps their innovations in theology, worship, devotion, and sacred spaces that gave birth to the notion of Protestant asensuality. It is worth briefly considering the changes these reformers made for two reasons. First, because they did alter sensuous elements of worship and departed from theological ideas. Second, because Catholic Reformers, including Robert Bellarmine, were conscious of those changes and defended their own practices considering the developments they saw from

131 “Treatise on Good Works,” 44:35. He treats this same theme explicitly in “On Christian Freedom,” in LW 31:372: “There are very many who, when they hear of this freedom of faith, immediately turn it into an occasion for the flesh and think that now all things are allowed them. They want to show that they are free men and Christians only by despising and finding fault with ceremonies, traditions, and human laws; as if they were Christians because on stated days they do not fast or eat meat when others fast, or because they do not use the accustomed prayers, and with upturned nose scoff at the precepts of men, although they utterly disregard all else that pertains to the Christian religion.”

Calvin and Zwingli. At the same time, it is critical to underscore that even though worship practices changed, it would be impossible to consider the reformed traditions “asensuous.”

From the earliest stages of his reformation in Zurich, Zwingli favored slowly abolishing many of Catholicism’s most sensuous aspects. His reform would turn toward an evangelical service based on the Bible that would phase out the Catholic mass, scale back processions, do away with extra liturgical devotional activities like “creeping to the cross” or venerating relics, and removing images. It was over the question of images where Zwingli codified his approach to sensuousness in a letter from October 1524 to his fellow reformer Martin Bucer (1491-1551) saying, “quantum sensui tribueris, tantum spiritui detraxeris.” Explaining this aphorism, Zwingli revealed something about his understanding of human nature. In his view, humans had a tendency toward the sensual, and therefore images were not helpful to the spiritual life because they “appeal solely to the senses (‘solum sensum moveant’).” At the same time, Zwingli did not originally advocate for the condemnation and destruction of all images. Zwingli believed in usefulness of images to depict historical episodes, but was ultimately wary of idolatry. He also particularly objected to “whorish depictions of Mary Magdalene, to the Virgin Mary painted with bared breast, to naked Sebastians and the like.” Even though Catholics would wholly denounce Zwingli, and retained images in Churches vociferously denying


that the veneration of images was idolatrous, they shared many of his beliefs. For one, Federico Borromeo insisted on historical veracity in paintings and also decried the use of nudity in the arts.\textsuperscript{137}

Ultimately, Zurich cleansed its churches in 1524 and the phenomenon of iconoclasm spread throughout Switzerland thereafter.\textsuperscript{138} Undoubtedly, the question of the images has also left the most lasting impact on Calvin’s reputation as a reformer who ushered in an asensuous Christianity. It was Calvinist iconoclasm, especially as propagated by French Huguenots, that Catholics had in mind when the last session of the Council of Trent met to declare the veneration of images, saints, and relics as valid. Like Zwingli, Luther, and parts of the Catholic tradition, Calvin arrived at his ideas about the senses from his theological anthropology. In his view, emphasizing man’s fallen nature after the Original Sin of Adam and Eve, “all our senses have become perverted” to the point that we “do not perceive what is true.”\textsuperscript{139} And yet, according to Calvin, it is precisely the senses that bring the soul to salvation. Quoting Paul the Apostle, Calvin reminds his reader that “it pleased God through the folly of preaching to save those who believe.”\textsuperscript{140} In his view, preaching is “the magnificent theater of heaven an earth,” through which the faithful learn

\textsuperscript{137} For more on the Catholic understanding of the relationship between the senses and sacred art see chapter four.

\textsuperscript{138} For more on the impact and spread of iconoclasm, see Carlos M. N. Eire, \textit{War Against the Idols: The Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to Calvin} (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986).


Christianity. If Christians learn the faith from preachers, they do not have use for images as “books of the uneducated.” Furthermore, he argues that it:

is well known that they set monstrosities of this kind in place of God. The pictures or statues that they dedicate to saints – what are they but examples of the most abandoned lust and obscenity? If anyone wished to model himself after them, he would be fit for the lash. Indeed, brothels show harlots clad more virtuously and modestly than the churches show those objects which they wish to be thought images of virgins…Therefore let them compose their idols at least to a moderate decency, that they may with a little more modesty falsely claim that these are books of some holiness!

Just as in Zwingli, Calvin lays out an attack on certain sensuous practices of Catholicism based on an anthropology that sees people as too readily moved by the senses. In particular, he attacks images for their lack of decency. As noted above, Catholics shared much of this anthropology, and would attack sacred images for lack of decorum as well. At the same time, it is absurd to suggest that Protestant, and even the Reformed traditions were “asensuous.” Instead, they altered the sensescape, but it is clear that the senses, and especially the sense of hearing, was a priority for salvation. The senses were necessary, but needed to be guarded.

Conclusion

In some ways, Anthony Synnott has already articulately summarized this brief survey:

“Christians therefore were very ambivalent toward the senses. Necessary for life, they could, however, lead to damnation; they could be enjoyed, but not too much; they reflected God’s goodness, but could lead into temptation.”

Over the centuries, the Judeo-Christian

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and Western traditions have struggled with a legacy of denying the body in favor of the mind and the spirit. The result is that paradoxes abound. The senses, created by God, could lead to heightened appreciation of God, and therefore they are most valuable. They also are the seats of the basest desires and chasing gratification of the senses leads to sin. It is for that reason that the body and its senses had to be tamed. What is remarkable is just how consistent this line of thought was from Plato to Luther. According to Synnott, this would all change: “After the Renaissance, concern with the senses became less moralistic, and more practical, more epistemological, and more scientific.”¹⁴⁴ The following chapters test that claim through an examination of Early Modern Catholicism’s approach to the issue.

Chapter 2

Sensuous Catholicism:
The Use and Custody of the Senses in the Spiritual Life

Part of the Jesuit missionary program included sending annual reports from the mission fields back to Europe. These reports had a twofold purpose: spiritual and propagandistic. On the one hand, they gave the Superior General in Rome a sense of the spiritual welfare of the Jesuits as well as their catechumens across the world. On the other hand, their careful description of the customs, flora, and fauna of the peoples and things encountered in hitherto unknown territories made for enormously appealing reading in Europe, electrifying readers and even inspiring them to desire life as Jesuit missionaries. In 1634, Paul Le Jeune, included this description in his relation:

The other is a low animal, about the size of a little dog or cat. I mention it here, not on account of its excellence, but to make of it a symbol of sin. I have seen three or four of them. It has black fur, quite beautiful and shining; and has upon its back two perfectly white stripes, which join near the neck and tail, making an oval which adds greatly to their grace. The tail is bushy and well furnished with hair, like the tail of a Fox; it carries it curled back like that of a Squirrel. It is more white than black; and, at the first glance, you would say, especially when it walks, that it ought to be called Jupiter's little dog. But it is so stinking, and casts so foul an odor, that it is unworthy of being called the dog of Pluto. No sewer ever smelled so bad. I would not have believed it if I had not smelled it myself. Your heart almost fails you when you approach the animal; two have been killed in our court, and several days afterward there was such a dreadful odor throughout our house that we could not endure it. I believe the sin smelled by sainte Catherine de Sienne must have had the same vile odor.¹

The animal described is none other than the North American skunk, but Le Jeune’s metaphors reveal more about the early modern Catholic mentality than about the natural world. In particular, Le Jeune showcases the Catholic attitude toward the paradoxical

¹ Paul Le Jeune, Relation of What Occurred in New France in the Year of 1634 (Paris: Sebastian Cramoisny, 1635), 313. For more analysis of the Relations and their usefulness, see Bronwen McShea, Apostles of Empire: The Jesuits and New France (Omaha: University of Nebraska Press, 2019).
relationship between the senses and the spiritual life. At first glance, the skunk is beautiful, according to Le Jeune, but the nearer it comes the better one understands it. Its stench was so bad that it provoked a physiological and emotional response that Le Jeune categorizes as heart failure. Furthermore, the smell itself helps Le Jeune to understand the rottenness of sin.

Le Jeune’s description of the skunk for European audiences recalls much of the material discussed in the previous chapter regarding the long-standing tensions between the body and the spirit in the western tradition. The dichotomy between body and spirit was intimately linked with the use and custody of the senses. These two traditions were intertwined in the Christian life. Traditional scholarship suggests that the relationship was re-examined during the Reformations. As the historiographical narrative goes, sensuality in religious experience reached a crescendo in the late-medieval period that was intolerable to reformers. They in turn beseeched their coreligionists to return to a certain interior simplicity in religion. The result was a Catholic reaction that insisted on heightened aesthetic experiences. In other words, Catholicism “doubled down” on sensuousness in religion. This chapter questions to what degree this generalization was true by using statements from the Council of Trent as well as sermons, spiritual writings, and catechisms published in its aftermath.

On the one hand it is undeniable that Catholicism continued to be a religion of the senses. This chapter explores both the positive and normative aspects of that sensuous worship; that is, how the senses were part of religious worship in early modern Christianity, as well as how Christians were expected to use their senses in their devotional lives. This exposes a paradoxical dialectic: the aim of exteriority in religious practice was to heighten
interior devotion. On the other hand, Catholic moralists and treatise writers maintained; and, in fact, lionized the tradition of the custody of the senses and mortification of the flesh following the Council of Trent. For that reason, the second part of the chapter challenges the idea that Catholic worship practice was merely an assault on the senses meant to awe and inspire its worshippers. Bellarmine’s sermons and passages from his spiritual writings that deal with the relationship between the use of the senses and the spiritual life are particularly illustrative. I approach the texts based on the following motifs: Bellarmine’s method for application of the senses as it profits an individual’s prayer life and appeals to the senses, and his stern warnings regarding the paramount importance of keeping custody of the senses. I set his views on the senses within the context of early modern Catholicism and its spirituality. These insights will establish a strong foundation on which to set up the topics of the subsequent chapters on two issues at the center of the final session of the Council of Trent: the cult of the saints and their depiction in religious images.

I. Early Modern Catholicism and Sensuous Worship

There is no doubt that late medieval and early modern religious practice was unabashedly sensuous. Nearly all aspects of religious culture relied on the senses in one way or another. Lay participation both within the rites of Catholicism and in the increased dominance of private devotion became a hallmark of late medieval and early modern Catholicism. That participation relied on the senses. As Eamon Duffy demonstrated in *The Stripping of the Altars*, the laity’s involvement in Catholic ritual advanced far beyond merely attending or hearing mass.² Indeed, lay participation through the senses was a constant feature of a

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² See Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400-1580* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005). Of course, Duffy’s work focuses largely on late medieval and early modern England. Similarly, Jacob M. Baum has outlined much of the sensory practices related to late medieval and early modern Catholic worship in the first three chapters of his recent monograph, see Jacob M. Baum,
religion whose rites varied, at least slightly, from place to place. The central focus of Catholic experience was the mass, and therefore analyzing its sensuous dimensions offers the most fitting departure point to study the role of the senses in Catholicism. What follows is a description of the sensuous elements of the mass as well as other sacraments and practices. These descriptions are not exhaustive and they cannot account for the unique experience of every rite and every individual. Indeed, they hardly account for the disparities between churches in rural and urban areas, nor for the difference in the elaborate ceremonies of well-endowed Churches versus the simpler rites of poorer Churches. Nevertheless, they offer a sense of the scope and scale of how Catholic worship in community and in private depended on, regulated, and exploited the senses.

_The Sacraments_

The sacraments as the *Catechism of the Council of Trent* reminds readers (reiterating the definition of St. Augustine and other early Church Fathers) are constituted of “matter…which fall under the eye” and “form…which are addressed to the ear.”[^3] Naturally this is true of the mass which stimulates every bodily sense. First, before entering a Church, townspeople would have heard the pealing of the bells calling them to attendance at mass. The ubiquity of sounding bells even necessitated Churches to procure bells with different tones to distinguish themselves from others in their vicinity.[^4] The sound of bells also

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permeated the interior of churches. They complemented music throughout the liturgy. Churches with more money were also able to train and keep a choir capable of singing more elaborate polyphonic music. The Jesuits in Vienna, for example, were fortunate enough to regularly have polyphonic music as set down in the instruction of Jerónimo Nadal. They could even enjoy more polyphonic music at mass on major feasts or with the special permission of the rector or provincial, this despite widespread concern about the difficulty of conveying a textual message through polyphonic harmonies. Bells also marked the most climactic point of the liturgy, the elevation of the host at consecration.

For many, receiving the sacrament was limited to sight, except for once a year around Eastertime as decreed by the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. By the middle of the sixteenth century, however, there was increased demand for more frequent communion. The Jesuits in particular, urged those in their spiritual care to receive the sacrament more frequently, and defended the practice. What exactly “frequently” meant in the context is up for

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5 Alexander J. Fisher, “Music and the Jesuit ‘Way of Proceeding’ in the German Counter-Reformation,” *Journal of Jesuit Studies*, 3.3 (2016): 380. For some of the most up to date research on the Jesuits and music, see this special issue 3.3 (2016) from the *Journal of Jesuit Studies*. Of course, the Jesuits were not alone in commissioning polyphonic music for their churches, as the Oratorians also endeavored to develop this art, see Eric Cochrane, “Caesar Baronius and the Counter-Reformation,” *The Catholic Historical Review*, 66.1 (1980): 55.

6 T. Frank Kennedy, “Jesuit Colleges and Chapels: Motet Function in the Late Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Centuries,” *Archivum historicum Societatis Jesu* 45 (1996): 201. See also Shai Burstyn, “Pre-1600 Music Listening: A Methodological Approach,” *The Music Quarterly* 82.3/4 (1998): 465. That concern became so pervasive that the a Tridentine decree urged musicians to create simpler melodies that prioritized text over music. This is evident for example in the dedication of Costanzo Porta’s *Missarum liber primus* for Cardinal Giulio della Rovere which explains that the volume contains, “a good number of polyphonic masses in which, according to Your order, the words can be easily understood and the music generally is simple, brief and, if I am not wrong, ‘ariose’”, in Franco Piperno, “Cardinals, Music, and Theatre,” in *The Brill Companion to the Early Modern Cardinal*, eds. Mary Hollingsworth, Miles Pattenden, Arnold Witte (Boston: Brill, 2020), 605.

7 Joseph De Guibert, *The Jesuits: Their Spiritual Doctrine and Practice*, trans. William J. Young, ed. George E. Ganss (Chicago: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1964), 376. Others, notably the Jansenists were opposed to frequent communion, see Antoine Arnauld, *De la fréquente communion. Où les sentiments des pères, des papes et des conciles, touchant l'usage des sacramens de pénitence & d'Eucharistie, sont fidèlement exposéz : pour servir d'adresse aux personnes qui pensent sérieusement à se convertir à Dieu;*
debate, but it seems that they may have urged some toward weekly reception: “‘It is a pious act to exhort the faithful to frequent Communion. Priests ought, however, to warn those whom they see inclined to it not to approach the Eucharist oftener than weekly, especially those who are married.’”

Nevertheless, the spiritual climax of the mass during communion depended on much more than the sense of taste, since visual communion was considered just as important. After attending a Catholic mass Thomas Cranmer contemptuously commented: “‘What made the people run from their seats to the altar, and from altar to altar, and from sacring (as they called it) to sacring, peeping, tooting, and gazing at that thing which they saw? What moved the priests to lift up the sacrament so high over their heads…’”

What was idolatry for Cranmer was deep spiritual communion through the sense of sight for the laity watching the events of the paschal mystery unfold at the altar.

At other points throughout the mass, one would expect the laypeople to move their gaze throughout a Church. Granted, every church was different, but many would have been adorned with sacred images, statues, stained glass, tombs of saints, and a wide variety of other artworks. The laity might also notice the changing color schemes of the liturgical seasons in the priestly vestments. Beside the scent of their neighbors alongside them, laypeople could also expect to smell incense wafting through the church.

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8 In De Guibert, The Jesuits, 379.


touch each other (or perhaps a pax board) as they exchanged a sign of peace. They would hear the readings, possibly a short homily, and liturgical prayers, as well as say the liturgical responses.

The stimulation or recruitment of the senses was not reserved for the sacrament of the eucharist alone. Indeed, each of the sacraments use or require sensuous interaction. A valid confession depended on interior introspection, deep sorrow, and ultimately using all the organs of hearing including the tongue, on the part of the confessant, and the ear for the confessor. Touch too was involved as the laying on of hands was part of the final rite of absolution.\textsuperscript{11} By the High Middle Ages formulas for confession guided penitents to confess with each of the five senses in mind. This custom only became more common after 1215 when annual confession became obligatory.\textsuperscript{12} Confession not only guided penitents to consider their sins based on the senses and encouraged them to guard their senses, but it also (along with extreme unction) was a remedy for sensuous sinners. The Jesuits themselves were at the forefront of pastoral approaches to the sacrament of confession.\textsuperscript{13}

At the same time, the very nature of confession, requiring the explication of sins—especially those related to lust—made it one of the more morally perilous sacraments. As has been well documented, the confession of sexual sins could at times lead to titillation and possibly satisfaction of lustful desires.\textsuperscript{14} Other sacraments did not raise as much of a

\textsuperscript{11} Wietse de Boer, Conquest of the Soul: Confession, Discipline, and Public Order in Counter-Reformation Milan (Boston: Brill, 2011), 107.


\textsuperscript{13} For more on the Jesuits and confession see Robert A. Maryks, Saint Cicero and the Jesuits: The Influence of the Liberal Arts on the Adoption of Moral Probabilism (Burlington: Ashgate, 2008).

\textsuperscript{14} See Stephen Haliczer, Sexuality in the Confessional: A Sacrament Profaned (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996). It was in part for this reason that Jesuits were wary of confessing women. See Lance Lazar,
possibility for scandal, and yet they were no less dependent on the senses. During the rite of extreme unction priests anointed each of the sense organs in order to remit their respective sins. The baptized underwent ablution, confirmands were anointed with fragrant chrism, clergy laid hands on ordinands, and couples made vows and ultimately consummated their marriage. In all of these, hearing, speaking, and touch were required for sacramental validity.

There were also numerous extra-sacramental practices and ceremonies that comprised the complete experience of Catholic worship. Even the simplest of these, praying the rosary, marshalled the senses. Not only did Catholics speak the prayers associated with that devotion and finger their rosary beads, but there was also a subtle olfactory component to the devotion when using amber beads, as Rachel King has pointed out. The amber emitted a fragrance that wafted to the nostrils while praying the rosaries, but it also left a residual scent on the fingers reminding individuals to pray the rosary anew later. In general, praying the rosary was one of the few stimuli to the sense of smell outside of liturgical and extra-liturgical events in which incense was burned in a Church or during a procession. Nevertheless, the wide variety of rituals that remained a part of Catholic devotional life targeted the remainder of the senses.

For example, the act of pilgrimage, which in and of itself had numerous iterations including local journeys or long voyages, demanded sensuous engagement. Any given

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15 For a fuller explication of this rite, see the section on Robert Bellarmine below.

16 See Rachel King, “‘The beads with which we pray are made from it’: devotional ambers in early modern Italy,” in Religion and the Senses in Early Modern Europe, Wietse de Boer and Christine Göttler, eds. (Boston: Brill, 2013).
pilgrimage route and site included different customs associated with it. So important was pilgrimage to early modern cities and economies that, as was the case with Rome, their streets were reorganized to facilitate the passage of pilgrims through holy sites.¹⁷ In general terms it was common enough to expect pilgrims to act as penitents depriving or torturing their senses in the course of their journey by wearing hairshirts, fasting, and walking barefoot or even on their knees, sometimes over many miles. These customs were frequently amplified at the sites of devotion. In the case of the Santa Scala, pilgrims expected to earn an indulgence for climbing the holy steps that Jesus himself supposedly ascended for his trial on their knees. Enduring the pilgrimage was a means to an end. The journey took the devout from their home to a special holy place typically notable for housing relics. For example, at the top of the Santa Scala pilgrims entered the Sancta Sanctorum, or Chiesa di San Lorenzo, which according to tradition, housed a reliquary with remains of thirteen saints since Pope Leo III had placed it there in the ninth century. The bones of martyrs and relics of Christ’s passion were scattered throughout all of Italy, Europe, and the Mediterranean world. As noted, each site had its own practices, but there were certainly unifying elements. In all these places, pilgrims expected to pray before the heroes of the past and most importantly hoped to see and touch these holy relics believing that this type of proximity could magnify the thaumaturgic and intercessory powers of saints.

The power of sight was in many ways the most dominant of the senses and related to the widest variety of both private and public devotions. The proliferation of both

manuscript and illustrated print editions of books of hours was so wide that it among the best-selling genres of the early modern period.\(^{18}\) In content, the manuscript copies varied widely as many, especially the most luxurious, were bespoke products made to fit the needs and desires of their patrons, but it is still possible to speak of them in general terms especially as they developed and became more standardized as printed works.\(^{19}\) These private texts were meant to accompany devout Catholics through the recitation of daily hours of prayer as well as the mass and other liturgical events. Indeed, the books themselves could be devotional objects adorned with images meant to explicate the text and be seen, and also decorated with bindings of silk, satin, and velvet meant to be held.\(^{20}\) The texts provided for ways of speaking to God and the saints.\(^{21}\) They guided the faithful through the mass, offering prayers to recite as the priest said the mass in Latin, and many can be localized based on which shrines or pilgrimage sites they highlight.\(^{22}\) In sum, these texts kept the faithful and their senses occupied during the mass, at extra-liturgical events, and in the privacy of their homes.

In more public settings, devout practices also kept the senses active in pursuing religious ends. This was certainly true of the explosion of religious artwork in the fifteenth

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\(^{19}\) Reinburg demonstrates that the peak of production for books of hours dated to around the first quarter of the sixteenth century, a trend also noted by Larissa Taylor, who was studying the production of sermon books in the same period. Both explain the decline of these texts by noting the rise of other types of devotional texts, such as those written by Bellarmine explained below, see Reinburg, *French Books of Hours*, 41.

\(^{20}\) Reinburg, *French Books of Hours*, 76.

\(^{21}\) Reinburg, *French Books of Hours*, 140.

\(^{22}\) Reinburg, *French Books of Hours*, 188, 224.
and sixteenth century, and the increasing emphasis on frequent public preaching. Together painting and preaching were meant to delight, move, and instruct audiences on both theological topics as well as good Christian habits and virtues. Those habits included attendance at public devotions such as the *Quarant'ore* (40 hours), which became increasingly popular with the backing of the Oratorians and Jesuits in the middle of the sixteenth century. That devotion included forty hours of constant vigilance watching the communion host. All the while, the faithful might expect to hear liturgical music and sermons on a variety of theological and moral topics. As noted, these devotions mentioned here are only some of many, and the intention was not to provide an exhaustive history of the ways in which the Church targeted the senses in worship nor in how the faithful may have used them, but to offer a taste of how richly sensuous late medieval and early modern Catholic sacramental and devotional practices were leading up to period of the Reformations. The question is whether and how the criticisms of these practices levied by Reformers may have changed these practices and the outlook of Catholics toward the use and custody of the senses.

**III. The Council of Trent and Catholic Sensuousness**

As noted above, Protestant Reformers called many of these sensuous practices into question, which lives on today through the English derogation of “traces of popery” as nothing more than “smells and bells.” The first chapter outlined the ways in which various reformers including Erasmus and Luther criticized the sensuous nature of early modern Catholic worship and devotional practices. In some instances, these were lampooned as superstitious or simply absurd. In others, such as the maintenance of images in holy places

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23 For more on the importance of artworks and preaching see chapters three and four.
and the veneration of the saints, they were decried as idolatrous. How then did Catholicism officially respond to these critiques during and after the Council of Trent? Paul III Farnese convened the Council of Trent to address these theological attacks and consider correcting the abuses in the church hierarchy and religious practice. Over the eighteen years the Council met in three different periods. In all of the council decrees and the documents, letters, and diaries related to the council there is no definitive statement on Catholicism and sensuousness, except for the concern expressed in the twenty-fifth session about overly sensual images. Nevertheless, just as all Catholic liturgies and devotions stimulated the senses so too did statements and ideas about the senses permeate the literature of the day. Therefore, the role of the senses in religion was on the minds of theologians and spiritual writers who defended Catholic practices against Protestant critiques. Recent studies dismiss the ways in which Catholic clergymen critiqued the sensory elements of Catholicism, and advocated for sensory regulation. In this reading, in lieu of reexamining the potentially problematic role the senses played in the spread of superstitious practices, the Church chose a path that was even more sensuous targeting the faithful and

24 Hubert Jedin’s work remains the definitive history of the Council of Trent; however, since its publication there have been other notable histories of the Council, and many examinations both of its implementation and impact on early modern Catholicism. See Hubert Jedin, *Storia del Concilio di Trento*, vol 1-4 (Brescia: Morcelliana, 1973), John O’Malley, *Trent: What Happened at the Council* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013); *Trent and Beyond: The Council, Other Powers, Other Cultures*, eds. Michela Catto, Adriano Prosperi (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017). While there are numerous other studies one could list here, there is one overarching message that has emerged in the studies of the council over the last few decades: Early Modern Catholicism was not monolithic, and its wide dispersion throughout Europe and the whole early modern world made the implementation of the Council’s decrees a process subject to negotiation that took place over time, places, and cultures rather than an immediate and clear transformation.

manipulating their senses in an effort to indoctrinate. This historiographic narrative misunderstands the relationship between the Church and the senses, which was characterized more by a culture of sensory regulation. That culture existed before the era of Reformations and persisted long after. The regulatory aspects are evident in the decrees of the Council, the catechism, and in the thought of its implementers, notable among them, Robert Bellarmine.

The Decrees of the Council confirmed many of the religious practices mentioned above and affirmed them with theological apologia more than they emended them. Before turning to those points; however, it is worth noting that one of the very first assertions from the Decrees of the Council, directed at the bishops and theologians in attendance guided them toward appropriate sensory custody: “It has determined and decreed that each and all of the faithful gathered in the city of Trent are to be exhorted (as it now exhorts them) that they resolve to free themselves from the evils and sins which they have hitherto committed, and for the future to walk in the fear of the Lord and not gratify the desires of the flesh, to be urgent in prayer, to confess more often, to receive the sacrament of the eucharist, visit churches frequently, fulfil (so far as each is able) the Lord’s commandments, and also to offer prayers daily for peace among Christian rulers and for the unity of the Church.” In addition, the second session’s decree urges bishops to celebrate mass at least every Sunday, fast at least every Friday, give alms, celebrate a mass of the Holy Spirit with accompanying litanies to the saints every Thursday in the cathedral (and maintain silence during those

26 See, for example, Jeffrey Chipps Smith, Sensuous Worship: The Jesuits and the art of early Catholic Reformation in Germany (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); Evonne Anita Levy, Propaganda and the Jesuit Baroque (Berkely: University of California Press, 2004); The Sensuous in the Counter-Reformation Church, eds. Marcia Hall and Tracy Cooper (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

27 Tanner, Decrees, 660.
services giving attention to the celebrant “by mouth and mind”), practice sobriety and moderation in eating, avoid idle conversation in preference for listening to the scriptures at table, instruct their attendants to avoid vices, and display integrity “in their dress and manner of life.” As these statements indicate, they did not ban any sacramental, liturgical, and devotional practices, but encouraged them. They were less concerned with the theological attacks of reformers on the sacraments and the saints and more so with the reputation of their bishops and the ways in which the senses were recruited in the cosmic struggle of good and evil. Indeed, as the decree on the sacrament of the last anointing, which “has guarded the end of life by a very strong defense,” indicates, the sacraments and their sensuous elements were fundamental components of the war that Christians waged against the devil, “who seeks and seizes opportunities through the whole life of finding ways to devour our souls.” One of the critical goals of this sacrament, as explained by the decree was not only to remit the sins of the ailing persons, but also to encourage them to resist “more easily the temptations of the devil.”

Therefore, the sacraments and all their sensuous dynamics were defended and upheld to ward off the devil. This was particularly true for the Eucharist insofar as the decrees insist on its actual oral reception as well as the practice of gazing at and adoring the host during elevation, while it remained reserved in the tabernacle, and during

28 Tanner, Decrees, 660-661.
29 Tanner, Decrees, 710.
30 Tanner, Decrees, 710.
31 See Tanner, Decrees. For baptism and confirmation see especially session 7; 13 for the eucharist; 14 for confession and last anointing; 23 holy orders for the Eucharist; and 24 for marriage.
processions. It also affirmed all the sensuous elements of the liturgy itself for the benefit of human nature which “cannot easily raise itself up to the meditation of divine realities without external aids, holy mother church has for that reason duly established certain rites, such as that some parts of the mass should be said in quieter tones and others in louder; and it has provided ceremonial such as symbolic blessings, lights, incense, vestments and many other rituals of that kind from apostolic order and tradition, by which the majesty of this great sacrifice is enhanced, and the minds of the faithful are aroused by those visible signs of religious devotion to contemplation of the high mysteries hidden in it.” They did concede; however, that certain superstitious and illicit practices had crept into the eucharist and encouraged bishops to address those issues, which included banning unknown or notorious priests from saying mass, and eliminating “the kind of music in which a base and suggestive element is introduced into the organ playing or singing, and similarly all worldly activities empty and secular conversation, walking about, noises and cries…” The theological defense of the sacraments and rooting out of abuses were more important to the theologians at Trent than the actual administration of the sacraments. Still, there is hardly any indication that the theologians expected these to change at all.

One notable exception was the sacrament of confession, which changed rather dramatically in the decades after the Council concluded. Those changes were not ushered in by the decrees of Trent as much as they were by the experimentation of the reforming archbishop of Milan, Carlo Borromeo (1538-1584). Much of Borromeo’s program of

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33 Tanner, *Decrees*, 734.

34 Tanner, *Decrees*, 736-737.
reform in his churches focused on sensory regulation and his innovations to the practice and furnishing of the sacrament of penance were no exception. Though he changed neither the matter nor the form of the sacrament he did introduce the confessional box, which radically reshaped the physical space in which confessions were made. The confessional box publicized the act of confessing insofar as the box permitted witnesses to testify that nothing untoward happened while also maintaining the secrecy of the sacrament.\(^{35}\)

Separation between confessant and confessor was also paramount, and Borromeo even encouraged the penitent and priest to avoid making eye contact.\(^{36}\) In fact, his designs for the confessional box included specifications that the screen dividing the priest and penitent should be fine enough and a cloth should be hung so that nothing could pass through.\(^{37}\) Thereby it would permit sound, diminish sight, and preclude touch. While the Tridentine degree neither presents nor alludes to these practical changes in the sacrament of penance, Borromeo’s innovations seem to have captured the spirit of sensory regulation. His reforming spirit was so greatly acclaimed that he became, with the support of Robert Bellarmine, one of the first saints canonized in the post-Tridentine period.\(^{38}\)

Borromeo’s canonization was especially noteworthy given the fact that the Catholic Church had refrained from canonizing holy people for some sixty-three years prior to

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\(^{35}\) de Boer, *Conquest of the Soul*, 95.

\(^{36}\) de Boer, *Conquest of the Soul*, 93.


\(^{38}\) For Bellarmine’s role in Borromeo’s canonization see Angelo Turchini, “Roberto Bellarmino e il processo di canonizzazione di S. Carlo Borromeo,” in *Bellarmino e la Controriforma*, eds. Romeo de Maio, Agostino Borromeo, Luigi Gulia, Georg Lutz, Aldo Mazzacane (Sora: Vincenzo Patriarca, 1990), 385-402.
Perhaps this was due at least in some way to the intense scrutiny the cult of the saints and veneration of relics suffered at the pens of various reformers from Erasmus to Luther. In the final session of the Council of Trent, the Cult of the Saints and veneration of relics were affirmed as legitimate and valuable to Christian belief and practice. Though some have argued that the decrees within this session were only hastily prepared due to the coming plague, it remains one of the longer and more significant sessions touching on a wide variety of theological and practical issues at the center of Catholic devotional life.  

After defending belief in Purgatory, the Council Fathers insisted that bishops teach the faithful:

carefully about the intercession of the saints, invocations of them, reverence for their relics…that the saints, reigning together with Christ, offer their prayers to God for people; that it is a good and beneficial thing to invoke them and to have recourse to their prayers and helpful assistance…and that those hold impious opinions who deny that the saints who enjoy eternal happiness in heaven should be invoked…or that calling on them to pray for all of us is idolatry…or that it is foolish to invoke those reigning in heaven with mind and voice.

This statement alone permitted the many established traditions related to saints and their relics that relied on the senses including pilgrimages, processions, and the touching of relics, as well as the culture of feasting and fasting, commanding pastors to “commend to every one of the faithful…that they take every care that they are obedient to all these things; particularly those concerning mortification of the flesh such as choice of foods and fasts, and all that goes to. Increase of devotion such as the devout and faithful celebration of feast

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41 Tanner, Decrees, 774-775.
days…”42 To this session, the Council Fathers added their defense of sacred images, and with it came the flourishing of Church building and decorating in Rome.43 In the following decades, religious and lay patrons commissioned enough sacred art to fill churches for admiring viewers to learn about the faith and be moved to greater piety, at least ideally.

Learning about the faith, and about the many ideas discussed at Trent became the preoccupation of the period following the Council, as the Council fathers suspected it would be. For that reason they determined that it would be necessary to establish a program of education to teach the parish priests and laypeople about the contents of the faith established by the council:

So that the faithful people may approach the reception of the sacraments with greater reverence and spiritual devotion, the holy council charges bishops not only to explain their power and benefit in a way that those receiving can grasp…but to ensure that the same is done by all parish priests with devotion and wisdom, even in the vernacular tongue, where there is need and it can reasonably be done; and this is to be done according to the form laid down by the holy council for each sacrament, which bishops should take steps to have accurately translated into the vernacular and explained to the people by all parish priests.44

The result was the promulgation of the *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, a text specifically meant for parish priests. That catechism was one of many, as the era of Reformations saw many catechisms produced in several different varieties to match the needs of intended

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42 Tanner, *Decrees of the Councils*, 797. For more on saints and sanctity see chapter five.

43 For more on the images of saints see chapter four.

44 Tanner, *Decrees of the Councils*, 764. This idea is reiterated in the twenty-fifth session where the decree specifically refers to the commissioning of a catechism (797). For more on the creation of seminaries and education of priest see Kathleen M. Comerford, *Ordaining the Catholic Reformation: Priests and Seminary Pedagogy in Fiesole, 1575-1675* (Florence: L.S. Olschki, 2001) and Kathleen M. Comerford, *Reforming Priests and Parishes: Tuscan Dioceses in the First Century of Seminary Education* (Boston: Brill, 2006).
audiences from less educated laypeople to more educated, to people from other Christian denominations, and even non-Christians.

Catechisms contained a great deal more practical information than the decrees of the Council of Trent, especially where the senses were concerned. In fact, after listing the Creed, prayers, commandments, works of corporal and spiritual mercy in his short catechism composed in Goa in 1542, Francis Xavier includes the five senses: “The bodily senses are five. The first is to see. The second is to hear. The third is to smell. The fourth is to taste. The fifth is to touch.” Including a list of the senses with other creedal lists indicates how central they were to Catholic theology and practice. Bellarmine does not list them explicitly in his short catechism, but refers to them, noting only that enumerating the senses in a catechism is unnecessary, not because they are unimportant or difficult for the simple to understand, but because they are already “too well known.” Nevertheless he uses his longer catechism to expound on the divine authorship of the body and the senses: “that man has body and soul, signifies that he has all the other things, which are found in the body, such as blood, bones, nerves, and the rest, and all the other things, which are found in the soul, such as the intellect, the will, memory, and both interior and the exterior senses.” Bellarmine’s message is altogether clear: God, creator of heaven and earth, is

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47 “…che l’uomo ha corpo, & anima, intende ancora, ch’egli ha tutte le cose, le quali si trovano nel corpo, come vene sangue, ossa, nervi e, & cetera, & tutte le cose, che si trovano nell’anima, come intelletto, volontà, memoria, sentimenti Interiori & esteriori…” Robert Bellarmine, Dichiarazione più copiosa della dottrina Cristiana (Venice: Giovanni Battista Ciotti, 1650), 18. See below for more information on Bellarmine and the body and its senses as divine gifts.
also the creator of the senses. And those senses, must be used in right Catholic worship, during the liturgical or sacramental events or in viewing sacred images.\textsuperscript{48}

Before turning to Bellarmine and other implementers of the Tridentine reforms, Trent’s \textit{Catechism} for parish priests is worth considering in greater detail. In structure it hardly deviates from what one would expect to see in a catechism: important prayers (the Creed and the \textit{Pater Noster}) and explanations of them, the sacraments, and the commandments. From its outset it links the use of the senses to correct belief and practice citing Pauline epistles:

\begin{quote}
It is true that \textit{the invisible things of God from the creation of the world are}, as the Apostle teaches, \textit{clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made: his eternal power also, and divinity}… But, as \textit{faith cometh by hearing}, it is clear how necessary at all times for the attainment of eternal salvation has been the labor and faithful ministry of an authorized teacher; for it is written, \textit{how shall they hear, without a preacher?}\textsuperscript{49}
\end{quote}

Like the Tridentine decrees, the \textit{Catechism} adds little to the understanding of the sacraments, at least as they pertain to the senses, but underscores how the senses are fundamental to the very institution and definition of sacraments:

\begin{quote}
We are so constituted by nature that no one can aspire to mental and intellectual knowledge unless through the medium of sensible objects. In order, therefore, that we might more easily understand what is accomplished by the hidden power of God, the same sovereign Creator of the universe has most wisely, and out of his tender kindness towards us, ordained that His power should be manifested to us through the intervention of certain sensible signs.\textsuperscript{50}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{48} Bellarmine, \textit{Copiosa doctrina}, 115.

\textsuperscript{49} \textit{Catechism of the Council of Trent}, 3.

\textsuperscript{50} \textit{Catechism of the Council of Trent}, 137.
The *Catechism* maintains the sensuous practices central to early modern Catholicism and affirmed by the Decrees of the Council, but it highlights the anxiety concerning the role of the body and its senses in the economy of salvation. On the sacrament of baptism, which imbues individuals with grace and virtue the *Catechism* concedes: “there still remains after Baptism a severe conflict of the flesh against the spirit, in which, however, it would not become a Christian to be dispirited or grow faint.”\(^{51}\) It is for this reason that the ceremonial practice of baptism includes placing salt on the tongue and signing the neophyte with the cross over the forehead, eyes, breast, shoulders, and ears ‘to declare, that by the mystery of Baptism, the senses of the person baptized are opened and strengthened to enable him to receive God, and to understand and observe his commandments.”\(^ {52}\) Reiterating the Pauline conflict between flesh and spirit the *Catechism* puts the antagonism between the body, senses, and practice of Christianity in full relief. The sacrament of baptism opens the sense organs to receiving God, and those same senses succumb to temptations that remove them from God.

The problems of sin and temptation are particularly notable where catechisms expound on the decalogue and the vices. Here, it recommends the tradition of custody of the senses, which Bellarmine emphasizes in his catechism and other writings. Teachings on the first commandment; however, encourage the use of the senses by emphasizing the legitimacy of making and venerating images.\(^ {53}\) Bellarmine adds that the use of images must be upheld for their ability to teach the faithful elements of the faith and the lives and deaths

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\(^{51}\) *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, 175.

\(^{52}\) *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, 179-181.

\(^{53}\) *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, 343-346.
of the saints.54 The senses, and especially the senses of sight and touch, seem most problematic where lust is concerned, as enumerated in the teachings on the sixth commandment. Therein adultery was not limited to fornication outside of marriage, but in sight alone.55 To avoid these sins the Catechism recommends eschewing idleness and practicing temperance. In particular it recommends avoiding immodest dress, “which especially attracts the eye,” indecent and obscure conversation, and finally soft and obscene books which must be avoided no less than indecent pictures…such things possess a fatal influence in exciting to unlawful attractions and in inflaming the mind of youth.”56 The final recommendation is to mortify the body and to repress the “sensual appetites” by fasting or going on pilgrimages and practicing works of austerity.57 Bellarmine underscores these ideas in his teaching on the sixth commandment:

> It prohibits as well all other forms of dishonesty, which are, like roads to adultery, or fornication, that is wanton glances, libidinous kisses, and similar other things, and as such Our Lord has taught in the Holy Gospels, where teaching about this sixth commandment, he says, that he who looks at a woman with evil desire, has already committed adultery in his soul. And therefore, it is necessary for the one who wishes to flee from similar sins to have great care over his senses, especially of the eyes, which are gates through which death enters the soul.58

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54 Bellarmine, Copiosa dottrina, 115.

55 Catechism of the Council of Trent, 398.

56 Catechism of the Council of Trent, 202-204.

57 Catechism of the Council of Trent, 204.

58 “Prohibisce ancora Tutte l’altro dishonestà, le quali sono, come strade all’adulterio, o fornicazione, cioè gli sguardi lascivi, I baci libidinosi, & simili altre cose, & così ci ha insegnato il Signor Nostro nel Santo Evangelio, dove dichiarando questo sesto comandamento, dice, che chi guarda una donna con mal desiderio, già ha commesso l’adulterio nell’animo suo. Et però è necessario a chi vuole fuggir da doverlo simili peccati, have gran cura de’sentimenti suoi, * massime de gli occhi, che sono come porte, per le quali entra la morte dell’anima,” in Bellarmine, Copiosa dottrina, 145-146. Bellarmine makes similar pronouncements defining the vice of lust: “Lussuria è un’affetto disordinato verso I piaceri, & diletti carnali. (End 238 begin 239) I peccati, che da essa procedono sono cecità di mente, temerita in constanza, & di più adulterio, fornicazione, parole dishoneste, & ogni altra immondizia. Il rimedio e esercitarsi ne’digiuni, et nel oratione, & in fuggire le male pratiche perché questi sono I mezzi per conservare la castità & sopra tutto non si fidare di se stesso, ne di sua virtù, et santità: ma star lontano da I pericoli, et custodire I sentimenti e, considerando, che Sansone
Bellarmine follows the tradition established by the ancients that the vices did not always spawn spontaneously, but at times generated each other. In particular he notes that gluttony, which he defines as a disordered appetite of eating and drinking, desiring precious or forbidden foods, and overindulging, “gives birth to lust with all the other sins, that come from it.”59 To avoid succumbing to the temptation of gluttony, Bellarmine suggests that Christians practice temperance and abstinence, and “in particular it is most useful to consider, that the delight of gluttony is brief, and often leaves long pains of the stomach, and other similar pains after it.”60 In so doing he recommends traditional abnegation of the senses but also appeals to the sense of pain to encourage his readers to guard their senses more carefully.

Faced with the intense scrutiny of Protestant Reformers over the many sensuous theological and practical aspects of Catholic worship, the theologians and bishops at the Council of Trent affirmed the utility and necessity of these practices for orthodox Christian worship. These were thereafter communicated to parish priests and laypeople through catechisms. In these catechisms, the official one of the Council of Trent for parish priests, and those of other theologians, the message of Trent’s decree was amplified to include the importance of the custody of the senses. While these were important from the perspective of a variety of sins and abuses, it would appear that above all there was an intense concern with the sin of lust.


60 Bellarmine, *Copiosa dottrina*, 230.
II. Bellarmine and the Senses

In the decades after the Council of Trent and the promulgation of its decrees and catechism the means and methods for communicating the conciliar teachings expanded to other media. These included popular preaching and also the advent of an explosion in the publication of spiritual writings. Robert Bellarmine was at the forefront of this effort and is particularly worthy of study insofar as he was truly at the center and heart of this movement. There was hardly a theologian more respected in his time, and very few writers more prolific and highly regarded. For this reason, to understand the ways in which Early Modern Catholics learned about orthodox faith and orthopraxis one must know what Robert Bellarmine taught on these subjects. It is no surprise that the senses and the proper use and custody were a major component of those teachings.

The Profitability of the Senses

It is useful to preface Bellarmine’s remarks regarding the profitability of the senses by examining his sources, and determining to what extent Ignatius of Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises* permeate Bellarmine’s thought. This is not only important because Bellarmine was a Jesuit and therefore an heir to Ignatius’s spiritual legacy, but also because he wrote his spiritual treatises while he underwent some version of Ignatius’s exercises in his annual month-long retreat. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that Bellarmine would have had some of Ignatius’s practices in mind while he wrote his treatises. Perhaps the most famous method that Ignatius employs to engage the senses is the “composition of place,” a method of prayer that involves vividly imagining oneself in a particular - typically biblical - scene. These exercises were not new to Ignatius, but reflected his spiritual milieu insofar as he
drew inspiration from Ludolph of Saxony’s *Life of Christ* and Garcia de Cisneros’s *Exercises.*  

All the same, the composition is one of the most common exercises that Ignatius asks retreatants to practice. In the “second week” of the *Exercises,* Ignatius’ fifth contemplation, on the subject of the incarnation and the nativity, urges the retreatant to use all five senses: “see the persons…listen to what they are saying…smell the fragrance and taste the infinite sweetness of the Divinity…Using the sense of touch, I will, so to speak, embrace and kiss the places where the persons walk or sit.”  

Ignatius also includes positive language regarding the senses in the final contemplation of the *Exercises* known as the “contemplation to attain love.” When discussing how God is present in the created world he writes, “finally, how in this way he dwells also in myself, giving me existence, life, sensation, and intelligence; and even further, making me his temple, since I am created as a likeness and image of his Divine Majesty.”  

From this quotation it is clear that Ignatius highly values the human form as it is in the image and likeness of God, and more specifically the senses, as a special gift from God. At the same time, Ignatius also warned his exercitants about avoiding sin by requiring them to meditate on the sensuous sufferings of hell:  

> see with the eyes of the imagination the huge fires and…the souls within the bodies full of fire…. hear the wailing, the shrieking, the cries, and the blasphemies against our Lord and all his saints…By my sense of smell

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63 Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, 235.
I will perceive the smoke, the sulphur, the filth, and the rotting things…
By my sense of taste I will experience the bitter flavors of hell: tears, sadness, and the worm of conscience…By my sense of ouch, I will feel how the flames touch the souls and burn them.64

Consistent with the spiritual tradition followed by Ignatius, Robert Bellarmine also utilizes these methods and shares these sentiments.

In his positive evaluation of the senses, Bellarmine writes that they bring pleasure and joy, that they are a gift from God, and that the joy from the senses leads humans to God. Yet, even in his affirmation of the senses, Bellarmine includes the caveat that awards preeminent position to the will and intellect over the senses, “… when all other senses receive the stimuli suited to them, we experience immense joy…And yet the sensory faculties are all of the material order, and we share them with the beasts…For this reason, the delights of the mind are without doubt greater than those of the senses.”65

Notwithstanding the commonplace relegation of the senses to a lesser position than the mind that was so characteristic of western European culture, there are instances in which Bellarmine offers only favorable opinions regarding the senses. In accord with this Bellarmine writes on the beauty of the body: “God granted men two eyes, two ears, two hands, two feet, one nose, one mouth, one chest, one head, and the outcome was very beautiful and well proportioned.”66 Bellarmine opens this comment on the beauty of human

64 Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, 66-70. For Bellarmine’s composition of hell in his sermons and spiritual writings, see chapter three.

65 Bellarmine, *On the Eternal Happiness*, 162. It seems that Bellarmine is quite clearly influenced here by the ideas of Cicero from his *de Officiis*, “But the most marked difference between man and beast is this: the beast, just as far as it is moved by the senses and with very little perception of past or future, adapts itself to that alone which is present at the moment; while man – because he is endowed with reason, by which he comprehends the chain of consequences, perceives the causes of things, understands the relation of cause to effect and of effect to cause, draws analogies, and connects and associates the present and the future – easily surveys the course of his whole life and makes the necessary preparations for his conduct,” see Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Officiis*, trans. Walter Miller (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), Liv.11, 13.

form by emphasizing the sense organs, and their beauty. Apart from the chest and the head, which are last in this list, Bellarmine only lists sense organs, he does not include arms or legs nor does he mention internal organs. Both of Bellarmine’s ideas regarding the joy of the senses as well as their status divine gifts stand as a summary of a much longer thought he expressed regarding the senses in a sermon delivered on the thirtieth Sunday after Pentecost on September 5, 1604:

Add that the same God gave to you all the senses so that you might become full Of joy. For would the eyes be helpful, if there were no light? Would ears be helpful, if everything was silent? Would noses, if there were no odors? Would a mouth if there were no food? Would hands if there were nothing, which you were able to hold? Would feet, if there was not something to walk on? Now God on account of you made the sun, moon, stars, all the sounds, odors, tastes, fruit, regions, planes, mountains, treasures, and wealth for your senses to enjoy.  

Bellarmine’s first idea in the above quotation links both the joy of the senses and their status as a gift, but he does not conclude there. For Bellarmine, it is so evident that God has bestowed the senses upon humankind so that humans might experience joy. Moreover, he adds God made not only the things that please the senses such as sounds and fruit, but also how those objects are enjoyed, such as the light by which humans see. So, for Bellarmine, the pleasure of the senses is not an immediate danger, but something that inspires joy.

Still, it is important to hold in mind that these joys are not in themselves an end. The end of the joy that the senses bring is desire for God himself. Indeed, Bellarmine writes of God in the beatific vision as the most excellent thing that at one time contains and shares

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68 For more on the senses in the afterlife, see chapter three.
the joy of all the senses, “If one thing contained in it all the objects of sight... and at the
time all the objects of hearing...all smells...all flavors...all of those things that
delight the touch; and this one thing would exhibit the pleasure of the will: certainly it
would be the most excellent.” Bellarmine defines God in the beatific vision as an encouragement to try to attain paradise. Yet, Bellarmine, aware that his
audience is the living on earth rather than the blessed in Heaven, also shares practical advise
on how the joy of the senses could lead one closer to God: “My soul, when anything that
seems wonderful strikes your eye or your thought, make it a ladder to recognize the
Creator’s perfection which is incomparably greater and more wonderful.” Bellarmine
recognizes that the earth is full of beautiful objects that are wonderful to behold and inspire
awe in humankind. So, he asks his reader to harness those emotions to contemplate the
goodness of God.

These considerations of how much pleasure the senses will achieve in heaven
suggest a pattern or method that Bellarmine uses to inspire his audience to think of the
divine. That is, he makes appeals that meet his reader as sensuous creature. For example,
in urging his reader to avoid sin Bellarmine appeals to the sense of smell:

If … you could see how ugly a sinful soul is, how it gives off a foul odor like a
rotting corpse, and how God and the holy angels shrink to look at it even though
it may dwell in a beautiful, handsome, and very attractive body in the eyes of
men… you would not allow yourself for any reason to become such.

University, 1942), VIII: 88. Bellarmine preached this sermon in Rome on February 3, 1602, and again on
January 29, 1612. Note that Bellarmine shares nearly this same idea in his Mind’s Ascent: “Suppose that
somebody had a single thing at home that contained all the objects of the senses in the highest degree so that
he would not want to ever leave his home to see or hear or smell or taste or feel anything since he had at
home every delight in that one object that the greatest pleasure-seeker could hope for....” Bellarmine, Mind’s
Ascent, 156.

70 Bellarmine, Mind’s Ascent, 69.

71 Bellarmine, Mind’s Ascent, 142.
This meditation can be read on two levels. The first is as a direct appeal to the sense of smell. Bellarmine asks the reader to imagine the ugliness of sin by likening it to the stench of a rotting corpse. Through this lens, the allure of sin is resisted insofar as Bellarmine reveals that it is not alluring at all, but only sickening. On the second level, he asks his reader to see as divinity sees. He demonstrates that our senses when enjoying beauty can be deceived, but that God’s senses cannot. Bellarmine also takes this theme up in the *Art of Dying* where he claims that in hell there is no light by which to see apart from that given off by the sulfurous flames. Those flames only allow the tortured soul to see the demons that torment it.\(^{72}\) In contrast, the soul in heaven “will be permitted to see, hear, and uninterruptedly be in the company of not only one but with each and every one of the prophets, apostles, and doctors.”\(^{73}\) To Bellarmine’s audience, the latter alternative is by far the more appealing. Bellarmine also persuades his audience to abandon sin and desire union with God by an application of the senses in a form of composition of place. Many of his spiritual writings (and even his sermons) on the joys of heaven and sorrows of hell are essentially long meditations that resemble the composition. This is especially true of Bellarmine’s aforementioned *De gemitu*, which frequently functions as a composition of hell, and *On the Eternal Happiness*, which invites the reader to imaginatively compose the heavenly kingdom.\(^{74}\) In *On the Eternal Happiness*, Bellarmine specifically urges the reader to engage in the composition using a sense-by-sense account of what awaits the soul in

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\(^{72}\) Bellarmine, *Art of Dying*, 331. See chapter three for more of Bellarmine’s ideas about the senses in the afterlife.

\(^{73}\) Bellarmine, *On the Eternal Happiness*, 49.

\(^{74}\) Bellarmine, *Art of Dying*, 331.
heaven. He asks his reader to imagine seeing as the blessed reveling in the sight of their bodies radiating in light; to hear the harmonious heavenly choir singing the “Alleluia”; to smell the “wonderfully agreeable fragrance” of the blessed.\textsuperscript{75} He insists that the blessed will “derive some sort of delight from their sense of taste”; and that the “sense of touch will enjoy no small pleasure because of the permanently excellent condition brought about by the gifts pertaining to a glorified body.”\textsuperscript{76} While the whole treatise, \textit{On the Eternal Happiness}, engages the senses to inspire the reader to desire heaven, in this section Bellarmine systematically targets each sense. Not only does his reflection require the audience to apply their senses, but it also incites desire to reach paradise for the perfection of the joys of the senses. He both engages the senses and appeals to the reader using them in this imaginative contemplation of heaven. Perhaps, Bellarmine summarizes the beneficial use of the joyous quality of senses best when he writes, “Therefore, the goods of this world, wealth, honors, and pleasures, are not completely forbidden to Christians, as is the immoderate love of things of this world which is called by John the Apostle, ‘the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life’ (1 Jn. 2:16).”\textsuperscript{77} In other words, the senses can derive an honest and worthy pleasure, but immoderate love of that pleasure is troubling.

\textit{The Dangers and Custody of the Senses}

If there is a framework in the Ignatian corpus for viewing the senses positively, then there is also a precedent for custody of the senses. For example, in the \textit{Spiritual Exercises’}


\textsuperscript{76} Bellarmine, \textit{On the Eternal Happiness}, 175-176.

\textsuperscript{77} Bellarmine, \textit{Art of Dying}, 244.
“second method of praying” Ignatius writes that the retreatant “should keep the eyes closed or intent on one place, and not allow them to wander.”78 Ignatius’ most thorough treatment of the senses comes from the third part of the Constitutions on “The Preservation and Progress of those who enter the Society.” Here he decrees: “All should take special care to guard with great diligence the gates of their senses (especially the eyes, ears, and tongue) from all disorder, to preserve themselves in peace and true humility of their souls....”79 It is this perspective toward the senses shared by Ignatius that Robert Bellarmine ardently clings to. Bellarmine argues that his audience should practice the careful custody of the senses lest they fall into two dangers. The first is being too worldly. Falling into this proclivity results in spurning God. The second is that the senses are the gates of sin that, if unguarded, expose the soul to incontinence.

Bellarmine grapples with how to make the ineffable God real despite his concern that the senses are a trap that encourages humankind to be too centered on the empirical reality experienced through the senses. He demonstrates that the senses do not make God immediately present to humans: “we see created goods with our eyes, touch them with our hands, taste them with our mouth, possess them physically, and enjoy them. We do not see God, touch him, taste him, possess him…So it is no wonder if created things touch us more than God…”80 In this quotation, Bellarmine’s insistence that humans are more than just sensuous beings is reflected. While God cannot be immediately grasped by the senses, the person who applies both the gift of reason and sensuous experience might be able to

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78 Ignatius, Spiritual Exercises, 252.

79 Ignatius Loyola, The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus, ed. John W. Padberg, S.J. (St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996), 250. The number given here is a paragraph number, not a page number.

80 Bellarmine, Mind’s Ascent, 70.
contemplate the ineffability of God. In a more condemning tone, Bellarmine suggests that anyone who admires the senses too much will become a slave to them: “By the five yoke of oxen are meant the labours and weariness of sinners who are the slaves of their five senses; and when a man labours in doing penance instead of sinning, he barters the five yoke of oxen, for the single yoke of Christ.” In this quotation Bellarmine urges readers to turn away from the pleasures of the senses because they can prevent one from taking up the commands of Christ, or lead one to sin. The sins of incontinence, he argues, incite selfishness not Christian selflessness.

In his various sermons and writings Bellarmine spills much ink on the issue of custody of the senses. As Donnelly notes, much of Bellarmine’s perspectives from the spiritual writings are summaries of his sermons. Thus in reading through all of Bellarmine’s utterances and writings on the senses one finds minor contradictions that do not substantially change his message. Bellarmine’s overarching concerns regarding the custody of the senses are most succinctly expressed when he reflects on the sacrament of extreme unction in the Art of Dying:

In this sacrament all the parts of the body are anointed, in which reside the five senses of the body, and it is said with reference to each, ‘May God pardon you whatever sins you may have committed through sight,’ and so of the rest of the senses. We gather from this that the five senses are the gates through which sins of all kinds enter into the soul. So if anyone carefully guards these gates, he will easily avoid a great number of sins, and thus he will live well and die happily.

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81 Bellarmine, The Seven Last Words From the Cross (Tacoma: Cluny Media, 2016), 36.
83 These inconsistencies most often manifest themselves in his proclamations regarding which sin is the most dangerous. I will try to demonstrate this, when possible, in the texts below.
84 Bellarmine, Art of Dying, 303.
In other instances, in which Bellarmine treats each sense specifically, he typically offers some advice on how to keep custody of each sense. In the analysis to follow, I examine Bellarmine’s notion of custody of the senses for each sense. While it is unnecessary to include everything that Bellarmine wrote on each sense, I will note the instances where Bellarmine borrows from his sermons in his spiritual writings.

The first two senses that I discuss here are the senses of taste and touch. I have chosen to analyze Bellarmine’s writings regarding these senses first, because they are the senses that require proximity to interact with their objects. On taste Bellarmine writes: “Savory foods and precious wines make another much more dangerous noose, by which the throat is captured and hence intoxication and drunkenness exist, which harm the body and the soul at the same time and drain the household.”\footnote{Bellarmine, De gemitu, 229.}

An important theme to note in Bellarmine’s discussion of these sins of incontinence is that he does not view them as harming only the person committing them. Here he argues that the gluttony and drunkenness of one person attached to touch can ruin a household. He offers a similar rationale regarding the sense of touch: “there remains the sense of touch, which is both the most crass and the liveliest of all. Through this, works of the flesh enter to stain the soul and at the same time to corrupt other persons…”\footnote{Bellarmine, Art of Dying, 312.} Bellarmine seems to use some kind of
superlative regarding the dangers of all the senses; here, touch is referred to as “the crassest of all.” To some degree, it is impossible to make a moral order of the senses (excepting smell, which was least problematic), and therefore it is more useful to understand the nature of Bellarmine’s fear. What made touch so problematic for him is its close association with the sin of lust. Hence, Bellarmine shows that in falling into the sin of lust through touch, a person does not necessarily sin alone. Yet, Bellarmine’s outlook is not desperate or bleak. Instead, he offers remedies for the potential sins that derive from succumbing to the senses of taste and touch. For sins that originate in taste, Bellarmine, very traditionally, prescribes fasting and choosing unripe or unpalatable foods as the ascetic saints had done. On defense against the sin of touch, Bellarmine suggests two different remedies. The first is to neglect the sense altogether: “[do not touch], even honestly; for the approach of sin is closed for lascivious touch in this way.” The insinuation here is that Ignatius also practiced this custom. To this Bellarmine recommends practicing asceticism, “then touch, which is most vehemently [dangerous], is killed with hairshirts, belts, iron breastplates… and when titillation or the heat of libidinousness was appearing, they preferred to cast themselves in thorn bushes and snows, rather than tolerate the beginning of libidinous

87 Bellarmine, “Sermo Octavus,” in Opera Oratoria Postuma, ed. Sebastian Tromp, (Rome: Gregorian University, 1942), VI: 118. This sermon was given on December 8, 1604, which was the unofficial feast of the Immaculate Conception – a cause that Bellarmine argues vehemently for.

88 Bellarmine, “On the Anniversary of Blessed Father Ignatius,” in Opera Oratoria Postuma, ed. Sebastian Tromp, (Rome: Gregorian University, 1942), II: 293. This sermon was given on July 30, 1608.
ardor.” Bellarmine offers these practices as a model to his audiences if they too found themselves threatened by the sins that enter through the gate of touch.

For Bellarmine, a theme that arises from his discussion of the senses of smell, hearing, and especially sight is their ability to harm the soul from afar. That is, these senses are gates of sin even for objects that are distant from the person. To Bellarmine it seems that the least harmful sense is smell, which he discusses in both the De gemitu and the Art of Dying. If anything, his suspicion for the sense of smell softens in the Art of Dying. In the former he uses his common trope of the senses as a noose, and suggests that perfumes and unguents can be alluring to mankind. In the latter, Bellarmine states: “The third sense is smell...the sense of smell has to do with odors, and they do not play a major role in harming the soul. Precious fragrances are a concern for only a few, and the common ones, such as the scents of flowers, roses and lilies, are harmless.” His concern regarding the sense of smell relates more closely with his feelings regarding humility and poverty. That is, someone who could afford perfumes would be better served sharing his wealth with the poor, a practice that people admired about Bellarmine.

Bellarmine, “Sermo Octavus,” in OOP, VI: 118. Note that he calls touch “the most vehemently dangerous” of the senses.


Bellarmine, Art of Dying, 310.
If Bellarmine was relatively unconcerned about sins stemming from the sense of smell, then he was downright disturbed by the dangers of hearing and sight. For Bellarmine, hearing is very closely related to speaking, and in this way it is an example of another sin that does not pertain to one person alone, but both the speaker and the listener: “Hearing, it is the most dangerous sense; for it seizes even in absence, and has a universal object, for through the tongue the objects of all the sense are poured in the ears…[Through hearing] the first sin entered the world.”92 Since Bellarmine attributes original sin to hearing, presumably he is referring to the serpent speaking to Eve in Genesis 3; the reference indicates his anxiety regarding the sense of hearing. What one hears can be dangerous in two ways. The first way is that sycophants can puff up the ego, and for this reason Bellarmine tells his readers to be suspicious of flattery, wantonness, detraction, lascivious songs, and lovers’ talk.93 The second way is for heresy to enter through the ears.94 The temptation in the Garden of Eden can be understood both as flattery and heresy since the serpent both cauoles Eve, and also convinces her to defy God. Equally problematic for the sense of hearing was the danger of heretical thought entering the ears through speech.


93 Bellarmine, Art of Dying, 309.

94 Bellarmine, Art of Dying, 309.
Indeed, he defines heresy as being “erroneous, scandalous, and offensive to pious ears.” As a remedy to hearing heresy, Bellarmine recommends silence: “The remedy is to habituate oneself to the rule of silence.” Keeping silence was the safer practice because not only did it encourage a culture in which heresies could not be heard, but it also limited opportunities to speak heresy.

The final sense, and the one which Bellarmine admonishes his audience about most thoroughly, is sight. He clarifies his fear regarding sight in one sermon: “The eyes are a great gate through which impurity enters: and rare are those captured by love of women or men in a different manner than through sight.” Yet, for a fuller picture one must turn to his first, sermon on sight delivered on December 9, 1583. This sermon established the framework Bellarmine would use in all his later sermons and writings in which he discusses sight. He recycles many of the same biblical and patristic quotations, images, and examples to warn his audience about the dangers of falling to the sin of sight, which is lust, as well as moving them toward a remedy. Among these are the story of David and Bathsheba from 2 Samuel 11, Job 31:1, Judith 10:17, Daniel 13:8, as well as passages from Augustine, and Gregory. Bellarmine begins noting that like hearing, seeing can do harm from afar. From there Bellarmine moves to the remedy used to protect against the sins of sight, which is to

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95 “haeresi proxima, erronea, scandalosa, piis auribus offensive” In Godman, Saint as Censor, 55.

96 Bellarmine, “On the Custody,” in OOP, IX: 460. Using the example of the saints, Bellarmine shares similar advice in the “Sermo Octavus:” “Therefore the saints sought silence and solitude,” in OOP, VI: 118.

97 Bellarmine, “Sermo Octavus,” in OOP, VI: 118.

avoid fixing the eyes on anything. He is especially concerned with gazing at members of the opposite sex: “The great noose is a beautiful woman for the eyes of men and a beautiful man for the eyes of woman.” He then draws an analogy between fixing the eyes and passing through fire, arguing that one who passes through fire quickly is not harmed.

Bellarmine continues with an exhaustive number of examples from saints and biblical stories. Most prominently featured is St. Francis, who Bellarmine claims, “was cautious in his gaze so that he might not know any woman by her face.” His most common biblical example is that of David and Bathsheba. Bellarmine meticulously comments on the bible story detailing all the sinful and villainous events that came of David succumbing to sight and thus lusting after Bathsheba. Additionally, he cites Gregory of Nazianzus: “he who does not guard his external eyes, with God making free use of them, loses the internal [soul].” Finally, he cites Job 31:1: “I have made a contract with my eyes so that I may not know a woman.” One other image, not included in the Third Exhortation that Bellarmine repeats in both his sermon on Ignatius as well as the De gemitu,


100 Bellarmine, De gemitu, 225. That he does not mention the same concern regarding homoerotic gaze is an interesting omission, since this was a common issue hinted at in various rules for religious life.

101 Bellarmine, “Third Exhortation,” in OOP, IX: 205. He also uses this imagery in On the Custody: “For a simple glance does not harm just as quickly crossing through fire is not harmful,” 460.

102 Bellarmine, “Third Exhortation,” in OOP, IX: 205. He also shares the example of Francis “And St. Francis, as Bonaventure says, never knew a woman from sight,” in “Sermo Octavus,” in OOP 118. This is a common trope Bellarmine uses to describe the careful custody of the eyes practiced by saints as indicated in chapter three.

103 Bellarmine, “Third Exhortation,” in OOP, VI: 205. He also recounts the story of David in “On the Custody,” 460 as well as in “On Ignatius”: “and David seeing was captured,” 294.


is the story of Susanna from Daniel 13. For Bellarmine that story reveals how “the eye is the gate through which there enter sins which pertain to lust.” Bellarmine suggests that had the older men never looked at Susanna, then they would not have raped her. It is as if they sinned by looking at her, and not by raping her. Thus, for Bellarmine, the real danger stemmed from sight.

Bellarmine is very careful, in all of his declarations on the dangers of the senses, to cite either biblical or patristic sources. Taking careful note of these is of no small import. These patristic and biblical sources indicate that Bellarmine wanted to lend his subject the greatest possible authority. He does not let his word stand alone but preaches and writes with a chorus of his predecessors in an effort to persuade his audience beyond a shadow of doubt that they must practice careful custody of the senses.

III. The Catholic Reformers and the Senses

The importance of Robert Bellarmine and his teachings on the role of the senses on the spiritual life does not lay in their innovation. Instead, the teachings demand attention due to Bellarmine’s prominence at the center of the Church, its theology, and its institutions that defended its orthodoxy. Furthermore, outside of Rome, Bellarmine was widely read and acclaimed by Catholics throughout Europe. He even acquired the attention of Protestants. Sometimes, especially where his spiritual writings were concerned, their

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106 He refers to this story in both his sermon “On Ignatius,” in OOP II: 294, and in the De gemitu, 227.

107 Bellarmine, Art of Dying, 303. To modern readers, Bellarmine’s response to the story of Susanna is problematic if not downright repulsive. To a certain degree, his response removes agency from Susanna’s rapists and places it on lust entering through the eyes.

108 For more on Bellarmine’s Protestant readership see the introduction. Not only did Protestant’s read Bellarmine’s work, but he even became a stock Catholic in English theater, as in the play Hierarchomachia, or the Anti-Bishop. I am thankful to Michael Questier for sharing with me his draft
appraisal was positive. In other instances, the Protestant Reformers identified a serious ideological threat in Bellarmine. In any case, Bellarmine’s teachings and thoughts permeated Europe, and he enjoyed an unparalleled position in the process of reforming the Catholic Church. Practicing the moral teachings of the Church was synonymous with the proper use and custody of the body and its senses. To dispel any notion that Bellarmine was a lone extremist urging Catholics toward an austere form of piety, it is necessary to show how many of his contemporaries and followers also understood that the appropriate balance between the use and the custody of the senses was at the heart of Catholic worship, especially in the wake of the Reformation. Here, I consider the spiritual works of two of Bellarmine’s most famous and widely published contemporaries: Lorenzo Scupoli (1530-1610) and Francis de Sales (1567-1622).

This sample is small given the explosion in the genre of ascetic or devotional literature in the period. Nevertheless, the selections are hardly arbitrary. Lorenzo Scupoli’s *magnum opus*, *The Spiritual Combat* (1589), was one of the most published and read Catholic spiritual treatises of the early modern period. In short, it was an instant classic. Furthermore, as its title suggests, it encapsulates the theme and mood of the spirituality of the Catholic Reformation, a combat between good and evil, which Scupoli shows was waged at the level of the senses. Without casting judgment on other spiritual writings, it is defensible to say that many of them were derivate, or at least depended on, Scupoli. Francis de Sales, another noted author of the spiritual classic, *The Introduction to the Devout Life* (1609), was educated by the Jesuits and was the reforming bishop of Geneva, nominally

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chapter co-authored with Peter Lake about the Hierarchomachia “*Hierarchomachia* and Libellous Secret History: Un/Godly Lives and Formal Polemics.”
anyway. Furthermore, he was an ardent admirer of his episcopal colleague, Bellarmine. There are numerous other spiritual authors one could include, nevertheless, these two were among the most famous of the age, and both were known to Bellarmine.

An English translator of Scupoli’s *Spiritual Combat* notes that Francis de Sales:

> for upwards of twenty Years carried this book about him, and never failed reading some Pages of it every day: He called it his Director and recommended it to all those who consulted him in the great Affair of Salvation. And though that excellent Book the *Imitation of Christ*, like this, tends to unite the Soul entirely to God; yet St. Francis gave the Preference to the *Spiritual Combat* for this Reason, because the latter reduces its Maxims to Practice; whereas the former contains indeed Abundance of choice Sentiments, but does not point out the immediate Application of them.

Given the status of the *Imitation of Christ*, and the reputation of St. Francis de Sales, this is hardly mean praise from de Sales and Scupoli’s translator. More important is the rationale behind the encomium: Francis de Sales valued Scupoli for the practical advice his text gave to the Christian. What remains is to determine exactly what Scupoli recommended.

At the outset, Scupoli, taking his cue from St. Paul, grapples with the full difficulty that the paradox between flesh and spirit, interior and exterior in Catholic devotion and practice presents. The entirety of Scupoli’s introduction explores seeming contradictions related to the proper use of the body and self-abnegation. Scupoli’s ideas are so various that at times he sounds Erasmian, or even Lutheran. Given how illustrative the passage is,

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109 Because Geneva was firmly controlled by reformed Protestants, Francis de Sales was not able to reside in Geneva.

110 See above on the *De gemitu*.

and how well it presents the paradoxes and contradictions that faced Catholic writers, it
will be fruitful to quote it liberally:

Because many, without any other consideration, have placed the spiritual life within the rigors of life, in the maceration of the flesh, in hair shirts, chastisements, long vigils, fasts, and in other similar bitter corporal exertions. Others, and particularly women, tend to believe that being joined to a great sign of virtue when they say many vocal prayers, hear many masses and long offices, or attend Churches and take frequent communion. Many others, among which are found sometimes those who have taken a religious habit and live in the cloister, are persuaded that spiritual perfection depends above all on attending choir, silence, solitude, and regulated discipline. Thus, those who partake in these actions and others who partake in similar ones believe that perfection is rooted in them. But it is not this way, and the said works are means of acquiring the spirit, and fruit of the spirit, as such it is not possible to say that the works themselves consist of Christian perfection and true spirit.¹¹²

Scupoli’s concern places the body at the center of a cosmic battle between good and the devil, wherein the devil uses even the holiest practices of self-abnegation against those who aspire to spiritual perfection. At face value, it appears that he is wary of these traditional works of piety, fearing that they breed a feeling of security amongst the pious. Such a thought would align him closely with the likes of Luther and Erasmus, who did not reject these practices wholesale, but believed they were useless within the economy of salvation. Instead, it belies the complexity of the paradox. He explains; however, that both pious practices and rigorous mortifications are fundamental to belief.

They are without doubt a most powerful means of acquiring the spirit for those that use them well and tactfully for taking on force and strength against the contrary wickedness and fragility; for arming themselves against the assaults and deceits of our common enemy, for providing themselves with spiritual help from God, which is so necessary, especially for beginners. In addition, there are fruits of the spirit in truly spiritual people, such as castigating the body, because it has offended the Creator and for having a greater subjection and humiliation in their service. They are silent and live in solitude in order to

flee even the least offense of the Lord, and for conversing with Heaven they attend to the divine cult, and other works of piety: they pray, and meditate on the Life and Passion of Our Lord, not out of curiosity, and sensible pleasure, but for knowing better the way of wickedness and of good and of God’s mercy: for inflaming themselves always in divine love, and in the hatred of their very selves, following with their own abnegation, and with the Cross on the back of the Son of God; they frequent the holiest sacraments for the glory of his Divine Majesty, and for joining themselves more closely to him, and for taking a new force against the Devil. But for others, that place the foundation of their spiritual life in said exterior works, they cannot by the defect of those actions in themselves (which are all most holy) but through the defect of those who use them, they can sometimes offer more than open sins, occasion of ruin.\textsuperscript{113}

Scupoli displays his knowledge of Aristotelian virtue ethics in full. His point is simple: action becomes essence. Those who do pious works become pious. He also makes an important distinction between “beginners” and “truly spiritual” people. Just as authors prepared different catechisms for different audiences, so too did spiritual writers define different practices for people at different places in their spiritual lives. Nevertheless, the goal for all was to progress in the spiritual life and become advanced. Scupoli makes one other critical point: these practices were unquestionably useful for warding off the devil if not for salvation. At the same time, he believes the body is so easily corruptible, that even in acts of self-denial, it can be led astray.

They are so intent on the works themselves that they leave the heart abandoned in the hand of bad inclinations and of the Demon. That one seeing that they are already off the right path, leaves them not only to continue in their said exercises with delight, but also fills them according to their vain thoughts such that they believe they feel the delights of heaven where they are persuaded of being among the angels and seeing the face of God before them…\textsuperscript{114}

\textsuperscript{113} Scupoli, \textit{Combattimento Spirituale}, 3-5.

\textsuperscript{114} Scupoli, \textit{Combattimento Spirituale}, 5.
The point of separation between the advanced and the beginner in the spiritual life is not so much the actions themselves, but the intentions.

Despite being rife with ideas about the flesh and the spirit, this opening reflection offers very little of that practical advice regarding the senses that de Sales cherished; however, those counsels pepper the text. Furthermore, Scupoli directly addresses the senses and issues related to them on multiple occasions throughout the work. A cluster of chapters address the issues as Robert Bellarmine would lay them out himself: through application and custody of the senses. The message of the two spiritual authors is so close that is improbable to assume that one did not influence the other. And more importantly, both worked within a moral and catechetical tradition of more than a millennium in the making.\textsuperscript{115} What follows shows that Scupoli advocated for the exterior works, especially the use and custody of the senses, that he expresses concern about in his opening argument. He treats the senses specifically in a series of chapters on divine contemplation and fighting against the vices of the body.\textsuperscript{116} In his framing, using the senses to contemplate the divine is a form of sensory regulation. The senses also provide an opportunity for contemplation “whenever an agreeable object presents itself to your exterior senses, separate with your thought the material thing from the spirit that is in it, and think, if it pleases your senses, that it has nothing, but that all of it is a work of God.”\textsuperscript{117} Thereafter, he applies this general principle to the senses of sight, taste, smell, and hearing:

When you see yourself busy admiring things that have a noble essence, reduce

\textsuperscript{115} See Franco Mormando, “Did Bernini’s Ecstasy of St. Teresa Cross a 17\textsuperscript{th}-Century Line of Decorum,” 4.


\textsuperscript{117} “Quando si rappresenta à qualsivoglia de’tuoi sensi esteriori alcun'oggetto, separa col pensiero dalla cosa creata lo spirito, che è in quella, e pensa, ch'ella da se non hà niente di tutto ciò, che a tuoi sensi soggiace, ma che tutto è opera di Dio,” Scupoli, \textit{Combattimento Spirituale}, 113.
the creature to its nothingness in your thought, fixing the eyes of the mind on
the highest Creator present there, and how He has given it its being, and take
delight in him alone… Tasting food, or drink, consider that God is the one
that gives it that flavor, and delight in him alone… if you will be pleased in
any scent… do not stop yourself in that delight, pass to the thought of the lord,
who is the origin of that odor… when you hear some harmony of sound, and
singing, turn your mind to God…118

Francis de Sales, who encouraged his own readers to “have at hand some approved book
of devotion, such as… the Spiritual Combat…” followed a similar paradigm.119 In his
understanding the whole of creation, in all its details are made to reveal God’s excellence,
“he has given you intellect to know him, memory to be mindful of him, will to love him,
imagination to picture to yourself his benefits, eyes to see his wonderful works, tongue to
praise him, and so on with the other faculties.”120 With the likes of Ignatius, Scupoli, and
de Sales encouraging engaging all the senses in an effort to turn the mind to God, how
could Bellarmine have done otherwise?

The spiritual combat that Scupoli writes about refers to guarding the senses to ward
off the attacks of the Devil. Therefore, custody of the senses as a contrary, but

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118 “Quando ti avverderai d’essere occupata nel mirare cose, che hanno un nobil’essere, ridurrai col
pensiero al suo niente la creatura, fissando l’occhio della mente al sommo Creatore ivi presente, che
quell’essere le hâ dato, & in lui solamente prendendo diletto… Gustando cibo, ò bevanda, considera, che
Iddio è quello, che la dâ quel sapore, & in lui solo diletandoti… Se ti compiaceri nell’odorare alcuna cosa
al senso grata, non ti fermando in quel compiacemento, passa col pensiero al Signore, da cui ha la sua
origine quell’odore… Quando odi alcuna armonia di suoni, e canti, rivolta con la mente al tuo Dio…”
Scupoli, Combattimento Spirituale, 112-117. Elsewhere he recommends using a similar tactic to
constantly meditate on Christ’s passion such that whenever one sees a whip, arms, column, or some other
instrument of the torture, they could think of Jesus’s suffering. Similarly, when drinking (literally tasting,
gustando) wine they could recall Christ asking for a drink from the cross. He also recommends imaging the
stench of dying bodies on the way to Calvary, if captured by some sweet smell. Finally, he when hearing
noises or shouting he encourages his reader to imagine the voices jeering “Crucify, crucify” at the trial of
Jesus, see Scupoli, Combattimento Spirituale, 119-121.

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120 de Sales, Devout Life, 43.
complementary aspect of using them, is a prevalent theme in his work, or as he puts it “great caution, and constant exercise is demanded in governing and regulating well our exterior senses.”121 In a similar way de Sales grapples directly with the issue of flesh and spirit cautioning his reader that “The flesh rests heavily on the soul and constantly drags it downward…”122 Predictably two major areas of concern included the eyes and their place in inciting lust, and the tongue, related to hearing. Scupoli identifies three phases of temptation to lust: before during, and afterwards. He advises avoiding temptation altogether by fleeing every occasion of sin.123 For de Sales, this memorably included dancing:

Balls, dancing, and other such nocturnal gatherings usually attract the vices and sinsrife in such places, namely, quarrels, envy, scoffing, and wanton love. Such affairs open up the bodily pores of those taking part in them and they also open up the pores of the hearts. They are thus exposed to the danger that a serpent will seize a favorable opportunity to breathe into their ears loose words, foolish deeds, or wanton asks, or that a basilisk will cast an impure look or wanton glance of love into their hears, which being thus opened, are easily caught and poisoned.124

Dancing exposed the eyes, ears, and sense of touch to lustful delights, which could not be tolerated by de Sales, and simultaneously participating in dance removed a Christian from prayer and contemplation. Therefore, at the time of temptation, there was only one surefire cure according to the tried and true methods of tradition: “the remedy in these cases is honesty, modesty, not wanting, nor seeing, nor feeling things, that might incite this vice, and flight, as said above…furthermore the vivacity of the body must be given mortification

121 “Grande avvertenza, e continuo essercitio si richiede nel regger', e regolare bene I nostri sensi esteriori,” Scupoli, Combattimento Spirituale, 111.

122 de Sales, Devout Life, 258.

123 Scupoli, Combattimento Spirituale, 91.

124 De Sales, Devout Life, 197-198.
with fasts, discipline, hair shirts, vigils, and similar harshness…”"125 Francis de Sales was much in agreement, “Chastity depends on the heart as its source, but looks to the body's external senses and by thoughts and desires within the heart. It is an act of impurity to look at, hear, speak, smell, or touch anything immodest if our heart is entertained thereby and takes pleasure in it…Such must be the devout soul—chaste, clean, and pure in hands, lips, ears, eyes, and all its body.”126 Closing the eyes, or avoiding eye contact with perilous objects, and maintaining silence were, in the worlds of Scupoli, “great force for spiritual battle, and certain hope of victory.”127 It is quite possible that Bellarmine crystallized his ideas about the senses in his spiritual writings after reading the works of his contemporaries, Scupoli and de Sales, who in turn, had numerous authors to turn to for advice regarding the use and custody of the senses.

**Conclusion**

In Le Jeune’s description of the New World, his experience of a new sensory phenomenon, the stench of a skunk, inspired him to consider the ways in which the encounter illustrated spiritual truths. Through his olfactory sense, he reflected on the repulsiveness of sin. In a similar way, Francis de Sales opens his *Introduction to the Devout Life* by likening his text...

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125 “Il rimedio in questi casi è l'honestà, la modestia, non volendo, nè vedere, nè sentire cose, che incitano à questo vitio, e la fuga, come di sopra hò detto...La vivacità del corpo si hà da mortificare con digiuni, discipline, cilicii, vigilie, & altre simili asprezze,” Scupoli, *Combattimento Spirituale*, 96-98. Gaspar Loarte, a Jesuit spiritual writer shared nearly the same advice regarding lust in his own treatise of 1557: “The first remedy one should take up against lust is to diligently shun all the occasions in which the flesh is commonly inflamed with wicked desire, as in conversation with people who often, or are able, to provoke you to such a fire, avoiding looking at them as much as you can, especially with a fixed gaze, because as Saint Isidore says, 'the first darts of lust are the eyes,' which Jeremiah said 'stole his soul.'” And to understand this danger, Saint Gregory says that it is not allowed to look at what is not allowed to be desired, because death commonly enters through the windows of the eyes and the other senses.” See Gaspar Loarte, *The Exercise of the Christian Life*, trans. Charles Keenan (Boston: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2016), 80.

126 de Sales, *Devout Life*, 148

to a bouquet of flowers that one can use to avoid the stench of the world.\textsuperscript{128} The sensory imagery speaks volumes about the paradox involved in the senses, as also in writing about them. He adds that like any florist he cannot add anything new, but only rearrange the flowers: “I neither can nor will, nor indeed should I, write in this \textit{Introduction} anything but what has already been published by our predecessors on the same subject.”\textsuperscript{129} The themes he explores and the advice he gives are ancient and venerable. Where the dichotomy between flesh and spirit is concerned, deep continuity is evident with the tradition and practice of the past. In the thought and practice of early modern Catholics using the senses became more important than ever for moving the soul to greater piety. Nevertheless, concerns with the custody of the senses in the cosmic struggle against sin were no less important. These twin themes were prevalent through pre-Tridentine culture, conciliar documents, catechisms, and in the thought of three of the most renowned Catholic spiritual authors of the day. The ideas were known to the highest churchmen and vigorously communicated to laypeople by preachers and pastors. Instead of understanding this as a dichotomy, it is better to avoid thinking of Catholic culture as pitting one against the other and to imagine a culture of sensory regulation in which paradoxes were a central component of belief and piety. For guidance on how to put these ideas and theories into practice of Catholic life, preachers and writers offered the examples of the saints. The next chapter explores exemplarity and how saints and sinners alike demonstrated the ways to use or avoid using the senses.

\textsuperscript{128} de Sales, \textit{Devout Life}, 21-22.

\textsuperscript{129} de Sales, \textit{Devout Life}, 21-22.
Chapter 3

Between Heaven and Hell:
Saints, Sinners, and the Senses

The previous chapter explored the role of the senses in the spiritual life both from a theoretical perspective as well as a practical one. It traced ideas about how fundamental the senses were to moral teaching and how they comprised the core of the practice, ritual, and devotion of Catholicism. It pursued the question as to whether or not attitudes and practices changed as a result of the Reformations through the Council of Trent. This chapter analyzes the same theme from above and below, from heaven and hell, from virtuous saints to vicious sinners. Examining the theme from these perspectives is motivated by the fact that saints and sinners were the ultimate exemplars of virtue and vice, and therefore, the way they used and guarded their senses provided model behavior for Christians to imitate. Because of their exalted status saints permeated the entire culture of early modern Catholicism. This was especially true in preaching. Sermons on the saints abound in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Preachers painted images of these Christian heroes in the ears and imaginations of their audiences, offering them examples for how to live. Oftentimes these depictions imagined saints as the standard for the perfect use of the body and its senses. Robert Bellarmine, like many preachers of his time, frequently preached on the saints, and alluded to the saints on numerous occasions. In addition, in one spiritual treatise, on the *Eternal Happiness of the Saints*, he highlights the sensuous rewards awaiting the abstemious holy people in the afterlife.

Not everyone answered the call to holiness. For many, the demands of saintly sensual deprivation were too arduous. Instead, the allures of the world enticed and ensnared
many, who found it too easy to embrace the secular world and succumb to their carnal appetites, or at least that is how the preachers framed it. Bellarmine’s sinners include errant kings, and the heresiarchs of his day. In other instances, even people with the best intentions strayed from the good and holy path. Among these were men, who originally intended to pursue religious life in the Society of Jesus. They abandoned the path laid out for them for a variety of misdeeds as recorded by Pedro de Ribadeneyra in his Dialogos. Known today for his hagiography of Ignatius and his propensity for writing propagandistic history that aggrandized the deeds and successes of the Society, Ribadeneyra also wrote an account of men who either abandoned or were dismissed from the Society.¹ These men parted from the straight and narrow path of devotion, chastity, and modesty tempted by a wide variety of the world’s enticements. As he tells it, they all received a share of God’s justice on earth in return. His Dialogos relate stories of negative exemplars. The stories serve a clear rhetorical end: to terrify rather than inspire their readers into lives of sensuous deprivation within the Society of Jesus. Both perspectives, exemplars positive and negative, offer further insight into the complex world of the senses in the spiritual life.²

¹ For Ribadeneyra’s biography of Ignatius, see Pedro de Ribadeneyra, The Life of Ignatius of Loyola, trans. Claude Nicholas Pavur, SJ. (St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2014). Ribadeneyra’s Dialogos remain unpublished, while several versions exist in manuscript copy all citations below refer to a Spanish manuscript from the Jesuit archives in Rome: Pedro de Ribadeneyra, “Dialogos en los cuales se tratan algunos exemplos de personas que aviendo salido de La religion de La Compañia de Jesus han sido castigados severamente de la mano del Senor” (Unpublished manuscript, Alcala, 1592), ARSI, Fondo Gesuitico, ms. 67. I use parenthetical citations from this manuscript of the Dialogues hereafter. For more on Ribadeneyra and his works, see Jodi Bilinkoff, “The Many ‘Lives’ of Pedro de Ribadeneyra,” Renaissance Quarterly 52.1 (1999): 180-196.

² Note that for Bellarmine and his contemporaries it may not have been necessary to distinguish between “negative” and “positive” examples, as both connotations were inherent in the word: “Exemplo. Lat. Exemplum, est virtus vel vitium, vel aliud quiduis, quod in alio nobis imitandum, vel vitandum proponitur: ex Valla lib. 6” see: Tesoro de la Lengua Castellana, o Española, “exemplo” by Sebastian de Covarrubias y Orozoco (Madrid: Luis Sanchez, 1611): 391. Covarrubias draws on Lorenzo Valla’s definition of example as both virtue and vice, which either ought to be imitated or avoided.
comparison was not only useful for instruction of Bellarmine’s audiences, but also reflects the way he thought. Even from his earliest days he compiled lists both of the positive canon of Christian authors and a negative one of heretics.³

Therefore, this chapter juxtaposes Bellarmine’s sermons on the saints and holy people with sinners and Ribadeneyra’s “apostates,” some of whom Bellarmine may have known personally. It pays special attention to how saints and sinners used and misused their senses and received eternal sensuous rewards and punishments in return. Because this chapter relies heavily on sermons on the saints, I begin by considering preaching and the sermon event as a virtuous sensuous activity for preacher and hearer. Then I examine Bellarmine’s preaching on the saints as exemplary practitioners of the use and misuse of their senses; I consider his influence on later preachers; then I record how Bellarmine himself, according to his biographers, was a good custodian of his senses; and, finally, I turn to Bellarmine’s sinners and Ribadeneyra’s Dialogos and his stories of the first ex-Jesuits as negative exemplars.

I. Preaching on the Saints

The importance of the sermon in seventeenth-century Rome cannot be overstated. The sermon served many functions, both social and religious. The most important of these were to instruct, delight, and move its audience. Sermons, distinct from a homily at mass, could fill an hour (or more), with considerable crowds listening intently, or if they were out of earshot, merely gazing at the preacher, his gestures, and his surroundings. The entertainment value of these sermons in the early modern world might be underappreciated today, and therefore must be underscored. Robert Bellarmine, for example, supposedly

³ Godman, Saint as Censor, 54-55.
enthused his audiences to the degree that they desired to touch him.⁴ So beloved were preachers that governments would try to procure and compete for the best ones.⁵ Preaching served many ends, spiritual, moral, political, and more.

_Trent's Decree on Preaching_

The decree of the Council of Trent (1545-1563) on preaching defined the reform and evolution of Catholic preaching during the last quarter of the sixteenth century and beginning of the seventeenth century. Before the era of Reformations, preachers prepared sermons for a unified Christian audience, meaning with limited concern for theological polemics between competing Christian sects. After Trent the focus of preaching shifted from a scholastic tone, emphasizing orthodoxy, obedience, and order, to rhetorical persuasion that insisted on moving audiences from vice to virtue.⁶ The impetus for Trent’s decree was twofold. On the one hand, the perceived prominence of preaching in the new Protestant traditions necessitated a decree on countermeasures in preaching.⁷ The Roman Catholic Church felt that the Scriptures, their interpretation, and their dissemination belonged solely to the magisterium, or the Church’s teaching authority. From the Catholic point of view, the greatest sin of Protestantism was its prideful and arrogant belief that ministers and preachers outside of the authority of the Church could interpret the

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⁴ Brodrick, _Saint and Scholar_, 22-23.

⁵ Michelson, _The Pulpit and the Press_, 17.


⁷ John O’Malley, _The First Jesuits_ (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 91. O’Malley points out that the notion that the Protestants won the pulpit and the Catholics the altar is facile and erroneous, but it was still a powerful motivator for Catholics to reform preaching.
Scriptures. On the other hand, reports of the flagrant negligence and inadequate training of many Catholic preachers demanded reform in preaching. Consequently, the Council’s fifth session (June 17, 1546) addressed both of these problems by demanding priestly instruction in liberal arts and Scripture Studies, by calling for regulation of the preachers in the dioceses, and by redefining the primacy of preaching in the Roman Catholic tradition.

Most of Trent’s demands became the burden of the bishops. The first of these decrees exhorted the bishops to refill stipend positions, posts meant for preachers and teachers that carried benefices, in their diocese with those who, “if competent, can give explanations and interpretations of sacred scripture.” Additionally, the decree mandated that bishops supply, at the very least, someone to teach poor clergy and laypeople the rudiments of grammar. The new educational reforms for preaching depended on the authority that rested in the bishop to permit only legitimate teachers and preachers to fulfill those offices: “no one is to be admitted to the office either public or private, who first was not examined and approved by the bishop of the diocese regarding his life, customs, and

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10 In Norman Tanner, *Decrees*, 668.

knowledge.” Since the prevailing belief dictated that the source of heresy was inaccurate preaching, the Council Fathers were preoccupied with correct preaching.\(^{13}\)

The Council Fathers were clear that so long as preaching was rigorously orthodox, it was one of the most important ministries in the Church.\(^{14}\) They consider preaching the “special task of bishops;”\(^{15}\) they affirm that “all bishops, archbishops, primates, and all other prelates of the church are bound to the office of preaching the holy gospel of Jesus Christ, unless legitimately impeded;”\(^{16}\) and that, “even archpriests, ordinary priests and anyone else who holds some control over parishes and other churches, having the care of souls, ought to feed with salutary words the ones committed to their church.”\(^{17}\) Additionally, the Council suggested that, at minimum, preachers ought to deliver sermons on Sundays, feast days, and more often if possible.\(^{18}\) In practice, sermons were not held only on Sundays and feast days, but at least three times a week especially during liturgical

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12 In Tanner, *Decrees*, 5.2.7, 669.


14 As Giorgio Caravale has shown this was not as easy a task as it appeared. There were numerous Italian preachers, who converted to Protestantism, and many others that leaned toward some heterodox ideas, which they subtly shared with their congregations. See Giorgio Caravale, *Predicazione e Inquisizione Nell’Italia Del Cinquecento: Ippolito Chizzola Tra Eresia e Controversia Antiprotestante* (Bologna: Il mulino, 2012).

15 Tanner, *Decrees*, 669.

16 Tanner, *Decrees*, 669.

17 Tanner, *Decrees*, 669.

18 Tanner, *Decrees of the Councils*, 669. The famous, although hurried Twenty-Fifth Session of the Council, which in part concerned the invocation, veneration, and relics of the saints as well as sacred images also encouraged bishops to teach and preach on these topics, in Tanner 774-776. The twenty-fifth session validated the Catholic tradition regarding saints and images against Protestant positions and sought to rectify abuses within it through right teaching and preaching.
seasons of Advent and Lent. In particular, the Jesuits were prolific preachers, who often exceeded these standards. According to O’Malley, the abundance of preaching events set Jesuit preaching apart. It seems that Jesuits would preach multiple times a day with some sermons that were brief and others that might last up to four hours. Beyond regularity in preaching, Trent guided preachers towards suitable themes, “announce with brevity and facility in speech the vices which it behooves them to turn away from and the virtues which they must pursue.”

Post-Tridentine Preaching in Practice

In general, preaching in the decades after Trent through the first half of the seventeenth century was oriented towards reuniting all Christian souls under Roman Catholicism. In this period, preachers became increasingly oriented toward moving the individual hearer from personal vice to virtue. The preachers of the post-Tridentine decades committed themselves to a “personal, emotional, dedicated, and wide-ranging effort to save souls,”

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20 O’Malley, The First Jesuits, 92.

21 Tanner, Decrees of the Councils, 5.2.11, 669. See McGinness, Right Thinking and Sacred Oratory, 32 for the history of this theme in preaching dating back to Saint Francis of Assisi.

22 McGinness, Right Thinking and Sacred Oratory, 4-5. See also John O’Malley, Praise and Blame in Renaissance Rome: Rhetoric, Doctrine, and Reform in the Sacred Orators of the Papal Court, c. 1450-1521 (Durham: Duke University Press, 1979). In addition to crediting O’Malley for turning him toward preaching in Counter-Reformation Rome, McGinness also points out that he delved into a relatively unexplored field. His focus is more on sermon literature than sermons themselves. Since McGinness’s work other scholars have looked into post-Tridentine preaching, see Emily Michelson, The Pulpit and the Press; Roberto Rusconi, Predicazione e Vita Religiosa nella società italiana: da Carlo Magno Alla Controriforma (Torino: Loescher, 1981); Giacomo Martini and Ugo Dovere eds., La Predicazione in Italia Dopo il Concilio di Trento: Tra Cinqucento e Settecento: Atti del X Convegno di Studio dell’Associazione Italiana dei Professori di Storia della Chiesa: Napoli, 6-9 Settembre 1994 (Rome: Edizioni dehoniane, 1996); and Larissa Taylor, ed. Preachers and People in the Reformations and Early Modern Period (Boston: Brill, 2001). Only Norrie Corman’s chapter in Taylor’s volume discusses Italian preaching.
rather than a reform concerned “purely about obedience, authority, or clerical factionalism.” Preachers were primarily concerned with teaching, delighting, and, most of all, moving audiences. Francis Borja’s preaching manual, *Ecclesiastes sive de ratione concionandi instructione*, published in 1592 emphasized moving audiences by focusing on the theme of vice and virtue. The publication of this preaching manual for Jesuits fulfilled the dream of the founder of the Society of Jesus, Ignatius Loyola, and the second Superior of the order, Diego Lainez, the second Superior of the order. What is more, Borja’s manual was consistent with Ignatius’s admonition to Jesuit preachers to avoid using the scholastic manner to instruct and move audiences. Bellarmine and his successors adhered to Borja’s guidelines and Ignatius’s advice. Bellarmine himself wrote a brief treatise on preaching, which he called “A Guide to Composing Sermons.” In scope and content Bellarmine expects the preacher to aim for moving souls from vice to virtue, and to use the Scriptures and the Patristic Fathers, as well as examples from history to prove this point.

To achieve their goal of moving audiences, one tool at the preacher’s disposal was theatricality, which was highly dependent on the senses. The activity of preaching itself depended on good sensory practice. The tongue was not merely an organ employed for the senses of taste and touch, but also hearing.

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24 This triad derives from the classical tradition in the works of Quintilian and Cicero, and Augustine of Hippo appropriated it for the Christian context.


28 See chapter 2 citing Bellarmine’s sermon *On the custody of the heart*, IX, 460.
efficacious when coupled with appropriate gestures because audiences were able to see a preacher from farther away than they could hear him.\textsuperscript{29} Furthermore, these gestures could help impart the meaning and drama of the sermon.\textsuperscript{30} Bellarmine himself recommends these practices where appropriate. The preacher should begin “first while the body is at rest with a moderated voice and with simple opinions; then, if it is necessary to contend or rebuke, he raises his voice, multiplies words, agitates the body, cries out, etc., that from the change of voice and the commotion of the members he might get results…”\textsuperscript{31} Some records from preaching events indicate the supposed efficacy of a preacher. For example, the sermons of the Jesuit preacher, Louis Coudret (1523-1572), inspired “more than one thousand to take communion.”\textsuperscript{32} Coudret was not alone. Emond Auger (1530-1591), another French Jesuit, so moved listeners with his sermons that not only did his audiences grow in number, but observers also credited his message with a significant surge in reception of the eucharist around Easter time.\textsuperscript{33} While these instances describe events in France in the late sixteenth century, there is no reason to believe that Italian preachers did not have the same preoccupation with, or success in, moving audiences.

Moving audiences required a certain amount of creativity and flexibility including shifts in tone, attitude or disposition. Trent’s decree noted the discrepancies in the

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\begin{enumerate}
\item Emily Michelson, “Dramatics in (and out of) the Pulpit in Post-Tridentine Italy,” \textit{The Italianist} 34.3 (2014): 449.
\item Michelson, “Dramatics in (and out of) the Pulpit,” 449-450.
\item In Grant, \textit{Autobiography}, 83.
\item In A. Lynn Martin, \textit{The Jesuit Mind: The Mentality of an Elite in Early Modern France} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 9. The numbers reported by the Jesuits are dubious. Often data were used to prove efficacy. That is, the greater the number the preacher could convince, the more efficacious his sermon.
\item Martin, \textit{The Jesuit Mind}, 14.
\end{enumerate}
composition of audiences, urging preachers to give sermons appropriate for the education level of their hearers.\textsuperscript{34} Another reason for the preacher’s flexibility is the generic nature and brevity of the Tridentine decree on preaching. The decree was as specific in its demand for preaching and content, as it was vague in determining what good preaching ought to be like. The absence of discussion of form and method was a matter of concern for steadfast clerics who desired to preach using a systematic and defined approach.\textsuperscript{35} A final suggestion that accounts for a certain degree of plurality of expression among preachers is the ascendance of several new religious orders, all of which were in some way dedicated to preaching. This includes the Capuchins (1520), Theatines (1524), Barnabites (1530), Jesuits (1540), and Oratorians (1575). Each of these orders trained and produced famous preachers. Yet, each order brought its own unique mission and spirituality to preaching. For example, Matteo da Bascio, an Observant Franciscan, founded the Capuchins because he wanted to embrace a life that followed the \textit{Rule} of Francis more closely and a mission that included eremitic lifestyle and preaching to the poor. The Capuchin Constitutions of 1536 predated Trent in its return to Francis of Assisi’s themes of vice and virtue as the focus of preaching.\textsuperscript{36} As another example, the Barnabites also prized preaching, but their focus was on studying the epistles of St. Paul.

The foundation of all Christian teaching, use of the Sacred Scriptures, was also a stylistic feature of sermons that varied by preacher. The Tridentine decree’s preference was for a strictly exegetical sermon rather than a theological disputation, or scholastic

\textsuperscript{34} In Tanner, \textit{Decrees of the Councils}, 668.

\textsuperscript{35} McGinness, “Ideals and Practices,” 112.

\textsuperscript{36} In McGinness, “Ideals and Practices,” 121.
explanation of doctrine. It appears that preachers adhered to Trent’s inclination since they preferred exegesis and interpretation of the Scriptures that favored an allegorical or spiritual reading for moral uplifting.\(^{37}\) While individual preachers used the biblical texts based on his own inclinations, it appears, according to Fabris, that Jesuits cited the Scriptures less than patristic and classical texts whereas other orders, especially the Capuchins, preferred to cite Scriptural passages in their sermons.\(^{38}\) Contrarily, Fulvio Fontana, S.J. (1648-1723) used more patristic and classical sources than Biblical sources on average. Yet, Robert Bellarmine, S.J. (1542-1621) favored using more biblical than classical and patristic sources.\(^{39}\)

II. Sensing with the Saints

It is no exaggeration to say that the saints permeate Bellarmine’s writings and thought. There is hardly a text he wrote that does not cite or refer to the saints. In general terms, this is unsurprising. The saints and martyrs were the heroes of the Catholic faith. As Peter Brown argued, veneration of saints, holy people, and their relics began very early in the history of Christianity.\(^{40}\) In part, the thirst for the holy reflected an elemental human proclivity for the supernatural. The saints were miracle workers, and people were desperate to tap into thaumaturgic power. From the very earliest days of the Church there were those

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\(^{38}\) Fabris, “Uso della Bibbia nella Predicazione,” 68-72. As Jesuit examples Fabris uses Jesuits Daniello Bartoli, Fulvio Fontana, and Pietro Valle while he uses Francesco Casini as a Capuchin example.


who identified the power behind the works of wonder and sought to possess it as the story of Simon Magus illustrates (Acts, 8:9-24). By the time of the Renaissance the identification of relics and saints with miracles increasingly became associated with superstition by humanists and Reformers. Erasmus lampooned many practices related to the veneration of relics and pilgrimage. Many Reformers denied the efficacy of the saints altogether.

The Council of Trent, however, maintained the validity of the cult of the saints, their relics and images, albeit with a caveat. They declared that every attempt had to be made to avoid superstitious practices regarding veneration. This notion reflected a different approach to the cult of the saints already seeping into the culture of the clerical elite. Increasingly they minimized the thaumaturgic and miraculous deeds of saints in favor of emphasizing their virtue and importance as role models and examples for living a good Christian life. To the religious and cultural historian, the saints and sermons on the saints represent a treasure trove, which permits a thorough exploration of the early modern mindset. As Peter Burke notes “They [the saints] reflect the values of the culture in which they are perceived in a heroic light.” Burke found that Italian noblemen, who were priests in a religious order, were most likely to become Counter-Reformation saints. He also delineated five common routes to sainthood: founding an order, being a missionary, being a pastor, charitable activity, and mysticism. Yet, there were also attributes relating to the

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41 For more on the issues of saints and their images, see chapter 4.


43 Burke, “How to be a Counter-Reformation Saint,” 53.

44 Burke, “How to be a Counter-Reformation Saint,” 55-56. Though mysticism is hard to define and can describe a number of different experiences, in the context of Ignatius, it likely refers to visions, especially visions during the mass and prayer.
appropriate use of the senses that were also common to saints, as Bellarmine’s sermons indicate.

The post-Tridentine era presented an even more intriguing reason to study saints because of the increase in canonizations that occurred after the establishment of the Sacred Congregation of Rites and Ceremonies in 1588. The Congregation assisted the papacy in crafting a new image of sanctity that included different media from text and image to sermons and spectacles. According to Ditchfield, a candidate’s cult was most promising if it involved “all the senses thus requiring analysis of a language that was visual as well as textual, symbolic and spiritual as well as concrete and literal.”

The text and image sources alone did not suffice in establishing a cult. Canonizations necessitated a dedicated group that could propagate the ideas within the devotional works according to Clare Copeland, who has suggested that the religious orders were the most powerful lobbying organization in the canonization process. This explains why Bellarmine’s sermons emphasize the sanctity of uncanonized Jesuits, especially Ignatius of Loyola and Luigi Gonzaga. The saint-making machine relied on more than the sermons of one preacher, albeit a famous one. Attempts at promotion included “traveling between houses and sharing devotional impulses, hagiographies, prayers, and relics.” In the specific case of the canonizations of Ignatius and Francis, for example, the Jesuits,

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46 Simon Ditchfield, “Thinking with Saints: Sanctity and Society in the Early Modern World,” *Critical Inquiry* 35.3 (2009): 554. His assertion was foundational for interdisciplinary studies that included text and image to understand sanctity and hence early modern culture.

47 Clare Copeland, “Sanctity,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to the Counter-Reformation*, ed. Alexandra Bamji et al. (Burlington: Ashgate, 2013), 233
“shared devotions around the globe, cultivating reciprocal interest for images of Ignatius of Loyola and Francis Xavier in both Asia and Europe.”48 The impact of the orders on the bureaucratic process suggests that canonization ought to be viewed as having an “impetus both ‘from below’ and from intermediary promoters.”49

Ditchfield, contrarily, has cautioned against historical studies that focus on the “product” of canonization because they aggrandize the value of political clout and wealth in the outcome of the canonization procedure.50 Instead, he argued for considering the “sometimes conflicting motives behind the individuals and institutions who sought to promote particular candidates to be raised to the altar.”51 In Ditchfield’s view the motivation-based approach would yield a closer understanding of “the nature and range of the cultural work performed by sanctity and the cult of the Saints.”52 No matter what the approach, sermons on the saints reveal their cultural relevance to the preacher and his audience.

*Bellarmines’ Saints and the Senses*

Sebastian Tromp, the twentieth-century Jesuit theologian and compiler of Bellarmine’s sermons devoted one volume to sermons on the saints; however, these sermons hardly represent all of Bellarmine’s comments regarding saints and sanctity. In reality, the vast


51 Ditchfield, “Coping with the Beati Moderni,” 438.

52 Ditchfield, “Thinking with the Saints,” 584.
majority of his sermons refer to or cite saints either for their theological and moral teachings or the example of their lives. Overall, Bellarmine portrays the saints as heroic practitioners of virtue, enemies of temptation, and defenders of hyper orthodoxy. Most of those virtues depend on the ability of each saint to appropriately use or guard their senses. In general, these practices reflect much of what scholars already understand about saints and their exemplarity.\textsuperscript{53} To summarize: they prayed often, fasted and mortified their flesh, displayed great humility and charity, and, above all, guarded their chastity and battled temptation. Yet not every saint fits that model perfectly, and for many their conversion to Christianity depended on their senses.

No saint, excepting the Virgin Mary, was born a saint.\textsuperscript{54} The fact is that many saints had unsavory pasts. A point which Bellarmine underscores drawing on the examples of many apostolic and patristic figures:

Thus Saint Marcellinus, who first feared dying, such that he lapsed into sin and sacrificed to idols, then humble he rose desiring for suffering, such that he sought out the tyrant and Marcellinus goaded him to kill him. Thus, Doctor Paul says in his letters that he was before the whole world an iniquitous, blasphemous persecutor of Christ. Thus, Saint Peter freely received what Mark had clearly described in his Gospel concerning his denial; and he confirmed that gospel and gave it to the Church for reading, so that all might read of his sin. Further the Doctor Augustine not content with having written the Reconsiderations of those passages in his books, he even wrote the books of his Confessions, where he openly confesses that he was a concubinary and thief and heretic.\textsuperscript{55}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[53] See Donald Weinstein and Rudolph M. Bell, \textit{Saints and Society: The Two Worlds of Western Christendom, 1000-1700} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).
\item[54] Bellarmine does offer sermons in praise of Jesus and the Virgin Mary, and he was, along with many of his Jesuit colleagues, an advocate of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. That doctrine was only officially promulgated in 1854 by Pope Pius IX.
\item[55] “Sic S. Marcellinus, qui ante metuerat mori, postquam in peccatum lapsus est et sacrificavit idolis, tam humilis et cupidus patiendi resurrexit, ut ipsemet quasierit tyrannum et eum ad se occidendum instigaverit. Sic D. Paulus in suis epistolis dicit coram toto munduo se fuisse iniquum, blasphemum, persecutorum Christi. Sic S. Petrus libenter accepit quod Marcus tam clare descripsisset in evangelio suam negationem; et confirmavit illud evangelium et dedit Ecclesiae legendum, ut omnes legerent eius peccatum. Sic D. Augustinus non contentus scripsisse \textit{Retractiones} multorum locorum in suis libris, scripsit etiam libros
\end{footnotes}
In some ways, Bellarmine cautions the audience to recall that all saints remain fallen and have at one point or another transgressed. More to the point, many of the most illustrious saints had been the most notorious sinners.

Many of these sinners-turned-saints followed a similar sensuous paradigm by which provocation of the senses converted them toward their personal brands of heroic Christianity. Take for example, Paul, who converted to Christianity through a gracious vision, as Bellarmine tells it. Expounding on Paul’s conversion story, found in Acts 9, Bellarmine explains that Paul “sees Christ with his bodily eyes, in spiritual form close to the earth.”56 From that visual bodily encounter with Christ, Paul became convinced of Christianity’s truth, and abandoned his life as a persecutor of Christians to become Christianity’s most prolific missionary and most important apostle. Similarly, a sensuous encounter with Christianity encouraged Augustine to abandon his concubine and persuaded him to accept the truth of orthodox Christianity, as Bellarmine relates: “he broke the first stone in his heart by assiduously hearing the sermons of Saint Ambrose, and the second by reading the epistles of saint Paul.”57 By encountering the Bible through hearing the sermons of Saint Ambrose, Augustine discovered that Christian teachings and philosophy were more sophisticated than he had originally believed. Augustine’s senses also drove his

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56 “Ille enim videt Christum oculis corporeis, sed in ære vicino terae,” Bellarmine, in OOP, “Ad Haereticos Abiuratos, VIII: 287. Presumably the Saint Marcellinus is Pope Marcellinus (r. 296-304). Note that Bellarmine does not include St. Ignatius in this list, nor does he ever refer to Ignatius’ rambunctious and wayward youth before his conversion to the saintly life.

particular conversion moment in a garden (recounted in book 8 chapter 12 of the *Confessions*). Augustine hears a chile’s voice from a neighboring garden, that instructs him to pick up a book (Paul’s Letter to the Romans) and read it. Thus hearing, touching, and seeing all drove Augustine to embrace Christianity. And what passage did he read? Paul’s Letter to the Romans 13:13-14: “Let us walk honestly, as in the day: not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and impurities, not in contention and envy: But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh in its concupiscences,” an exhortation to guard the senses, abandon fleshly desires, and at long last embrace lady Chastity.

Other saints, like Thomas the Apostle, had the benefit of knowing Jesus in life, and thus responded to his personal call. Nevertheless, in the days immediately following Jesus’ crucifixion, Thomas doubted. What assuaged his doubt? The opportunity, not only to see the risen Christ, but to touch the wounds of his side, to verify Christ’s bodily presence with his senses. Bellarmine explores the issue by answering a rhetorical question that he poses: “Why is it that Divine Providence wished that Thomas would be absent [when the other apostles learned of the resurrection]? First so that we might know that the Apostles were not so easily credulous, but that a certain one of them wished even to certify by touching.”

What is more, Bellarmine argues that Thomas’s act of sensuous verification was the core upon which generations of Christian belief was founded,

Second it demonstrated the true resurrection by three witnesses, of the eyes, of the ears, and of the hands. For thusly, true and living men are known, in nature

58 “Sed quare divina Providentia voluit, ut Thomas abesset? Primo ut sciremus, Apostolos non fuisse nimis cedulos, sed aliquem ex illis voluisse etiam certificari tangendo.” Bellarmine, in *OOP*, “Dominica in Albis” V: 190. For more on the idea of verification by touch in artworks see, Erin E. Benay and Lisa M. Rafanelli, *Faith, Gender and the Senses in Italian Renaissance and Baroque Art: Interpreting the Noli me tangere and Doubting Thomas* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), ch. 3.
in particulars. For taste and smell do not serve for knowing men, but for
knowing food and flowers and similar things. First, Christ displayed himself to
the eyes of his disciples...sight discerned his figure...The second witness was
the ear...and particular men are known by their friends through the voice. For
each has its own sound...The third witness was the hand, which proves that
the body is solid and not spirit.\textsuperscript{59}

The physical experience of seeing and touching Christ not only conquered Thomas’s doubt,
but also became the basis for later Christian belief.

Sensuous experiences were also the foundation for other saints to remain steadfast
even in the face of persecution, as Bellarmine explains using the example of St. Stephen,
the first Christian martyr, who died by stoning: “A miraculous vision is placed for Saint
Stephen. For in that very council seeing angry adversaries against him full of bloodthirsty
desire, and standing upon his own death, he rose his eyes to the sky, and he saw the heavens
opened, and the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right of God. This was a miraculous
vision. For it was not in his mind nor in his imagination, but in his bodily eyes...”\textsuperscript{60} In his
final moments, it was a vision that encouraged him, and gave him faith to remain resolute.
Thus, not only do the saints find Christianity through their senses, but God also encourages
them through sensuous mystical encounters. Yet even these privileged experiences were
not always enough to remove the difficulties of humankind’s fallen state.

\textsuperscript{59} “Probavit secondo veram resurrectionem tribus testimoniis, oculorum, aurium et manuum. Sic enim
cognoscuntur homines veri et vivi, et tales in particulari. Nam gustus et odoratus non servient ad
cognoscendos homines, sed cibos et flores et similia. Primo ergo ostendit se oculis discipulorum...Visus
discernit figuram...Secundus testis fuit auris...et inter familiares ad vocem discernuntur particulares
homines. Quisque enim habet proprium sonum...Tertius testis fuit manus, quae probat corpus esse solidum,

\textsuperscript{60} “Ponitur visio mirabilis Sancti Stephani. Nam in ipso concilio videns adversarios contra se iratos et pleno
sanguinolento desiderio, et mortem sibi instare, sustulit oculos ad caelum, et vidit caelos apertos, et gloriam
Deum et Iesum stantem a dextris Dei. Haec mirabilis visio fuit. Nam non fuit in mente tantum vel in
imaginatione, sed in oculis corporis...” Bellarmine, in \textit{OOP}, “In die S. Stephani,” II: 220.
Instead, Bellarmine emphasizes that many of the saints continued to experience stimulation or titillation of the flesh, even after conspicuous conversion moments. He rationalizes that God “permits great temptations and persecutions for certain saints, lest they become proud from the visions and other gifts of God” Bellarmine lists Paul among those who experienced such temptations. He offers Romans 7:23 “but I see another law in my members, fighting against the law of my mind, and captivating me in the law of sin, that is in my members,” as evidence. For Bellarmine, the “law of the members” signified that the “stimulus of the flesh [which] is the concupiscence of the flesh” was alive in Paul. In some ways, perhaps this insistence was meant to encourage his audience to consider that even saints bestowed with grace grappled with the realities of temptation at the level of the body and its senses. Nevertheless, Bellarmine makes an important distinction: these temptations did not come to the saints through ordinary means.

As a result of their extraordinary grace, they possessed extraordinary virtue, but those same advantages encouraged the devil and his supernatural temptations against them. As Bellarmine says regarding temptation of the flesh in Paul’s writing “Why is it called angel of Satan? So that you might know that the temptation of Paul was not born from too much food, nor from the drinking of too much wine, nor from the vision nor conversation with women; but from the pure temptation of the devil, just as it happened to the eremitic saints, Antony, Macarius, Hilarion, Jerome, Benedict, Francis and others.” After saints

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accepted their vocations, they scrupulously avoided the temptations of sensual pleasure by keeping careful custody of their senses. St. Francis for example, “never knew a woman by her face,” and so it was with Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, who “did not wish to see his own sister.” Some saints even endeavored to shield the senses of others, like Carlo Borromeo who “published an edict and under the penalty of Church interdict ordered, that all women even noblewomen could not enter the church, unless they were veiled so that their hair might not be seen.” Yet, these were not enough to remove temptation entirely, and the greater austerities encouraged even greater demonic temptations.

Consistent with the qualities of heroes the saints responded to greater challenges with epic virtue. In spiritual combat the saints surpassed expectations. Their spiritual battles typically manifested themselves as a war between the will and the body by castigation and self-abnegation. Even St. Paul, who was uniquely blessed and “rapt in the third heaven, who learned the gospel from God himself, who performed so many miracles, who converted a great part of the world, and still he castigated his body, so that he might kill the passions.” Citing 2 Corinthians 11:27 Bellarmine specifies that Paul labored in vigils denying himself sleep for prayer, in hunger and thirst, and in cold and nudity. What is more, he castigated his body, even after experiencing so much hardship and toil “having

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64 “Franciscus nullam mulierem noverat ex aspectu,” Bellarmine, in OOP “Sermo Octavus Beati mundi corde: de cordis purification,” IX, 204; and “noluit sororem suam videre,” Bellarmine in OOP “Beati qui lugent: de delecationibus,” VI: 76 It is worth noting that Bellarmine finds Bernard’s behavior extreme, yet understandable, “Certainly, Bernard would not have acted so severely with his sister, were she not an impediment for the delights of salvation,” “Certe S. Bernardus non tam severe egisset cum sorore, nisi delectatio mundi esset impedimentum ad salute,“


66 “raptus in tertium coelum, qui ab ipso Deo didicit evangelium, qui tot miracula faciebat, qui magnam partem mundi converterat, qui erat speculum omnis sanctitatis, adhuc castigabat corpus suum, ut passiones mortificaret…” Bellarmine, in OOP, “Dominica Septuagesimae”, IV: 85.
been whipped by the Jews five times, whipped by the Roman rods so many times, stoned similarly, and thrice shipwrecked having been cast about by the waves; and nevertheless, he says ‘I castigate my body…”’ As if the message was not clear enough, Bellarmine insists that Paul’s willingness to castigate his flesh, fast, and partake in other austerities is a mandate for Christians, “if Paul is in need of castigation of the flesh, are we not in need of it also?” Following Paul’s example, Bellarmine praises St. Ambrose and Augustine for their daily and most frequent fasting. Not only did St. Louis IX of France fast, eating “neither fish nor a single apple,” but he also wore a hairshirt thus torturing his haptic sense.

For Bellarmine, the greatest temptation of all was lust, and therefore he cherished the vow of chastity and defended means of preserving it: “the vow of chastity requires mortification of the flesh and love of penances, since the rigor of penance is as salt, which purifies and conserves from rottenness, as the examples of John the Baptist, Saint Claire, and indeed all the saints provide.” The means to cool those passions could become quite severe as Bellarmine demonstrates: “these means are helpful for cooling the heat of terrestrial and carnal passion: throwing oneself in the ice, like St. Bernard, or in the snow

67 “quinquies a Iudaeis flagellatum, tot a Romanis virgis caesum, semel lapidatum, ter naufragium fecesse, ab undis iactatum; et tamen dicit: Castigo corpus meum…” Bellarmine, in OOP, “Dominica Septuagesimae,” IV, 85-86.


like St. Francis, or in thorns like Saint Benedict; also useful is beating ones chest, fasting and keeping vigils, as saints Antony, Hilarion, and Jerome did.” The results of keeping chastity through mortifications was nothing less than the love of God. Bellarmine proves this in three ways. First, he argues that “the Lord hates lust, and carnal sins, so that he wished his own mother and presumably his father, to be a virgin.” Second, he uses the example of the “beloved” Apostle John who “was a most chaste, most pure virgin, and remained in this celibacy for the longest time, even up to his hundredth year. And as a result, he enjoyed many privileges…Second…he was loved before all by the Lord.” Third, the saints enjoyed a special prerogative, or signifier of their holiness: emission of a sweet odor from their corpse after death. Bellarmine explains that when the relics of St. Stephen were uncovered, they emitted a most sweet odor. So too did the Body of St. Hilarion, which St. Jerome related, “was found incorrupt after ten months with such fragrant odors that it seemed to have gathered perfumes.” To the weighty authority of Jerome, Bellarmine adds his own testimony declaring “I perceived a similar odor from the

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72 “La prima è perché, sicome l'acqua refrigera uno che ha caldo, smorza la sete, spegne il fuoco, così l'amor di Dio è il più potente rimedio, che si possa trovar per refrigerare, et a poco a poco smorzare le varie fiamme et la molteplice sete delle concupiscenze humane. Utili sonno per refrigerare il caldo dell'amor terreno et carnale il buttarsi nel ghiaccio, come fece S. Bernardo, o nella neve come S. Francesco, o nelle spine come S. Benedetto; utile è il battersi il petto, digiunare et vegliare, come fecero I santi Antonio, Hilarione, Hieronymo,” Bellarmine, in OOP, “Exhortation Secunda Caritas assimilatur aquae,” IX: 124.


These sweet odors were not only a divine grace bestowed on the saints, but a reminder to those who smelled them to toil in the world in order to enjoy the heavenly delights experienced by the saints.

To many, the task might have seemed insurmountable. After all, these were distant heroes and their deeds seemed incomparable. It must be noted that while Bellarmine had high expectations of even ordinary Christians, he was equally aware that people could fall short of these standards. It was for this reason that Bellarmine, consistent with the teachings of the Catholic Church and in keeping with Jesuit pastoral practice, maintained, supported, and encouraged his audiences to confess frequently.\(^7\) The difficulty of the task notwithstanding, Bellarmine insists that his audience take heart, reminding them that sanctity was not reserved merely for the apostles of the distant past nor was it manifest exclusively in arduous self-abnegation:

I do not wish to consider John the Baptist, since he was in the womb, nor the Apostles, since they were confirmed in grace, nor the hermits, lest perhaps it may be said that solitude alone made them perfect. I am thinking of the saints similar to us, like Saint Bernard, Saint Anthony of Padua, Saint Vincent, Saint Bernardino, and from our very own order Father Ignatius, Father Xavier, Father Borgia, of which we have their life as texts. These certainly were not sanctified in the womb, nor confirmed in grace, nor did they live in solitude; but they lived with men, preaching, teaching, hearing confessions, and other such things; and they have the same helps which we have: the same God, the same Sacraments, the same books, and other things beside. At the same time, if one may consider how they passed the night in prayer, or their fervor, suffering, humility, austerity of life, and then their faith in God, and then too their miraculous revelations.

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and other things, he will see how far we are from them.\textsuperscript{78}

To those, who despaired of the possibility of being a saint, Bellarmine insisted that it was possible. Sanctity was still real and present in his world, and people in recent memory had achieved it not only through the austere custody of their senses, but also through what may have appeared as the more mundane use of their senses in ministry.

\textit{Bellarmine and Jesuit Saints}

Bellarmine draws special attention to Ignatius of Loyola and Luigi Gonzaga. Ignatius, by the time of Bellarmine’s death, was not yet canonized. Thus, the sermons he customarily gave on the anniversary of Ignatius’ death were part of the widespread Jesuit attempt to promote their founder’s canonization, and in so doing their own order. These efforts included erecting churches and altars to his memory, and incessantly writing and rewriting his life so that it increasingly conformed to contemporary ideals for holiness.

In content, Ignatius’ holiness does not diverge much from the other saints. He practiced many of the virtues that audiences would expect; however, the emphases are slightly different, and provide insight into how Bellarmine understood the Jesuits and the wider society to which they belonged. Like so many other saints Bellarmine found Ignatius’s self-mortification astounding: “one thing that was certainly marvelous was how he began to flagellate his flesh in a manner that leaves one amazed as to how he survived, for in three ways he battled each day, fasting continuously, excepting only Sundays, he

\textsuperscript{78} “Nolo respicere Ioannem Baptistam, quia santificatus fuit in utero; nec Apostolos, quia confirmati in gratia; nec eremitas, ne forte dicatur, quod solitude faciebat eos perfectos. Considero Sanctos nobis simillimos, ut sanctum Bernardum, sanctum Antonium de Padua, sanctum Vincentium, sanctum Bernardinum, et ex nostris P. Ignatium, P. Xaverium, P. Borgia, quorum habemus vitas scriptas. Iste certe non erant sanctificati in utero, nec confirmati in gratia, nec vixerunt in solitude; sed vivebant cum hominibus praedicando, docendo, confessiones audiendo etc; et habebant eadem auxilia quae nos habemus; eundem Deum, eadem Sacramenta, eodem libros etc. Et tamen, si quis cogit et eorum pernoctationes in oratione, eorum fervorem, patientiam, humilitatem, austeritatem vitae, et denique cum Deo fiduciam, et inde miracula revelationes, etc., videbit quam longe simus ab illis.” Bellarmine, in \textit{OOP}, “De perfectione,” IX: 381.
stayed seven hours each day on his knees, and he ate only bread and water. And he spent seven hours of the day in prayer.”⁷⁹ According to Bellarmine, Ignatius directed these efforts toward maintaining chastity for himself and the men entrusted to his spiritual care:

Blessed Father Ignatius was not alone in his most diligent custody of chastity, but even provided for his men, stating in the rule: First concerning not speaking with women without a witness; for this sin is not committed except in secret. Second concerning not touching, even honestly; for in this way the possibility of lascivious touch is closed…Third concerning the sense of seeing…It is easy to close the eyes, or certainly not to fix them, at least before one might be captured. For looking briefly might not cause harm but fixing the eyes will cause harm.⁸⁰

Bellarmine’s Ignatius put the advice of Gregory, Job, and Augustine to practice by avoiding speaking and hearing women, guarding his eyes, and avoiding touching anyone. He also demanded that the men around him maintain these practices, and what is more, urged them to use their senses and surveil each other so that these precepts could be adhered to even more closely. In this way, Ignatius’ attempt to curtail the sensory world of his followers likens him to St. Carlo Borromeo, who endeavored to diminish sensual temptation for those entering the churches of Milan, as noted above. Perhaps this was a special requirement of saints for Bellarmine?

At the very least, there was a threat somewhat unique to Early Modern Catholicism that Bellarmine knew all too well: the threat of Protestant heresy. Just as chastity could be

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⁸⁰ “B. Pater non solum fuit in se diligentissimus custos castitatis, sed etiam providit suis, statuendo regulas: Primo de non colloquendo cum feminis sine teste; hoc enim peccatum non committitur nisi occultissime. Secondo de non tangendo, etiam honeste; hoc enim modo clauditur aditus ad tactum lascivum: quomodo Christus et sanctus Iacobus praeciipiunt, non iurare omnino, nimirum sine necessitate, ut longissime recedamus a periculio. Tertio de custodiendo sensu videndi….Facile est autem claudere oculos, antequam quis captus sit, vel certe non figere oculos. Non enim videre semel, sed figere oculos nocet.” Bellarmine, in OOP, “De Sancto Ignatio: Sermo I: Latine,” II: 294. The rule here refers to the Constitutions of the Society written largely by Ignatius. For more on this rule, see chapter two.
protected through custody of the senses so too could orthodoxy, “He closed his hearing to heresies, which is idolatry, in which Christians slip. For he bound himself and his men as much as he could to the Holy See, on which he knew that the true Church was founded. He ordered, that all of his…follow the doctrine of Saint Thomas, which was more approved.”

Proving Ignatius’s hyper orthodoxy was without a doubt one of the most pressing preoccupations to the early Jesuits seeking his canonization. Many aspects of Ignatius’s early life challenged that conception of him. After all, Ignatius had appeared before the Inquisition in Spain on numerous occasions, and some detractors associated his spiritual practices with “Erasmianism” or “Alumbradismo.” It is no wonder then that men like Robert Bellarmine and Pedro de Ribadeneyra stressed Ignatius’s orthodoxy in their writings and that the Jesuits sponsored images of Ignatius that communicated the same message. For example, the statue of Ignatius in St. Peter’s Basilica depicts Ignatius literally stomping on heretics, even though one finds very little about heresy in any of Ignatius’s writings. For Bellarmine, Ignatius’s orthodoxy depended on his ability to close his ears and filter out the many heresies that plagued Europe in his time.

While Bellarmine labored and the whole of the Society promoted the canonization of Ignatius, they were all also dedicated to the cause of several of their other brother Jesuits. The most personal of these for Bellarmine was that of Luigi Gonzaga, whom he knew and for whom he was a spiritual director. In that role he, commented on Luigi’s disposition


saying that Luigi was, “confirmed in grace” and that he “better understood the young St. Thomas Aquinas when considering the life of Luigi.” For a Roman Catholic cleric of the period, this comparison between Luigi and Thomas was indeed high praise. By the time, the very young Luigi died, fellow members of the Society of Jesus were already convinced of his sanctity and were promoting his cause for canonization. Ultimately, Pope Paul V formally beatified Luigi in 1605. The Jesuits wasted no time in promoting the permitted cult. As a new order the Society of Jesus needed canonized saints to solidify its own institutional status vis-à-vis the older religious orders. Cepari even asked Paul V for permission to use the title, “Blessed” in his biography of Luigi, which the pope granted.

The campaign for Luigi’s sainthood also spread to the domain of sermons. On the feast of Luigi Gonzaga in 1608, Robert Bellarmine extolled the virtues of his spiritual advisee, noting especially his call from God at a young age; “Another privilege was that the grace of chastity came to him, so that he was immune from all iniquity of the flesh and spirit; that is, not by his deed alone, but also in thought. Although there have been many virgins in the God’s Church, there have been at least as many of the chaste for a long time; nevertheless, I have not known any so free from the temptations of the flesh as this Blessed youth: perhaps others are not missing, but none are known to me. This proof is a true privilege, and it is far greater than any gift for resisting temptations might be.”

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83 Cepari, *Vita*, 183.

84 Miguel Gotor, *I Beati del Papa: Santità, Inquisizione e Obbedienza in età Moderna* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 2002), 216. This was before Ignatius (1609) of Loyola and Francis Xavier (1619), who were canonized together in 1622.

85 Gotor, *I Beati del Papa*, 209. This permission became necessary especially after the reforms of the canonization procedure with the foundation of the Congregation for Sacred Rites in 1588.

86 "Alterum privilegium fuit, quod ita fuit praeventus gratia castitatis, ut immunis fuerit ab omni inquinamento carnis et spiritus; idest, non solum opere, sed cogitatione. Et quamvis multi sint in Ecclesia Dei virgines,
of praise is nigh blasphemous as Bellarmine nearly proclaims that his protégé was sinless from his youth. This special grace notwithstanding, Luigi fastened himself to the model of his holy predecessors in self-abnegation:

For though he might have been powerful with the gift of extraordinary chastity, as we have said above: nevertheless he did not dare to expose himself to the least peril: and he was so rigid in castigating his body with fasting, and other penances, and indeed he might desire these remedies for restraining the enticements of the flesh; and he was so diligent in fleeing the sight and familiarity with women up to the point that he would not dare to look at his mother in the face.87

Luigi submitted himself to severe discomfort of the haptic sense, and of course maintained careful custody of his senses.

To Bellarmine, Luigi’s careful custody of his chastity coupled with his general disdain for the world proved him to be a true saint. Luigi’s intense indifference to the world opened him to greater spiritual possibilities. This is precisely why Bellarmine and the long chain of Christian thinkers before him hoped for in advocating the custody of the senses and perpetuating the mistrust of the body. It manifested itself in Luigi so strongly that when he was in prayer he was practically dead, "such that he could not sense anything in this world, not something happening in his room, if one entered or left.”88 In some ways, it is

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87 “Nam dum polleret tam insigni dono castitatis, ut supra diximus tamen non audebat ulli se periculo exponere; atque adeo rigidus erat in castigando corpore ieuniis et poenitentiiis caeteris, ac si his remediis ad comprimendos carnis stimuliis valde indigeret; et usque adeo diligens erat in fugiendo aspectu ac familiaritate muierum, ut ne matris quidem faciem intuitu auderet.” Bellarmine, in OOP, “In Festo Aloisii Gonzagae: Ad sepulchrum in ecclesia Colegii Romani,” II: 303-04.

88 “ut toto eo tempore non senserit, quid in cubiculo fieret, si quis introiret vel egredaretur.” Bellarmine, in OOP, “In Festo Aloisii Gonzagae: Ad sepulchrum in ecclesia Colegii Romani,” II: 304.
as if Bellarmine suggests that the true holiness is to be totally senseless to the world altogether.

Bellarmine’s sermons on the saints, and especially his sermon on Luigi Gonzaga, clearly became a model for how later Jesuits understood holiness as achieving heroic virtue through custody of the senses. Other preachers reiterated many of the themes and ideas espoused by Robert Bellarmine in his sermons on the saints. One sermon from the Jesuit Superior General, and longtime Apostolic preacher, Gian Paolo Oliva, indicates just how enduring and influential Bellarmine’s image of the ideal saint, Luigi Gonzaga, was to later generations of Jesuits. Oliva’s suggestions indicate that Bellarmine’s ideas were long-lived and that his sermons might have served as source texts for later generations of preachers.

Oliva delivered his sermon on Blessed Luigi to a group of young Jesuits in formation. Thus it stands to reason that Oliva offers his ideal picture of what a Jesuit should look like, that is to say, what it means to be a virtuous Jesuit. The resounding message is that the virtuous Jesuit will follow Luigi Gonzaga, the model of abstemiousness. In the first paragraph Oliva introduces his biblical pericope with its context, that is Christ speaking to his disciples. He claims that this phrase meant that the disciples would be able

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90 Mormando, Bernini, 166; for the original sermon text see Gian Paolo Oliva, “Sermone XXVII Nella Vigilia del Beato Luigi,” in Sermoni Domestici, (Venice: 1722) 1:316-323.
to live in public without human desires and earthly affections (Oliva, 28). Specifically, he adds that Luigi “did not wait to fight worldly wisdom within his own soul, but he always drove the world back with the holiness of his senses” (Oliva, 28). He then beseeches his listeners to take on the qualities of Luigi by avoiding the “sweet things of the world” such as perfumes, powders, and unguents and clinging to the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, which are the true heavenly fragrances. However even those who take the vows, he warns, can fall into the trap of sin (Oliva, 29).

Oliva then begins his attack on the sense of sight which leads to sin: “Like this he deludes himself, who, not denying his eyes any pomp and secular curiosity dreams of having to remove the heart from love of appearances (Oliva, 33).” He provides biblical authority as well by reiterating the story of the Fall (Genesis, 2). Specifically, he draws attention to Eve, who after seeing the fruit of the tree, took it (Oliva, 34). Oliva’s suggestion is that Eve’s sin, and thus the Fall of humankind, began with the sense of sight. Considering this, anyone is capable of falling victim to vice (Oliva, 35). For Oliva, Eve’s downfall began at the mere sight of the apple. In his view, once she saw the apple, she considered it in her intellect and with the prodding of the devil decided it was good for feeding and defied God (Oliva, 34). One momentary lapse of defense and an entire life of virtue can come crumbling down. Luigi, however, would not allow himself to be a victim

91 Citations reflect paragraph numbers, not page numbers.

92 “non aspettò di lottare nell'interno dell'anima con le suggestioni mondane, mà sempre risospinse da sè, con la santità de'sensi”

93 “delude se stesso, chi, non negando a'suoi occhi veruna pompa e curiosità secolare, sognà di dovere allontanar' il cuore dall'amore delle apparenze”

94 Emphasis added.
of vice. Following the proclamation of Bellarmine, Oliva adds that Luigi would not even look upon the face of his own mother (Oliva, 36)! In the peroration of his sermon, Oliva exhorts his audience to participate in an interrogation of Blessed Luigi’s body parts:

If you would ask the Eyes of Luigi, why do you not admire the crown of the Empress? Cant 2.5<sup>95</sup> he would respond, I languish with love. I deny myself the curiosity of one crown for in order not to undo in me the garland that I am weaving to Christ, with the contempt of every glory. If you asked his Tongue, why did you not speak either of the nobility of your ancestry, or of the grandness enjoyed and admired in its Court? He would say I languish with love. If with the Hand of the Blessed you asked, why did you not write to the Mother and other relatives? He would exclaim, I cannot, I languish with love. If finally you asked His Body, why did you go off to not enjoy in the spectacles not illicit, the Memory, why it might not remember how many relatives of his were Princes; if you asked his intellect the Intellect in which way did it not enjoy itself for a few minutes with worldly reflections? Each of them, would declare itself to be immobile, and shout, I languish with love. (Oliva, 41).<sup>96</sup>

Luigi emerges from this interrogation as the perfect image of abnegation of the senses. Oliva wants his Jesuit audience to know that Luigi, in every fiber of his being, did not submit to temptation by carefully guarding against the senses. Furthermore, Oliva wants his audience to internalize and adopt Luigi’s refrain, “I languish with love” (Oliva, 41). The questions, then, are not for Luigi who obviously avoided temptation of the senses, but for his audience. Oliva means to ask: Why do you not guard against your senses? Oliva’s theme of avoiding vice and embracing virtue reaches its apex in the real-life inspiring exemplar

<sup>95</sup> Song of Solomon 2:5

<sup>96</sup> Se domandaste all’Occhio di Luigi, perche non rimirasse la corona dell’Imperatrice? Cant. 2. 5. risponderebbe, AMORE LANGUEO. Negomi la curiosità di un diadema, per non isciorre in me la ghirlanda, che tesso à Cristo, col disprezzo d’ogni gloria. Se interrogaste la Lingua di lui, perche non parlassè ò della nobilità della sua stirpe, ò delle grandezze godute e rimirate nella Corte? direbbe Amore langureo. Se con la Mano del Beato vi querelaste, perche non iscrivesse alla Madre e a’ Parenti? esclamerrebbe, Non posso, Amore langureo. Se finalmente ricercaste il Corpo di Lui, perche non si auviasse [sic; avviasse?] à godere spettacoli non illeciti; la Memoria, come non si ricordasse, quanti fossero i Principi suoi fratelli; l’Intelletto, in qual guisa non si ricresse, per pochi minuti, con riflessioni di Mondo? ognun di essi si dichiarerebbe paralitico, e griderebbe, AMORE LANGUEO.
of Luigi. He employs his Lucan pericope a total of six times. His purpose is to equate Christ’s command to his disciples with the notion of being vigilant against temptation and use Luigi as an example of how to properly execute this caution. Oliva’s sermon on Luigi Gonzaga indicates how Bellarmine’s very ideas about the custody of the eyes and models were interpreted and employed by Jesuits, who followed him. The theme was all-important in the sensual culture of Baroque Rome.

III. The Saintly Senser

There remains one pivotal saint of the post-Tridentine period who has thus far gone unconsidered in this account, Robert Bellarmine himself. Bellarmine quickly became a subject for hagiographers after his death. His two principal biographers, Giacomo Fuligatti and Daniello Bartoli, rarely miss an opportunity to describe his holiness in terms of his application and custody of his senses. Furthermore, an English Jesuit, Edward Coffin (1570-1626), wrote a thanatography of Robert Bellarmine, which frequently describes how Bellarmine employed his senses even at the moment of his death. Even though Bellarmine was not keen on writing about himself, at the insistence of Superior General Muzio Vitelleschi, he recorded an autobiography that gestures to some of his holy sensory activities.

Living as a Holy Exemplar

97 See Giacomo Fuligatti, Vita del cardinale Roberto Bellarmino della compagnia di Gesù (Rome: Bartolomeo Zanetti, 1623); and Daniello Bartoli, Della vita di Roberto Cardinal Bellarmino arcivescovo di Capua della Compagnia di Gesù (Rome: Nicolò Angelo Tinassi, 1678). Where the issue of Bellarmine and the use of the senses is concerned Bartoli closely follows Fuligatti with hardly any emendations and very few editions. The most notable difference between the texts is the inclusion of several testimonials from Cardinals that knew Bellarmine.

98 For more on Bellarmine’s reluctance to write this autobiography, see Adriano Prosperi, La vocazione: storie di gesuiti tra Cinquecento e Seicento (Torino: Einaudi, 2016), ch. 1.
Perhaps it is best to examine Bellarmine’s sensory practices as he worded them himself. Given the brevity of his autobiography, he left very little specific or concrete examples of how he was a good practitioner of sensory custody and application, but there are some indications that he was thinking about the theme even in the context of his own life. Indeed, the text begins by welcoming the reader into the pious upbringing of his childhood. Bellarmine insists that he benefitted from a strong model of Christian excellence in his mother. In his words she, “was addicted to almsgiving, prayer, and contemplation, along with fasting and castigation of her body.” As with his saints, Bellarmine emphasized the holiness of his mother based on her ability to deny herself, but there was more to her virtue. Bellarmine also remembered her for cultivating good habits in her three sons including attending mass, making confessions, and remembering their prayers and devotions. In the prime years of his life, Bellarmine’s activity, as he recorded it, related mostly to preaching. In these instances, it is important to emphasize that giving good sermons was not only a virtuous sensory activity for the audience, but actually exhibited good use of the tongue, as an organ of the auditory sense, as well. Bellarmine’s fame as a preacher became so widespread that his very person became a sensory indulgence for his admirers. In fact, he managed to slip past crowds in Basel with the result that “many were very sad that they could not have seen him,” after “it was heard that [Bellarmine] was there.” Hearing, seeing, and even touching the preacher was praiseworthy sensuous activity. Bellarmine


101 Bellarmine, *Autobiography*, 34. Bellarmine adds: “whether they meant to do him harm or honor him is uncertain,” which no doubt reflects the fact that Basel was a Protestant city not noted for being kind to Catholics.
identifies his later days with the same types of rigor and holy austerity that he cherished in his own mother. He notes that even as a cardinal, he was sparing in his diet, abundant in prayer, meditation, and attending and saying mass, and careful not to accumulate wealth in preference for giving all his superfluous money to the poor.  

Giacomo Fuligatti confirms much of what Bellarmine had hoped to communicate about himself. He insists that from his youth, Bellarmine “heard mass with such great modesty,” and emphasizes his successful career in moving souls as a preacher, where he was both subject and object of appropriate sensuous practice. In one instance, when he was traveling from Florence, he stayed with Camaldolese monks. Fuligatti relates that the young Robert immediately impressed them with his virtue and that they “glimpsed so much spirit in his words that they desired to hear one of his sermons through every manner…and they listened not only with extraordinary attention, but what is more, with an excess of humility in order to attempt to kiss his hand with reverence, which he never permitted.”

In this anecdote, Fuligatti portrays the monks as virtuous observers of Bellarmine and his sanctity. They listen carefully to his sermon, but also cherish him so much that they even want to touch and kiss him. The depiction of Bellarmine also demonstrates profitable use of his senses by moving others to contemplate virtuous things with his sermon. That motif

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103 “l’uder messa contanta modestia” Fuligatti, *Vita Bellarmino*, 12.

104 “Restarono tanto presi quei buoni Padri da quella natura virtù dell’hospite giouane, e tiento spirito scorsero nelle parole di lui, che vullero per ogni maniera udire vn suo sermone…li quali non solo con istoradaria attenzione l’udirono: ma di più con ecesso d’humilità per riuerenza tentarono al fine di baciargli la mano: il che mai da luigli fu permesso” Fuligatti, *Vita Bellarmino*, 35.
is ubiquitous throughout these early lives, but especially while he preached in Louvain as related by Fuligatti.¹⁰⁵ According to one Brother Andrea Uvisse, who frequently had heard Bellarmine preach with such large audiences, that all of them could not be contained in the Church. And at that time, he was so well known in England and in Holland that many Heretics came to hear his preaching and were astonished by the many arguments of Catholic truth, that they were converted. Finally [Uvisse] affirms that he had seen Bellarmine’s face in the pulpit in the guise of an Angel, and just as that of Saint Stephen resplendent.¹⁰⁶

To the Early Modern Catholic audience there could hardly have been a better model for giving a good sermon. His words were so holy and efficacious, that he could convert Protestants to Catholicism, and he was even transfigured before the eyes of his audience.

Not only was Bellarmine’s preaching from the pulpit occasion for transformative experiences, but his words, presence and personal piety were equally efficacious. He was careful in his speech such that “nothing was heard from his mouth, that could have offended anyone whoever he might be, instead he always spoke well of any person.”¹⁰⁷ Furthermore, Fuligatti marks his conversation as “a gift proper to saints, and very perfect, insofar as it could beget sensible devotion in souls.”¹⁰⁸ What precisely sensible devotion means is worth unpacking. Lorenzo Scupoli, one of the most significant spiritual writers and a near-exact contemporary of Bellarmine’s suggests that sensible devotion (sensibile divotione) is a

¹⁰⁵ For more on Bellarmine’s preaching see chapters 3, 4, and 9 in Bartoli’s Vita.

¹⁰⁶ “aggiunge d’haver udito il Bellarmino predicar in Lovanio con frequenza sì grande di auditorio, che tutto non lo poteva capir la Chiesa; e che in quel tempo era publica fama come d’Inghilterra, e d’Olanda venivano molti Heretici per udir le sue prediche, restando vari persuasi della verità cattolica, che si convertivano. E finalmente afferma di haver vista sul pulpito la faccia di lui à guisa di Angelo, e come quella di S. Stefano resplendente” Fuligatti, Vita Bellarmino, 42-43.

¹⁰⁷ Fuligatti, Vita Bellarmino, 120.

¹⁰⁸ Fuligatti, Vita Bellarmino, 259.
form of “sensible pleasure” that derives from service to God, works of piety, prayer and meditation. In Ignatian terminology, sensible devotion is consolation, and the opposite of spiritual dryness (aridità) or desolation. Of course, he warns that sensible devotion or pleasure is not an end in itself, nor should one pursue it, but only that it may be a grace from God. In fact, Fuligatti clarifies that while Bellarmine attempted to unite himself to God in prayer and at mass, he was indifferent to feeling “sensible devotion.”

Given a long life of fasting, mortification, and general sensory deprivation it is no surprise that Bellarmine did not prioritize the gifts of sensible pleasure even in his prayer life. Recording one somewhat amusing anecdote, Fuligatti describes Bellarmine’s lodgings at the Roman College when he returned at the request of Clement VIII to compose a treatise on indulgences. Despite Clement’s requests for a good room with convenient library access, Robert “was placed in a narrow room, without books, and even worse, almost uninhabitable, due to an intolerable stench.” In response, no one heard a word of complaint nor any sign of displeasure from Bellarmine. Perhaps Fuligatti was subtly encouraging men who joined the Society not to grumble too much about their own rooms by offering the example of their holy predecessor. In any case, Bellarmine’s humility and ability to endure sensory suffering were on full display. His other feats of asceticism, especially involving fasting were similar commonplace additions to his hagiographers.

109 “gusti sensibili” Lorenzo Scupoli, *Combattimento Spirituale* (Paris: Gottifredo Marcher, 1659), 4. For more on Scupoli and his thoughts on the role of the senses in the spiritual life see chapter two.

110 Scupoli, *Combattimento Spirituale*, 313. He warns that sensible devotion may also come from one’s own nature or from the devil. When the pleasure is pursued for itself and not for closer unity to God, then it is likely from the devil.


112 Fuligatti, *Vita Bellarmino*, 120.
Even from his youth he was austere, castigating his body “with many extraordinary fasts and flagellating his body with other brutalities.” Later in life he maintained his youthful exuberance for fasting with strict dietary regulation. On Mondays he ate only eggs, while he fasted with Lenten rigor on Wednesdays, Fridays, Saturdays, and during Advent, that is, until his confessor forced him to limit this practice to one day a week in his final years. It was his “primary care and principal concern to guard the custody of his very heart precisely,” and he found inspiration and motivation for doing so in the lives of the saints. When maintaining these rigors seemed difficult he consoled himself by contemplating on the lives of martyrs and reading spiritual books.

The other aspect of his sanctity and regulation of his senses that was so impressive to his contemporaries was the maintenance of his virginity, which Fuligatti describes as both a “ray of celestial purity” and “superhuman.” Cardinal Crescentio testified that “[Bellarmine] told me that he had never experienced anything sensual in his life.” Maintaining his virginity in that way required the most “cautious and guarded exercise in

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113 Fuligatti, *Vita Bellarmino*, 6. It is important to note that these austerities would have displeased Ignatius, who advocated for a more moderate approach to mortification. It seems that later Jesuit hagiographers were unable to comprehend the golden mean of mortification expressed by Ignatius in his theory of mediocritas. On the other hand, in the decades following the death of Ignatius, many Jesuits seem to have valorized traditional rigorous penitential practices and mortifications.

114 Fuligatti, *Vita Bellarmino*, 140-141.

115 “La sua prima cura, e principale sollecitudine fu di vegliare alla custodia del proprio cuore con ogni esattezza” Fuligatti,” *Vita Bellarmino*, 85.

116 Fuligatti, *Vita Bellarmino*, 141.

117 “raggio di purità” and “soprahumana” Fuligatti, *Vita Bellarmino*, 264.

118 “mi disse un giorno, che non haveva mai provato dilettatione alcuna sensuale in vita sua,” in Fuligatti, *Vita Bellarmino*, 266.
the use of the senses of his body.”

Indeed, the caution that Bellarmine exercised expressed itself in some ways that seem excessive or perhaps even a little surprising. When he was a student and newly ordained priest at Louvain, he avoided hearing confessions of women, and insisted that he could only hear the confessions of theology students, who confessed in Latin. He endeavored to avoid hearing confessions that might touch on “some matter of sensuality.” Despite his best efforts, he did on occasion hear the confessions of women, and in those instances he “was observed…with his eyes modestly cast down to the ground.” What is more, in the event that confessions pertained to sexual activities, he was known to blush revealing how those subjects offended his chaste ears. Outside of the confessor’s office, Bellarmine defended himself against other sensory temptations to chastity. According to a story recorded by the Jesuit hagiographer Daniello Bartoli:

[Bellarmine] visiting a great ecclesiastic person during the winter season, and it was particularly cold in when entering into the rooms, he saw above their doors paintings, with nude figures, but he was silent: however after leaving accompanied

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119 “E nondimeno, a questa sua stessa carne innocente haver egli fatti così rigidi trattamenti, e si avverduto e guardingo essercito nell’ usare I sensi del corpo, che sembravan rimedio per necessità che ne havesse, quelle asprezzze, ch'eran preservativi per non venir mai ad averne bisogno” Bartoli, Vita Bellarmino, 343.

120 Fuligatti, Vita Bellarmino, 269. While it is true that one of the earliest Jesuit ministries was to prostitutes, there proximity to women in ministries was sometimes the cause of scandal. It is very possible that Fuligatti, even decades after the founding of the Society of Jesus was working to defend the Jesuit reputation on this front. For more on the first Jesuit ministry to prostitutes see Lance Lazar, Working in the Vineyards of the Lord: Jesuit Confraternities in Early Modern Italy (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2005). See Also Jorge Emmanuel Soria, “Prostitución reglamentada y las congregaciones jesuíticas,” Actas y comunicaciones del Instituto de Historia Antigua y Medieval, 13 (2018): 54-64.


122 “fu osservato…e con gl’occhi modestatamente abbassati in terra,” Fuligatti, Vita Bellarmino, 269.

123 “hora con la verginal erubescenza del volto, hora con segnarsi, e raccapricciarsi tutto, palesò quanto offendessero le sue caste orrechie quei ragionamenti,” Fuligatti, Vita Bellarmino, 270.
by that same ecclesiastic, when he was in the rooms with the paintings, My Lord, he said, there are some poor people, that are asking for alms from you. That one responded, very gladly would I give it to them, but where are they? So, Cardinal Bellarmine pointed to the nude figures, behold, he said, My Lord, now it is cold, and these ones are naked, it befits Your Illustriousness to command that they may be dressed and well clothed.124

Bellarmine was as careful to guard his senses and those of others with inanimate objects as he was with other people. These hagiographies confirm that his life was worth imitating for the faithful, who benefitted from his example such that “the odor of his innocent life being filled with every sort of virtue spread throughout the world.”125

_Dying as a Holy Exemplar_

Bellarmine made every effort to practice what he preached by living by his ideals for holy saints and bishops. This was even more true in the example he left in dying well, as described by Edward Coffin. In short, he exemplified many of the virtues he possessed in living as he was dying. Though he was no longer preaching from the pulpit, Coffin stresses how the actions of his final days together comprised his last sermon: “examples are of more force to move then words, and more effectuall it is to teach with reall actions than verball discourse; therefore unto the doctrine of the Cardinall in this behalf I will adione his Example, that the one may confirme the other.”126 The actions mentioned specify how the Jesuit prepared himself for death at the level of his senses.

124 “Visitando egli un gran personaggio ecclesiastico in tempo d’inverno, e di gran freddo all’entrar nelle stanze, vide sopra le loro porte quadri con figure ignude, e tacque: ma dipoi uscendo accompagnato da quel personaggio, poiché fu alle stanze de’ quadri, Signor, gli disse, son qui alcuni poveri, che da lei demandano una Limosino. Quegli rispose, Molto volentieri e dove sono? Allora il Cardinal Bellarmino mostrandogli quelle figure, Eccoli, disse, Signore, adesso fa freddo, e queste figure sono ignude: conviene che V. S. Illustrismus comando che siano vestiti e ben coperte,” in Bartoli, _Vita Bellarmino_, 350. For more on the significance of this story, and its relation to Catholic art see chapter four.

125 Fuligatti, _Vita Bellarmino_, 1.

126 Edward Coffin, _A True Relation of the Last Sickness and Death of Cardinal Bellarmine Who dyed in Rome the seventeenth day of September 1621. And of such things as have happened in, or since his Buriall_ (Saint-Omer, 1622).
Although, Bellarmine began his *Art of Dying* with the insistence that the first rule of dying well was living well, most of his text concerned itself with the final preparations for death.\textsuperscript{127} Above all, he impresses upon the reader that preparing for death requires time, and meditation, it is a lifelong pursuit and all-encompassing obsession. For that reason, he entreated Gregory XV to permit him leave from all his offices within the Church in his last sickness, which included his absence from the papal court as well as the consistories and congregations he either belonged to or administrated. To bolster his cause Bellarmine cited “his great Age, and that which followes thereof, his weaknes of body, decay of sight, hearing, & memory…and finally his fervent desire of returning againe to the quiet haven of religion.”\textsuperscript{128} The faltering of his senses was evident to visitors, who were forced to speak loudly so that the Cardinal could hear them.\textsuperscript{129} The weakening became all the more pronounced in his final moments as fevers intermittently “bereaved him of his senses” altogether.\textsuperscript{130}

Nevertheless, he enjoyed the ability to employ his senses enough such that he was able to model their appropriate use at the time of death. He was able to make his final confession, and “all his recreation was to heare the lives of Saintes read unto him, especially of Bishops, and above all of S. Francis, and in the hearing their rare and eminent vertues, he would always weep and sigh after that perfection of life to which they had so happily arrived.”\textsuperscript{131} He also urged his companions to read to him accounts of Carlo

\textsuperscript{127} Bellarmine, *Art of Dying*, 1.

\textsuperscript{128} Coffin, *Sickness and Death of Bellarmine*, 3-4.

\textsuperscript{129} Coffin, *Sickness and Death of Bellarmine*, 18.

\textsuperscript{130} Coffin, *Sickness and Death of Bellarmine*, 9.

\textsuperscript{131} Coffin, *Sickness and Death of Bellarmine*, 14.
Borromeo’s death. His hearing benefitted in giving him holy examples to follow as well as moving him to compunction and sorrow for his sins. Bellarmine also insisted on receiving the sacrament of extreme unction when he found himself “in his perfect senses,” and he answered “Amen, with great compunction of [e]art at e[a]ch several unction.” As per the rite of extreme unction, each of Bellarmine’s sense organs was anointed in an effort to remit the sins committed through it.

In addition to the customary sacramental activities related to dying, Bellarmine practiced typical Catholic devotions in his final days. On his deathbed, he held a small cross, and he “kissed it very often, and blessed himself divers times,” and he had a larger cross “which had the picture of our Saviors body fixed theron” by his bedside, which “he did oftentimes very devoutly kiss…a little after he layed it on his eyes, and taking it from thence he layed it on his left shoulder, imbracing it very hard between both his armes.”

For the onlookers these actions were a testament to Bellarmine’s strong devotional life as much a profession of his faith to show “the reverence he bare unto holy images.” Furthermore, as his final will and testament indicates, among his very few possessions were holy images and crosses. He bestowed to his nephew, Angelo, a picture of Robert de Nobili (a predecessor of his in the cardinalate from Montepulciano), an image of Carlo Borromeo (one of the most important saints of the Counter-Reformation Church), and a cross that he wore around his neck with relics.

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132 Coffin, *Sickness and Death of Bellarmine*, 30.

133 Coffin, *Sickness and Death of Bellarmine*, 32.


135 Coffin, *Sickness and Death of Bellarmine*, 59.

136 Coffin, *Sickness and Death of Bellarmine*, 98.
cross with precious relics. Keeping and using these for devotion were important to him. While he used what power was left to his sense of sight and touch to display his reverence to the Cross and Christian images, he also maintained his abstemious practices, especially as they related to food, as Coffin relates: “he had not only a great repugnance and aversion from eating, but a great loathing and horror to see anything brought him.”

Some of the most enduring scenes from his deathbed depict how he became the object of the sensuous devotion to others, much as in his life as a preacher. In one respect, he became a model for others to behold as Cardinal Girolamo Farnese said, “[I] will put Bellarmine before [my] eyes as an example of most worthy imitation.” Many approached his deathbed, “not only to see him but to kisse his hands, his head, or some other thing about him; & when therin they had satisfied their devotion, they would touch his body with their books, their beads, handkerchiefs, Crosses, Medalles and other like things…” This was, according to Coffin, especially true of Cardinals, who visited him and took “him by the hand kissed the same, & then touched his eyes and head.” Finally, after his death his body was publicly displayed for faithful people to reverence, and many people came “not…to gaze, & see the pompe of the funerals…but to see as they called him the Saint…as if already he had beene canonized…” So many came to practice their devotions that they

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137 Coffin, *Sickness and Death of Bellarmine*, 100.
138 Coffin, *Sickness and Death of Bellarmine*, 142.
139 “come un esemplare degnissimo d’imitatione” Coffin, *Sickness and Death of Bellarmine*, 44.
140 Coffin, *Sickness and Death of Bellarmine*, 39.
141 Coffin, *Sickness and Death of Bellarmine*, 39.
142 Coffin, *Sickness and Death of Bellarmine*, 65-66. The concession that Bellarmine had not yet been canonized was a crucial one as the regulation of veneration and cults to holy people, who had not yet been canonized became stricter in the decades following the Council of Trent.
allegedly wearied Bellarmine’s attendants who raised their rosary beads to his body on the visitors’ behalf. In the end of his life, after decades of preaching and writing about practicing Christian virtue Bellarmine proved he could display the same ideals that he cherished. Not only did he practice what he preached, but he became like the saints that he so admired, an object of Catholicism’s sensuous devotional practices.

**IV. The Blessed and the Senses**

By examining the senses in these saints’ lives it became clear that the bedrock for their holiness depended on how they fruitfully applied their senses, especially for the benefit of others as in preaching, and how they denied their senses. Self-abnegation and custody of the senses in particular distinguished the holiest of saints from the rest. Saintly heroism was self-denial. Fasting, self-flagellation, and an abundance of caution for admitting the content of sight and sound through the senses might seem severe, or fanatical, but to the audiences concerned it was fundamental. The promise of reward, in the form of heavenly eternal salvation, mitigated the discomfort of these abstemious practices. As Bellarmine put it himself, “perfect renunciation of all that a man possesses or desires to possess, this abnegation of oneself in order to serve God alone, this is the true price of Paradise.” It was, as Catholic authors expressed, a price well worth the reward. Bellarmine, and others described that reward in sensuous terms, but also explained how heaven would satisfy the

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143 Coffin, *Sickness and Death of Bellarmine*, 66.
144 Brad Gregory persuasively argues that it is easy today to lose sight about how important these issues of religion were to people. As he emphasizes, men and women were willing to die, sometimes in gruesome ways over it. See: Brad S. Gregory, *Salvation at Stake: Christian Martyrdom in early modern Europe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).
senses. In many ways, Bellarmine was merely an inheritor of that tradition, which was most memorably explored in verse by Dante Alighieri’s *Divine Comedy*.

Dante’s voyage or otherworldly pilgrimage through the realms of the afterlife relies on sensory language and metaphors to describe what the pilgrim witnesses in the afterlife. Paradise, is the ultimate place of sensory delight as the blessed benefit from the enhancement of the senses, or as Dante puts it, “Much is permitted there that is not permitted to our faculties here…”146 With the augmentation of sight, Dante immediately beholds the sun in a way that humans on earth cannot without damaging their eyes.147 So the glorious visions continue through the *canti* of the *Paradiso*, until the Pilgrim witnesses the ultimate “miraculous sight” by seeing the very being of God as “the Love that moves the sun and other stars.”148 The blessed souls of heaven continuously chant. In Venus the Pilgrim rejoices in hearing the “‘Hosanna’ sounded, such that I have never been without the yearning to hear it again.”149 From the assault on the senses in Hell, the Pilgrim rose to a place of sensory satisfaction and harmony in Heaven.

Robert Bellarmine’s imagining of what awaits the blessed souls of pious saints is perhaps even more sensorially pleasing than Dante’s ideas. Bellarmine does not detail Heaven and its intricacies so much as insist on the joys souls will experience there. The distinction may be explained by their different goals. Bellarmine’s exclusive aim was to move his audience to yearn for heaven. The promise of Heaven’s sensory delight would be

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the carrot to cajole the horse. This is precisely how he imagines Paradise in his On the Eternal Happiness of the Saints.

Not only does Bellarmine describe heaven in sensory detail, but he also treats directly with each sense as they exist among the blessed. He claims that heaven, as the “house of the saints,” is so resplendent such that “not only are the interior ornaments so very expensive, but indeed the exteriors of such edifices are marvelous to behold…”\(^{150}\) He insists that the composition of heaven permits unlimited sensory pleasure because, unlike earth, Heaven is infinite.\(^{151}\) He also explains the metaphor of the ‘heavenly banquet’ which he argues “connotes delight and pleasure, unless one should wish to deny that there is some pleasure associated with the sense of taste.”\(^{152}\) Yet, he describes the food of heaven as being “scanty” consisting of only “the fruit of one tree to eat and river water to drink,” which is a marked departure from foods “enjoyed in this earthly pilgrimage” which “are more varied and appetizing.”\(^{153}\) For those discouraged by the supposed lack of gustatory delight, Bellarmine reminds them that Adam’s food in Eden was similarly limited, “and yet those fruits, greens, and water were better than all the edibles and all the wines of this life; but far, far inferior are they to the fruit of the tree of life and the living waters of the celestial Paradise.”\(^{154}\) These comments underscore Bellarmine’s purpose, to appeal to the senses and thus encourage his reader to yearn for heaven, “Thus it seems appropriate for

\(^{150}\) Bellarmine, On the Eternal Happiness, 121.

\(^{151}\) Bellarmine, On the Eternal Happiness, 161.

\(^{152}\) Bellarmine, On the Eternal Happiness, 158.

\(^{153}\) Bellarmine, On the Eternal Happiness, 98.

\(^{154}\) Bellarmine, On the Eternal Happiness, 99.
me to take this occasion to expatiate on the delights and pleasures that the blessed souls enjoy in heaven. Unless I am mistaken, such contemplation will serve to stir up our souls to seek and reflect upon the things that lie above, so that we should so direct our lives that when it comes time to leave this world, we do not journey toward sorrows and darkness but instead, aided by God, toward light and eternal happiness.” 155 By defining Heaven in terms that denote its great capacity to please the senses without temptation, Bellarmine establishes a foundation upon which to discuss the joy of each particular sense.

Where sight and hearing are concerned, Bellarmine is largely indebted to Dante, offering few new delights for the eyes and ears. The eyes Bellarmine maintains, consistent with the Aristotelian tradition, are the “nobles of our corporeal senses,” and that in “the heavenly fatherland our vision will take great pleasure in beholding the splendor and beauty of one’s own body.” 156 He insists that each body will be as bright as the sun and adds that God will strengthen the “flesh of the eye beyond suffering so all that brilliance won’t hurt the eyes.” 157 Therefore, not only do the eyes rejoice in what they see, but also in a newfound strength and vigor. The brightness of the all the bodies of the angels, and especially of the saints, Jesus, and Mary will extinguish the need for other sources of light such as the sun, moon, lamps, or candles. One can imagine how Bellarmine, who must have worked frequently by dim candlelight, reveled in the idea of constant and strong light sources. All

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155 Bellarmine, On the Eternal Happiness, 157. For more on Bellarmine’s strategy of applying, using, and appealing to the senses for spiritual benefit see chapter 2.

156 Bellarmine, On the Eternal Happiness, 170.

157 Bellarmine, On the Eternal Happiness, 170. This echoes Dante precisely, “so this brightness that encircles us will be surpassed in appearance by the flesh that today is covered up by earth, nor can so much light weary us, for the organs of our body will be strong enough for whatever can delight us.” See: Alighieri, Paradiso, XIV, 55-60.
these visual pleasures would pale in comparison to seeing God face to face, which Bellarmine describes as the “first joy of the blessed.”\(^{158}\) Bellarmine promises that the martyrs too will not only shine, but they will be adorned with special radiance where they experienced torture. Perhaps this is one more plea to encourage his readers to embrace hardships, mortifications, and even martyrdom. The final visual joy that Bellarmine describes, will be difficult for modern audiences to appreciate. He insists that the blessed “will experience pleasurable sensations of joy,” as “we witness the awful deeds and torments of the damned.”\(^{159}\) One could understand being grateful for not being subjected to the pains of Hell, but to actually take pleasure in the pain of others seems a rather sadistic pleasure to modern audiences; nevertheless, it had many precedents, most notably in Augustine.\(^{160}\)

The joys Bellarmine expects exist for the auditory sense in heaven are less troubling. First, he maintains that “the sense of hearing and the vocal apparatus will find their place in the kingdom of heaven.”\(^{161}\) These joys consist primarily, as Dante suggested, in the songs of the heavenly choir that exclaim the Alleluia and sing “praise of God, but perhaps also of the saints, martyrs, and confessors.”\(^{162}\) These songs, will be better than any sound heard on earth because the singers will be better trained. To illustrate his point, he


\(^{159}\) Bellarmine, *On the Eternal Happiness*, 163.


\(^{161}\) Bellarmine, *On the Eternal Happiness*, 172. Note again how the vocal apparatus, that is speaking, is related to or part of the sense of hearing, underscoring how good speech, as in giving a sermon, is absolutely related to the appropriate practice of hearing.

cites a passage from Bonaventure’s life of St. Francis, who swooned at the sound of one note being plucked by an angel. He requests that his reader imagine how much more glorious a whole choir of musically trained angels might be. In this, he seems to reiterate Dante as well, who experiences the song of the heavenly choir in rapture “I heard along the cross a melody that ravished me, though I could not grasp the hymn. Well did I perceive that it was of high praise, for ‘Arise’ and ‘Conquer’ came to me, as to one who does not understand, although he hears.”

On the remaining senses Bellarmine claims that lack of scriptural revelation restricts him to one hypothesis, which is: “There will be little to say about the other senses, not because they are devoid of their own distinctive pleasures, but because the Holy Scriptures have not revealed to us what these pleasures are to be like.” Nevertheless, and perhaps unsurprisingly, Bellarmine finds arguments for the pleasures of each remaining sense. For smell, he alludes to the saints who “emitted the sweetest odor, one that no one had earlier perceived,” after they died, and cites St. Jerome and Gregory the Great, who described this phenomenon as it related to St. Hilary and St. Servulus. With the attestation of these authorities, Bellarmine concludes that “we can infer that if the bodies of the deceased saints exude a pleasant odor after the glorification of their souls, then all the more will living and glorified bodies emit the most agreeable fragrance.”

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163 Bellarmine, On the Eternal Happiness, 172-173.

164 Alighieri, Paradiso, XIV, 121-126.

165 Bellarmine, On the Eternal Happiness, 174.

166 Bellarmine, On the Eternal Happiness, 174.

taste, he seems to contradict, at least to some degree, his earlier suggestions regarding the “heavenly banquet” and “tree of life,” by suggesting that “the blessed will ingest no mortal foods.”\textsuperscript{168} Still, he says that “they will nevertheless derive some sort of delight from their sense of taste, so that it will not seem unnecessary.”\textsuperscript{169} He runs into similar problems with the sense of touch holding that the blessed will have a sense of touch, since glorified bodies can be touched, but also suggesting that bodies will no longer experience “a concupiscent craving for sexual pleasure.”\textsuperscript{170} The position is perhaps not surprising from a lifelong celibate champion of virginity, and neither is Bellarmine’s idea of tactile pleasure, which he proposes relates to perfect health and a lack of affliction as well the ability to move “with extreme rapidity from place to place and to pass through solid matter…and just as the haptic sense is uncomfortable and suffers pain when the heavy mortal body must climb somewhere higher or run rapidly from one place to another, on the contrary, it will feel pleasure and joy when it scales heights without fatigue or exertion or races most swiftly from here to there.”\textsuperscript{171} These criteria for tactile bliss likely reflect Bellarmine’s personal bodily experience. He was, after all, frequently sick, and his frailty, even as a young man, precluded him from traveling. It is understandable that he pined for a body without sickness and pain that would delight in the ability to move rapidly.

In \textit{On the Eternal Happiness}, Bellarmine specifically urges the reader to engage in a composition of place using a sense-by-sense account of what awaits the soul in heaven.

\textsuperscript{168} Bellarmine, \textit{On the Eternal Happiness}, 175.

\textsuperscript{169} Bellarmine, \textit{On the Eternal Happiness}, 175.

\textsuperscript{170} Bellarmine, \textit{On the Eternal Happiness}, 175-176.

\textsuperscript{171} Bellarmine, \textit{On the Eternal Happiness}, 176-177.
While the whole treatise engages the senses to inspire the reader to desire heaven, in this section Bellarmine systematically targets each sense individually. Not only does his reflection require the audience to apply their senses, but it also incites their desire to reach paradise for the perfect sensuous pleasure. He both engages the senses and appeals to the reader using them in this imaginative contemplation of heaven. Bellarmine concludes his description of the delights of heaven, by returning to the theme ever present in his writings and sermons: maintain custody of the senses, practice self-abnegation because the eternal glory is worth it, “Under these conditions, I still securely maintain that the advantages of the celestial Paradise alone by far outweigh those of this world and the terrestrial Paradise all grouped together. I arrive at this conclusion because all those highly desirable advantages are still incapable of filling the human soul or satisfying its desire; for the heart of man is capable of receiving infinite good, and all that is earthly is finite.” 172

For those who remain unmoved, Bellarmine urges them to consider the martyrs rhetorically asking them if “they joyfully purchased Paradise by the many and most bitter tortures they endured, and ask they holy confessors if they cheerfully purchased Paradise by the many vigils, fasts, prayers, alms, and persecutions, surely all of they would cry out with the Apostle, The sufferings of this time are not worthy to be compared with the glory to come, that shall be revealed in us.”173 For Bellarmine, the joys of heaven far outweighed simple suffering on earth. Yet, despite his best efforts and those of dozens of spiritual authors and preachers throughout the centuries, some always remain unconvinced.

V. Sinners and the Wanton Use of the Senses

172 Bellarmine, On the Eternal Happiness, 184.

173 Bellarmine, On the Eternal Happiness, 187. Note that the Apostle is Paul, and the passage is Romans 8:18.
If Robert Bellarmine was wont to present the joys of heaven that rewarded the saints, then he also drew upon the examples of sinners, and their punishments, to illustrate the importance of good custody of the senses. In his writings, Bellarmine frequently highlights the transgressions of important and famous political figures to highlight the disasters that befell them and their kingdoms when they relaxed the careful custody of their senses and fell to sins, especially lust. The similarities between these passages and the sinners of Dante’s fifth canto in the *Inferno* are impossible to ignore. Dante’s lusty sinners, Semiramis, Cleopatra, and others, are all infamous queens, whose lust precipitated the decline of their society. Semiramis, the Babylonian Queen that entered into an incestuous relationship her son “che libito fè licito in sua legge,” meaning she legalized incest in Babylon to legitimize her despicable affair. Likewise, Cleopatra’s relationship with Mark Antony brought the Roman civil wars to Egypt, effectively ending her reign and life by her suicide. Through these examples, Dante clarifies that the repercussions of all sins, including those of incontinence, befall not only the sinner, but others as well.

Bellarmine takes Dante’s cue when he refers to sinners in his sermons. Like Dante, Bellarmine finds fault blames rulers, who plagued their kingdom by succumbing to their lusts, which in turn “begets many sins.” The causes of falling to lust are, “wantonness of the eyes, hearing of obscenities, speaking obscene words, dishonest touch and similar things.” Bellarmine differs from Dante in that his sinners, David, Holofernes, the Elders

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from the story of Susannah and the Elders, Solomon, Henry VIII, and Emmanuel Philibert of Savoy, are all mere men. Yet, their sins have the same power to bring down the whole social order. Another important distinction is that Bellarmine tends to detail or at least allude to the punishment and tragedies that befall these men on earth, in addition to their divine punishment. Bellarmine reminds his hearers that David and the others succumbed to temptation from their sight “was captured by seeing…as was Holofernes…as were those elders of Susanna.” In the first case, David’s lust for Bathsheba incited him to order the death of her husband Uriah the Hittite, one of his soldiers, and earned him God’s anger, which manifested itself by the death of his first son born to Bathsheba. David’s son Solomon found himself similarly captured by lust to the degree that he supposedly took seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines. For this, as Bellarmine reminds the reader by citing Augustine and Gregory the Great, he was repudiated by God. Perhaps the most damning connection here is how Bellarmine compares Solomon’s misdeed to the “kings of the Turks and the Persians, of the Chinese and the Tatars, who possess vast realms and, captivated as they are by the pleasures of the flesh, deny their hearts, their eyes, their ears, their gullets, or their libido nothing that they crave.”

177 For fear of being too repetitive I do not include Bellarmine’s commentary and analysis on the Elders (for more on this story see chapter 2). Solomon, see OOP, “De Divitiis”, VI: 54-55, or Emmanuel Philibert, see OOP “De Matrimonio Mixto” VIII: 292.

178 “Primum cogitare quot poenas habet in hoc mundo…Secundo cogitare quam graviter Deus punit,” in OOP, “De Luxuria et Castitate” VIII: 135. In the case of punishments for lust in this world, Bellarmine refers to the example of David and Solomon.

179 “David videndo captus est…sic Holofernes…sic illi senes Susannae”, in OOP, “De Sancto Ignatio” II: 294. For more on David and Bathsheba and Susannah and the Elders, see chapter 2.

180 Bellarmine, On the Eternal Happiness, 178.

181 Bellarmine, On the Eternal Happiness, 178. Note that like much of the content in his spiritual writings, Bellarmine’s source for this material came from a sermon see, for example: OOP, “Beati Pauperes” VI: 54-55.
For Holofernes and the Assyrians, lust was also their undoing. “Caught by his eyes,” Holofernes permitted Judith access to him and his camp, where she cajoled him into inebriating himself and beheaded him.¹⁸² When the Assyrians found Holofernes’s decapitated body and discovered Judith’s plot, they abandoned their campaign against the Hebrews and fled.¹⁸³ His wantonness undermined his entire political and military campaign. In an example more pressing to his contemporaries, Bellarmine likens Henry VIII’s marriage to Anne Boleyn to “King Ahab who having been inflamed with lust by Jezebel persecuted Elijah, adorned idols and stones, and nurtured false prophets…”¹⁸⁴ To Bellarmine, Henry’s lust for Anne was the “origin of depraved heresy in England.”¹⁸⁵ Bellarmine’s short compilation of sinners, whose disregard for custody of the eyes, nourished their lust, deteriorated their power, and in some cases, won them divine punishment on earth.

Henry was not the only contemporary, or recent figure to earn Bellarmine’s ire. His lengthy career as a controversial theologian, which began during his theological studies at Louvain, gave him unparalleled familiarity with many, if not all major Reformation thinkers of his time. Yet he directed most of his writings and comments at John Calvin and especially Martin Luther. These figures were sinners in Bellarmine’s eyes as a result of their heretical theological, liturgical, and spiritual positions, but also on their unorthodox moral teachings. In his view, their theological and moral failings were mutually dependent.

¹⁸² Judith 10:17, 13.
¹⁸³ Judith 14.
¹⁸⁴ “Achab rex a lesabele inflammatus Eliam persecutus est, idola, et lapides coluit, flasos prohpetas fovit,” in OOP, “De Matrimonio Mixto” VIII, 292
He decries all heresiarchs throughout history as “bad men: all of us know this, since the
dregs of the Christian world, men who are apostates, blood-thirsty, violent, ambitious and
sensual have defected to them.” In Luther’s case the license he extended to his senses,
according to Bellarmine, mostly referred to the tongue. First and foremost, for preaching
heresy, but also for his proclivity for profanity: “Luther could not speak, without at almost
every third word calling others pigs, asses, devils, dung, excrement, so that his breast like
rotten bilge-water or an unclean toilet seemed to be able to breathe forth nothing but
dreadful bad smells. Therefore some have rightly determined to call Luther the prophet of
dung.” Here, Bellarmine conflates the olfactory and auditory sense to underscore his
point. Yet, the tongue is a peculiar organ, in that it has auditory, haptic, olfactory, and even
gustatory elements. It was Luther’s reputation for gustatory indulgence that most excited
his Catholic opponents. Bellarmine did not prove to be an exception:

while he was living, besides many other things, at each lunch and dinner he
drank a pint of sweet and exotic wine: there was this in addition to beer and
other kinds of wine. He did this willingly, except that he was not sick but for a
few hours, and with his mouth contorted and one whole side black he died.
Was it not a great miracle, that in the coldest weather, when bodies usually
remain intact for whole months that his body on the fourth or fifth day emitted
an unbearable bad odor, although it had been carefully enclosed in a
metal casket? Luther sinned by pleasing his sense of taste, indulging in food and drink. In Bellarmine’s
telling by participating in these delights Luther was punished by a sickness that led to his
death, and damnation indicated by the bad odor his body released. The bad odor of the
sinner, wafted in stark contrast to the sweet-smelling corpses of saints.

186 In Bellarmine, SRB, III: 99.
187 In Bellarmine, SRB, III: 73.
188 In Bellarmine, SRB, III: 59.
The Torments of Purgatory and Hell

Just as the abstemious custodians of their senses were rewarded so too would the sinners, who pursued the pleasure of the sense, be punished. The afterlife presents two places of punishment: Purgatory and Hell. On the one hand, Purgatory was only a place of transitory punishment where the souls of the saved were purged for the pleasures of Heaven. Hell, on the other hand, was a place of eternal hopelessness and torment. Just as there are echoes between Dante’s Paradise and Bellarmine’s so too are there in these otherworldly realms.

Dante’s Purgatory emphasizes the theme of hope. Even suffering through Purgatory, the souls sing and rejoice, knowing they will attain heaven. While they hear the psalms resound through the mountain, they also endure punishments that match the predominant sins of their life. The prideful bear enormous weights on their back, the eyes of the envious are sewn shut with iron wire, the wrathful wander blind through a cloud of black smoke, the slothful endure the pain of runners who race without rest, the avaricious lie with their faces to the ground and their limbs bound unable to grasp or see anything, the gluttonous experience hunger and thirst amidst a plentiful garden of delicious fruit, and, finally, the lustful must pass through a wall of flames. The pains of Purgatory, in Dante’s imagining, are not systematically oriented toward the senses. The torments are directed toward the senses that benefitted or took pleasure in the sins of life. The only sense that appears to go unpunished is the sense of smell. This distinguishes the punishments of Purgatory from those of Hell where even the sense of smell undergoes torture.¹⁸⁹ These

¹⁸⁹ Note that Bellarmine too believed that the sense of smell would undergo torture in heaven; however, he struggles to communicate how precisely one sins through the use of the olfactory sense. For more on smell, see chapter two and the section on sinners and their punishment below.
punishments all target the senses with a punishment meant to rehabilitate the soul. In this way, the punishments are not only transitory, but didactic.

The pedagogical nature of these punishments hints at the ceaseless importance of using the senses for the purpose of achieving beatification. The saved souls of Purgatory endure punishments for their sins and also benefit from lessons. Primarily, the souls are instructed through the auditory sense. In the terrace of the prideful the walls are lined with sculptures that offer examples of humility. The prideful cannot see them while they carry weights on their back, but, presumably, as they move to the next terrace seeing the sculptures teaches them the way of humility. The envious of the following terrace, hear voices that relate stories of generosity. More voices instruct the slothful about being zealous. The fruit-bearing trees in the terrace of the gluttonous teach the souls about temperance, and the souls of the lustful shout out names of the great practitioners of chastity. These lessons, which rely primarily on the auditory sense, come together with the voices of earthly preachers to create a contiguous sermon that urges souls to abandon their vices and embrace the virtues that will permit them entry into heaven.

Bellarmine diverges from Dante insofar as his imagining of Purgatory is far less didactic and emphasizes more the punishment awaiting those preparing for heaven. The punishments described by Bellarmine fall into the same two categories that he uses to explain the pains of hell: punishment of loss, and punishment of sense. The punishment of loss refers to the souls’ inability to enjoy the Beatific Vision, although the souls of Purgatory will eventually experience it, unlike the souls in Hell. He describes the punishment of loss by comparing it to a man “disturbed by a vehement hunger…or unbearable thirst, and see[s] before him a table laden with the best food and sweetest wine,
but cannot touch anything, and still he would know all these things were otherwise prepared for himself.”

Like Dante he insists that “the very things whereby a man sinned will torture him.” Yet, he only enumerates one punishment in particular, which consists of torture by fire. The fire, he argues, “is sensible,” and that “the punishments of Purgatory are very severe, and no punishments of this life can be compared with these…” For those expecting, the joyous singing of the hopeful souls undergoing purgation, there is only disappointment. Perhaps the differences of context between Dante and Bellarmine can explain why their concepts of Purgatory differ somewhat. For Bellarmine, it was important to insist that Purgatory was a real place, where the souls of the deceased suffered before gaining access to Heaven. His effort was less to imagine what Purgatory was like, but to demonstrate to Protestants that its existence was absolutely verifiable.

In a series of sermons at Louvain in the 1570s, Robert Bellarmine expounded upon a traditional teaching known as the Last Four Things, which were death, judgment, heaven, and hell. His sermon on hell, known as “Hell and its Torments” specifically argues that Hell is a place of sensory torture. That idea, of course, would also be familiar to readers of Dante’s Inferno. While the notion of hell as a place of eternal sensory torture predates Dante and his Comedy, he has bequeathed posterity with the most memorable exposition of the theme in literature. The Inferno was certainly familiar to Robert Bellarmine. What is more, Bellarmine shared with Dante an affinity for Virgil, whose Aeneas also descended

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190 Robert Bellarmine, On Purgatory the Members of the Church Suffering, trans. Ryan Grant (Post Falls: Mediatrix Press, 2017), 210. Note that Bellarmine did not write a particular treatise on Purgatory, but that this text is a translation of part of his De controversiis.

191 Bellarmine, On Purgatory, 205.

192 Bellarmine, On Purgatory, 205, 208.
into hell.\textsuperscript{193} For that reason it is worth briefly exploring Dante’s hell, and tracing its influence on Bellarmine’s conception.\textsuperscript{194}

The infamous inscription on the gate of hell itself alludes to the suffering and despair withing “THROUGH ME THE WAY INTO THE GRIEVING CITY, THROUGH ME THE WAY INTO ETERNAL SORROW, THROUGH ME THE WAY AMONG THE LOST PEOPLE…ABANDON EVERY HOPE, YOU WHO ENTER.”\textsuperscript{195} Even at the underworld’s gates the horrible sounds of Hell assail the Pilgrim and Virgil, who weep to hear the resounding of “sighs, weeping, loud wailing…Strange languages, horrible tongues, words of pain, accents of anger, voices loud and hoarse, and sounds of blows.”\textsuperscript{196} As they approach the river Styx, Charon, the ferryman, informs them that the journey to the other shore is a trip “to the eternal shadows, to heat and freezing,” a place of visual deprivation and haptic torture.\textsuperscript{197} An infernal whirlwind whips around those who suffer for sins of lust, and in its furious “turning and striking it tortures them.”\textsuperscript{198} The assault continues in the third circle where the gluttons are punished. For their sins, Hell torments them in a prison of “Great hailstones, filthy water, and snow pour down through the dark air; the earth stinks that receives them.”\textsuperscript{199} The Pilgrim witnesses these pains and miseries in the very first circles of hell, and yet he has already described a way in which hell

\textsuperscript{193} Bellarmine was so enthralled with Virgil, that he even claims he only used a Latin lexicon that was attested by Virgil in his youthful Latin verse compositions, see: Robert Bellarmine, \textit{Autobiography}, 2.

\textsuperscript{194} This theme was alluded to in chapter one of this dissertation.

\textsuperscript{195} Alighieri, \textit{Inferno}, III.1-9.

\textsuperscript{196} Alighieri, \textit{Inferno}, III, 22-27.

\textsuperscript{197} Alighieri, \textit{Inferno}, III, 86-87.

\textsuperscript{198} Alighieri, \textit{Inferno}, V, 32-33.

\textsuperscript{199} Alighieri, \textit{Inferno}, VI, 10-12.
torments each sense. Those torments only intensify through great extremes of hot and cold, fetid surroundings, and the introduction of gruesome beasts.

Perhaps, Bellarmine’s account of hell is not as engrossing as Dante’s, and yet it was probably no less effective. Consistent with his neo-Thomistic theological training, his approach is somewhat more systematic than lyrical. Bellarmine originally delivered his sermon on the pains of Hell at Louvain where his purpose was to prove to the university students, and general public in attendance, that Hell was a place deprived of all good. He follows the traditional idea that souls in Hell suffer on two different but dependent levels: for the loss of heaven and by the punishment of the senses. In this latter category his purpose is to prove that Hell is place of complete sensory torture: “For the eyes of the damned do not perceive anything beautiful, nor their ears any sweet sounds, nor the sense of smell any pleasant odors, nor the sense of taste anything sweet, nor the sense of touch anything that is soft.” These punishments he further divides into punishments of the internal senses dealing with thinking, memory, understanding, and the will, and then the five external senses.

Bellarmine posits that contemplating the pain and absence of heaven’s pleasure is the torment for thinking. Recalling past pleasures that earned the tortures of hell is the

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201 Bellarmine’s treatment of hell is a long form version of Ignatius’s composition of hell from the *Spiritual Exercises*, for more on this see chapter two.


203 In Bellarmine, *SRB*, II: 268.
punishment for the memory. It is worth noting that he uses a sensory metaphor to describe how the souls will come to apprehend the punishment of the memory: “For then finally they will understand with how much salt and with what sharp pepper those savory dishes were sprinkled with, which formerly seemed so sweet to them.”\textsuperscript{204} The temporal pleasures of indulgence, are not worth the eternal suffering of the internal sense of memory, nor of any of the other senses. The intellect will be assailed by considering the sinner’s earthly intransigence, or refusal to confess and repent sins while on earth. Bellarmine describes their intransigence by likening it to sensory activated imagining the souls pleading “O why were we so blind, why were we so stupid? Who stole our mind, who closed our eyes, who blocked our ears? Who so beguiled us that we never gave thought to these punishments?”\textsuperscript{205} Bellarmine used the mouths of Hell’s tortured souls to give advice to his listeners: use your ears, hear the preacher’s words, be moved to repentance, and avoid the fate of the damned. Finally, he adds that the sinners will suffer in their will by comparing the pleasures of heaven with the tortures of Hell.\textsuperscript{206}

Thereafter, Bellarmine moves to the punishments of the external senses, which he considers one-by-one. At the same time, he states, in no uncertain terms, that Hell does not subject sinners to one pain, but constant complete torment:

the punishment of the damned is not just one kind of pain, as of the head, of the kidneys, of the teeth, of the eyes, but it is a certain general punishment, which comprehends all the sufferings of all the members, of the whole body and of the senses…in hell most terrible pains are suffered at the same time in the head and in the eyes and in the breast and in the kidneys, and finally in all parts of the body, and the nerves, all the bones and all the senses.\textsuperscript{207}

\textsuperscript{204} In Bellarmine, \textit{SRB}, II: 268.

\textsuperscript{205} In Bellarmine, \textit{SRB}, II: 269-270.

\textsuperscript{206} In Bellarmine, \textit{SRB}, II: 270.

\textsuperscript{207} In Bellarmine, \textit{SRB}, II: 271.
He begins with his treatment on sight, which he uses as an opportunity to remind his audience that visual pleasure on earth derived from looking at beautiful forms, or watching various types of public entertainment, thereby introducing impurity into the heart is not worth eternal suffering. He warns that the sight of demons alone will be enough to torture the sense of sight. Citing, St. Bernard, he claims that one monk, tormented by a demon, lost consciousness, terrified from the mere sight of the demon. Through his explanation, Bellarmine elucidates not only the sensory pain the damned experience but insists that emotional turmoil comes with the physical pain. This establishes the pattern that he follows as he discusses the torments of the remaining senses. He chastises the audience for sensorial license, describes the punishment, draws on Christian, Biblical, or Classical sources to confirm his finding, and connects the sensory pain to some type of emotional response. For example, where hearing is concerned, he laments that people are too keen to listen to lewd songs, and eagerly await gossip for hours, while an hour’s long sermon wearies them. Like Dante, he warns that these sinners will hear only “groans, roaring, wailing, insults, blasphemies, and curses.”

Gesturing to Roman history, he relates Plutarch’s story about the dictator Sulla, who terrified Rome’s senators with the shrieks of six thousand Romans that he killed in cold blood in the circus. In his telling, Hell will arouse more horror as many more than six thousand sinners inhabit and fill it with their wailing.

To the frightening sights and sounds of hell, Bellarmine adds the foulest smell of the “lake of hell, into which all the filth of the world has been thrown.”

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this to the suffering martyrs, who Arian Vandals piled on top of each other and confined in close quarters without any place to relieve themselves. They suffered amidst their own excrement. There is a critical distinction between the martyrs and the damned. There were but a few martyrs, who suffered for a short while until they were rewarded in Heaven. In Hell, the stench is eternal, and there are countless stinking bodies. The punishment of the sense of smell is unique insofar as Bellarmine does not enumerate what sins one can commit with the sense of smell. This distinguishes smell from taste, whose punishments result from “many more serious crimes.” These crimes include drunkenness and gluttony, and appetite for exquisite food and drink. Their punishment is “unbelievable hunger and thirst” as alluded to by the parable of Lazarus and the rich man. This, of course, was a departure from Dante whose gluttons are pelted by a rain of excrement and endure the barking and biting of the mythical three-headed dog Cerberus. Similarly, Bellarmine’s fornicators and adulterers, who were too free with their sense of touch, are not thrashed by Dante’s infernal winds, but are consumed by “fire that is so so powerful, so living, so effective that our fire, in comparison with it, seems to be not true but unreal…But they will be tormented not only with the heat of fire, but also with unbearable cold.”

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211 In Bellarmine, *SRB*, II: 274.

212 For more on the sense of smell and its capacity, or relative lack thereof, to lead someone to sin, see chapter 2.

213 In Bellarmine, *SRB*, II: 274.

214 In Bellarmine, *SRB*, II: 274. For the parable of Lazarus and the rich man see Lk. 16:19-31.

215 In Bellarmine, *SRB*, II: 275. He adds St. Basil’s argument that intense cold is an incomparable torment.
Thus, Bellarmine concludes the sense-by-sense account of Hell’s torments, and launches into his final warnings about Hell’s agony, and last exhortations to live virtuously. This begins by addressing each sensory organ, just as Oliva would rhetorically address the sense organs of Luigi Gonzaga, and reminding them of the punishment for their corresponding sins: “O miserable ears, which will always hear the sound of floggings and blasphemies and dreadful groans! O miserable nose, which will always perceive the bad smell of filthy place and corrupt bodies! O miserable stomachs and miserable mouths, which will be tormented with eternal want and unbearable hunger and thirst! O miserable limbs, which will dwell in that abyss vomiting forth sulphureous flames!...O what profound darkness! O eternal night! O night, O night cursed by the mouth of God himself, which will not see the light of day and the splendor of the dawn!”216 And why reiterate these miseries? To encourage his audience to understand even in “some small way” their punishment, and in so doing, “to restrain all our passions, and…moderate our life that we would all seem to be not just Christians, but monks and holy hermits.”217 In this way, Bellarmine ends his thoughts about sinners and their punishment by invoking the saints. It is not enough for anyone to simply be a Christian, but a requirement to strive for otherworldly sanctity.

Pedro de Ribadeneyra and the ‘First Ex-Jesuits’218

Like his contemporary Robert Bellarmine, the early Jesuit hagiographer, Pedro de

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216 In Bellarmine, SRB, II: 276-277.

217 In Bellarmine, SRB: 276.

218 This chapter section is part of a larger project on Pedro de Ribadeneyra’s Dialogos, which includes an edition and translation of the manuscript text, as well as notes, commentary, and introductory essays. The text has never before appeared in English and translations are either mine or Fr. Barton Geger’s, S.J.
Ribadeneyra, offers his readers examples of sinners who fell to their sensual appetites, and thereafter were punished on earth for their wrongdoings in his *Dialogos*. The text of the first two dialogues, which record the stories of some seventy Jesuit who left the Society of Jesus, is an example of a common Jesuit perspective on the senses contemporary with Bellarmine.

What exactly were Jesuit readers of the *Dialogos* hearing or seeing when encountering the lives of their less than illustrious counterparts? The backgrounds and motivations of the “failed Jesuits” varied. Many left for other religious orders, some departed to pursue worldly pursuits, others took up a life of espionage or crime, and others still were dismissed for stealing from the church funds. He prefaces their lives by stating that it is better to “keep before our eyes the virtue of…strong and constant types.” Yet, he justifies recording the deeds of these transgressors and the rigorous punishments they received as inspiration or, more accurately, cautionary advice, for those vacillating in their vocation (7). Indeed, on numerous occasions the interlocutors urge the readers to take heed (escarmentar) of these punishments as benefit for themselves.

Ribadeneyra’s Jesuits, who abandoned their vocations due to a dereliction of duty to guard their senses, are very similar to Bellarmine’s promiscuous kings in that lust was a consistent motivator to abandon their life in the Society. Cypriano introduces the readers of the *Dialogues* to this category of men and the general contours of their path when he laments “the thing that amazes me is seeing that some of these that leave being priests and

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219 See, for example, the stories of Diego Romano (21), Luca Corso (88), Diego de Caceres (19), and Miguel de Guzman (70).

220 Covarrubias defines *escarmiento* as “a warning and honesty to not err for fear of incurring penalty suffered by others and in some instances already suffered by oneself” (la advertencia y recato de non errar por no incurrir en la pena, executada en otros y algunas vezes executada en la mesma), see: “Escarmiento,” Covarrubias.
doctors and preachers both esteemed and revered are snatched by the sensual appetites, which disfigure and soil the nobility of their souls with vices so abominable and carnal that they put so many evident dangers on their soul, life, and honor (44).” To illustrate the point, he shares with his interlocutors the story of one anonymous preacher from Lorena. In Cypriano’s telling this individual became so inflamed by the adulation for his preaching that he abandoned the path of virtue, left the Society, and fell in love with a married woman until on “one occasion, the husband caught him and his wife in flagrante delicto, and he killed him” (44). With this story, Cypriano creates the paradigm for the lusty Jesuit defector, at first virtuous, eases his custody of the senses, succumbs to temptation, and falls disgracefully until he is punished in this world by God.

One man from Vienna, according to Pedro, follows this paradigm closely. He joined the Society as a model of piety “ despising the vanities of this deceptive world and the gifts of his parents” (61). To enter the Society, he made a pilgrimage from Vienna to Rome on foot, and his first days as a Jesuit were marked by constancy such that he was admired by all and edified them with his example. He returned to Vienna at the conclusion of his studies where he maintained his “virtue and self-mortification” (61). Encouraged by his abilities his superiors made him Minister of the College at Prague where he remained remarkable for his good piety. Shortly thereafter, he began to take license until he left the Society and the Catholic religion altogether. Then, “he married a woman, or to put it better, he took on a prostitute, with the abominable sacrilege of incest” (62). Were this not bad enough he openly preached against Catholicism and the Jesuits, and to teach the people the “false doctrines of the heretics” (62). At that time, Maximillian II had called a diet in
Vienna, and was about to seize this wayward Jesuit, but God preceded the Emperor by giving the “apostate” a small tumor that tormented him for the final days of his life.

Following a novitiate characterized by pure obedience according to his contemporaries, one student, Asdrubal de Luna, was dismissed from the Society by Ignatius Loyola, though we do not know the offense. He returned to his native Sicily where he “gave himself over to sins of the flesh, and surrendered to his unchecked appetites, and then felt the consequences by contracting the ‘French disease’” (34). Shortly thereafter, he lost his eye in an argument with a man, and then he was shot by two men and died.

Others, such as one unnamed nobleman, who joined the Society were less virtuous from the beginning (71-73). Given this man’s social stature, Pedro tells the reader that the Fathers of the Society treated him with special care; however, he was disobedient from the beginning. His insolence resulted in his dismissal from the Society. The Jesuits felt compelled to readmit him in Toledo when he returned to them with a contrite heart. In short time, they sent him to study at Álcalá. There he pretended to have stomach aches that prevented him from either passing or keeping food down, but when there were no watchful eyes he would “stuff his throat and gulp down” everything he could get his hands on (71). The Jesuits dismissed him not for these faults, but for assaulting the good virtues of other students and encouraging them to loosen “the reins of severity and religious discipline” (72). Once dismissed, he attempted to enter the Dominicans on a few occasions, but they discovered that he was stealing alms. Abandoning all aspirations for religious life, he married a woman and committed many different crimes to support her, until God punished his license and carnality by giving him syphilis right down to his bone marrow (72).
All of these stories concern men, who wrongfully left the Society, fell into disgrace, and then were punished by God. This pattern encourages one of the *Dialogues interlocutros*, Francisco, to ask whether or not it was possible for a man to leave the Society and “live honestly and exemplarily in the world” (77). Furthermore, he notes that the preponderance of examples concern men, who abandon the Society to pursue their “tastes, appetites, and libertine life in the world,” and therefore wonders if some leave to live well under the rules of other religious orders (77). To answer his question, Pedro relates the story of one Portuguese boy who joined the Society at Coimbra when he was sixteen quickly became recognized for his tremendous learning as a scholar of Latin, Greek, Aristotelian Philosophy, Scriptural Studies and Theology. He managed to legitimately leave the Society by appealing to Gregory XIII for the dismissal of his vows. Instead, he joined the Augustinians who delighted in obtaining such a learned man for their ranks; that is, until he succumbed to “pride…and sensuality of the flesh” taking a woman of ill-repute (81). The Prior discovered his indiscretions and sought him out. Discovering him with the woman, the Prior took him, removed his habit, stripped him of his privileges and imprisoned him, until he escaped to Sicily where he served a bishop. While in Sicily, he was captured and killed by bandits (82). The authorities managed to apprehend the bandits, who confessed to their crime and the whereabouts of his body, which dogs had devoured by the time they found it.

For these men the risks of leaving the Society of Jesus, and the good virtues of strict religious life, presented a slippery slope and dangerous descent from virtue to vice. In Ribadeneyra’s language this is the result of laxity, of loosening the reins of mortification, penitence, and religious discipline. It manifested itself in welcoming gluttony, lust, and
other pleasures of the flesh. It resulted in divine punishments that include disfigurement, torment, and death. What was worse, for the interlocutors of the Dialogues, the departer could have avoided divine retribution simply by self-abnegation by holding the reins of the senses, and he would even be rewarded in this life with a fulfilling post as a teacher of “grammar in a college in the city, where he would be comfortable, appreciated, healthy, and trusted” (44). This does not include what was even more important, eternal salvation and heavenly reward. Instead, the passions drove men to sin, torment on earth, and worst of all eternal damnation.

**Conclusion**

Bellarmine did much more than focus on the theoretical or philosophical nature of the sense paradox in Catholicism. He also strained to apply it in religious and worship life, preferring to examine the theme through the examples of Catholicism’s heroes and villains. His approach was to study the issue through exemplarity. And the question for him was: how do the saints and sinners exhibit what to do or not to do where it relates to the senses? For the saints the paradox is ever present in their example. Their Christian lives depend on their ability to be open to sensuous encounters with the Divine as in the conversion story of Paul, or the doubting of Thomas. Furthermore, in a more mundane way, they use their senses to effectively minister to Christian people in giving sermons, or hearing confessions, for example. At the same time, they also achieve outstanding feats of asceticism, castigating their flesh, and guarding their senses through intense abstemiousness. They fast, they deny themselves sleep to pray, close their ears to heresy, avoid speaking with or looking at women, and avoid dishonest touching at all costs. Their efforts in these endeavors sometimes seem totally extreme, as in the case of Luigi Gonzaga, who refuses to even look
at his own mother, for example. Yet, Robert Bellarmine ever the admirer of these heroes, some of whom he knew personally, justifies all their activities. Not only does he support them, but he encourages and entices other Catholics to imitate them. The eternal prize of heaven, and all of its extraordinary sensuous delights, is the carrot he dangles before the horse, while hell and its punishments is the ever present stick.

Bellarmine’s sinners never found a glass of wine they did not gulp, a meal they did not devour, a lewd song that did not rouse their ambitions, or a partner that did not satisfy their lust. They come in all forms. Some had previously chosen the straight and narrow path of religion, but found the world and its enticements too tempting. They, unlike Oliva’s Luigi Gonzaga could not maintain the most careful and strict custody of their senses and succumbed to temptation. Others were the otherwise virtuous kings of the Old Testament, or the once virtuous king of England, whose lust turned them from their virtue, and brought about the ruin of their society. Ribadeneyra followed the same blueprint when speaking of bad Jesuits. For all of these, their punishments in Hell would be absolutely dire. Bellarmine’s image of Hell, all fire and brimstone, would make the most stalwart shudder. Perhaps even worse is Ribadeneyra’s depiction of the sinner in his *Dialogos* about Jesuit “apostates.” These were not even permitted the ephemeral sensory pleasures on earth before their eternal punishment. They were punished severely by God in life with public embarrassment, disfigurement, torture, horrible illness, and death.

The sermon audience would have a clear choice before them. Should I be a saint or a sinner? Should I maintain careful custody of my senses or indulge in my appetites. The rewards and punishments for following either path were plain. The rest was up to them.
Chapter 4
Paradox in Practice:
Art Theorists, and the Problem of “Lascivious” Paintings

Toward the end of his life, around 1443, the famed Franciscan preacher, Bernardino of Siena, completed his *De Inspirationibus*, a guidebook for discerning the will of God. Among the fundamental problems posed by discerning the will of God, according to Bernardino, was the ability to determine the appropriate balance between natural, or sensual pleasure, and spiritual pleasure. To illuminate the difficulty Bernardino offers his readers an example: “I know of a person who, while contemplating the humanity of Christ on the cross – it is shameful to say and horrendous just to think – sensually and foully polluted and defiled himself.” As Mormando notes, Bernardino’s concern is that “what may initially appear to be an innocent spiritual pleasure may in reality become titillatingly sensual.” He also underscores that Bernardino’s story concerns a man viewing art, specifically religious art. It is illustrative of a major concern that dominated the thought of moralists and art theorists, many of whom surely knew Bernardino of Siena’s works, through the seventeenth century despite a somewhat lax attitude toward sensuality in artworks ushered in during the papacy of Paul V.

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If the preceding chapters have highlighted theories about how important the issue of the appropriate use of the bodily senses was in the western tradition and to the Christian practice of religion, then this chapter puts those theories into practice by examining the place of sacred art in the spiritual life. It is critical to consider sacred art on several grounds. First, because contemporaries maintained the prevailing view that the eyes were the most powerful of the senses, and therefore they could be the most helpful and the most dangerous in the spiritual life. Viewing art required the power of sight. Second, because there was an unparalleled expansion in the production of art during the high renaissance and baroque period. Without the program of church decoration and flourishing of the arts in this period, the question would be a moot point. Third, because it became an important issue in the final days of the Council of Trent when bishops and theologians from France hoped to discourage the iconoclasm of reformed traditions. Focusing on sacred art as a subject that puts theories about the senses into practice points to how complicated a moral problem using and avoiding the senses could be.

What has become clear is how paradoxical the relationship between theology and the application and the custody of the senses was to Early Modern Catholicism. On the one hand, using the senses as a tool to move the spirit to greater contemplation of God and divine objects was a vital aspect of salvation and Christian practice. On the other hand, the misuse or wanton use of the senses could be catastrophic. Theories about art, and especially sacred art, from the period put this paradox in a material context that exemplifies just how difficult it was to navigate this complicated relationship. In short, viewing a decorous sacred image was meant to delight, instruct, and move an onlooker to greater piety. At the same time, many preachers and art theorists were terrified about the possibility that an
indecorous image might move a viewer to lust, like the man Bernardino of Siena knew. To spiritual writers, theologians, and art theorists there were two important ideas that had to be maintained simultaneously: the validity of art, and the eradication of superstition or lack of decorum. This was true as revealed by the final session of the Council of Trent, and throughout its period of implementation.

The problem of decorum in sacred art outlived Robert Bellarmine and the so-called “more rigorous” period of Tridentine implementation in the decades immediately following the Council. The high baroque period in Rome probably gave birth to some of the most provocative artists and artworks, including artists as significant, powerful, and influential as Gianlorenzo Bernini (1598-1680). In 1652, Bernini unveiled his masterpiece, the *St. Teresa in Ecstasy*, revealing the intimate moment between visionary and the divine for the world to see. What exactly was Bernini showcasing? To be sure, this has been a vexed question for centuries. In Bernini’s own day the statue elicited various and divergent reactions. On the one hand, Giovanni Battista Passeri, an ardent critic of Bernini, commented on the Cornaro chapel saying “it is a work of perfect beauty.”5 On the other hand, one dissenter demurred the sculpture for, “transforming [Teresa] into a Venus who was not only prostrate, but prostituted as well.”6 The rationale behind Passeri’s position is already evident. Passeri saw in the work exquisite execution. The image delights the viewer with the illusion of its floating figures that fascinate and surprise. Yet, in addition to the

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5 In Franco Mormando, *Bernini: His Life and His Rome* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2011), 159. Mormando has recently considered the *Ecstasy of St. Teresa* in even greater detail in his essay: “Did Bernini’s *Ecstasy of St. Teresa* Cross a 17th-Century Line of Decorum?” [https://www.academia.edu/44401140](https://www.academia.edu/44401140). I am much indebted to his analysis in these texts, as well as many conversations with him about this issue.

6 Mormando, *Bernini*, 162.
astonishing execution of the sculpture, it must be admitted that its erotic overtones contribute to its captivating nature; thus, the confusion.

Bernini sculpts the hovering saint balancing atop a cloud with a bare foot delicately dangling in midair. If this did not astonish enough, he transforms stone into flowing elegant drapery. Her right hand motions toward the golden arrow held by the boyish, pudgy, half-clad angel that stands over her smiling sweetly. The cupid-like angel grasps the folds of Teresa’s robe with his other hand. The saint’s mouth is ajar, and her soft ‘skin’ is entirely free of wrinkles and blemishes. Her eyelids appear half open as if her eyes are rolled into the back of her head, and the stone drapery of the cowl and hood give the impression of luscious locks of hair. Taking basic anatomical assumptions into consideration, it would appear that her legs, under the drapery, are spread apart.

Those familiar with Teresa’s visceral account might defend the eroticism positing that Bernini made every effort to render the saint’s text faithfully in stone:

He was not tall, but short, and very beautiful...In his hands I saw a long golden spear and at the end of the iron tip I seemed to see a point of fire. With this he seemed to pierce my heart several times so that it penetrated to my entrails. When he drew it out, I thought he was drawing them out with it and he left me completely afire with a great love for God. The pain was so sharp that it made me utter several moans; and so excessive was the sweetness caused me by this intense pain that one can never wish to lose it, nor will one’s soul be content with anything less than God. It is not bodily pain, but spiritual, though the body has a share in it – indeed, a great share.”

Admittedly, Teresa’s description of this liminal event surpasses erotic language in favor of language that is decidedly sexual; however, to say that Bernini’s portrayal merely sought textual accuracy is overstated. Bernini’s Teresa is a young woman, which is a break with

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7 Teresa of Ávila, *The Life of Teresa of Jesus*, trans., E. Allison Peers (New York: Image Books Doubleday, 1991), 274-275. The term “spear” is a clear mistranslation of the Spanish “dardo” or dart. Bernini depicted the image as Cupid’s golden arrow, but a dart is shorter than a spear and longer than an arrow.
truth and the iconographic tradition (in fact she was middle-aged at the time of the transverberation). Furthermore, it is unlikely that Teresa, after years of asceticism, would have appeared youthful. Additionally, she dressed in the habit of a Carmelite, not in the luxurious finery of the nobility suggested by Bernini’s drapery. The replacement of the angel’s dart with the Golden Arrow is hardly subtle and extremely provocative. It alludes to the paragon of lasciviousness himself, Cupid, and erotic rather than divine, love. What is more, if the viewer follows the tip of the ‘angel’s’ Golden Arrow, it does not point to Teresa’s heart, as the text suggests, but to her genitals, which are ostensibly exposed under her garments by the parting of her legs. Indeed, the angel even appears to be in the act of undressing the saint, or at least exposing her breasts. The saint’s elegant bare foot is not consistent with the historical record that shows that Teresa did not approve of walking without shoes and instead dictated that the Carmelite nuns to wear sandals. All these idiosyncrasies beg the question: is the saint reveling in the liminal experience of the inner mind between heaven and earth that is ecstasy, or is the statue a literal interpretation of metaphorical language that renders the already problematic topos of ecstatic mysticism intolerably erotic?


Bernini’s work, to say the least, was bold, but sensualized depictions of saints in ecstasy in art were not unprecedented. Nor were the opposing reactions to it novel. Bernini’s attempt to convert an inner ecstatic experience into a sensual phenomenon was one of many, and he followed a long line of antecedents. This chapter will pursue the subject of art and decorum as it relates to the use and custody of the sense of sight. In the minds of preachers and ecclesiastical art theorists, sacred art presented a clear battle ground between the appropriate use and custody of the senses. If images inspired mediation and divine thoughts in their viewers, they accomplished their task; however, Catholic moralists shared a widespread concern that viewing indecorous images, even sacred images, could incite lustful thoughts. I explore the issue by first examining and defining decorum, and expectations for sacred art up to the Council of Trent, epitomized by the debate over Michelangelo’s Last Judgment; then by considering the decree of images issued by the Council of Trent; and finally by examining in careful detail the ideas about sacred art laid out by ecclesiastics in the century following the Council of Trent. Catholic thinkers were at pains to defend sacred art against Protestant critique by citing Christian tradition and the virtues of looking at images. At the same time, they were concerned with its problems. Over time, as it became clear that the theological issues between Catholics and Protestants could not be resolved, treatise writers worried less about defending images from iconoclasm, and their concern with decorum, or decency, and propriety in art grew. Above all they abhorred nudity. These treatises on sacred art showcase an example of the practical

\[11\] Take for example Caravaggio’s Magdalene in Ecstasy, which exists only through its copies notably Artemisia Gentileschi’s. Its formal elements were clearly in Bernini’s mind when he was sculpting the Ecstasy of Teresa.
application of the use and custody of the senses in the spiritual life discussed in previous chapters.

I. Decorum and the Arts to the Conclusion of the Council of Trent

To be sure, art criticism and the quest for appropriate religious imagery did not begin with the Council of Trent, or the Protestant reformation. The story of artistic censure is much older. The Second Council of Nicaea (787) had defended the use of sacred images against iconoclasts centuries earlier. Still, in the late mediaeval and early modern period questions about artistic license prevailed. For example, Giovanni Boccaccio, infamous for recounting so many sultry and licentious tales in the *Decameron* concluded his work with an apology for the graphic nature of the text. Over the course of his one hundred stories, he trod brazenly on many subjects both taboo and impolite. These include stories about errant religious monks and nuns, who found themselves at the mercy of lust; use of profanities; and blasphemies as well. Very few stories offer even a hint of a moralizing element common to the *exempla* employed by preachers in the Middle Ages. That is, the wayward in Boccaccio’s tales do not always learn the error of their ways, and instead find the means to continue in their sins. Preempting his critics, Boccaccio admits to the faults of these stories: “it is very clear to me that these tales of mine can expect no more special immunity than anything else… I intend to reply briefly to several objections that perhaps some of you…might have wished to voice.”12 His self-awareness leads to an apology in the classical sense; he defends his impropriety rather than seeking pardon for it: “some among you…will say that I have taken too much license…that is, I have sometimes made ladies

say things, and more often listen to things, which are not very proper for virtuous ladies to say or hear. I deny this, for nothing is so indecent that it cannot be said to another person if the proper words are used to convey it; and this I believe, I have done very well.”\textsuperscript{13} Thus, Boccaccio launches his self-defense with an outright denial that he erred claiming that the censorship of language is itself wrong. Hereafter, Boccaccio argues that he upholds the standards of decorum. He claims that the nature of the stories compels him to use the language he uses; that his language is no worse than quotidian double entendres verbalized every day; the stories were not told in a church, sacred place, or school; they were not told in the presence of easily scandalized churchmen and philosophers; the purpose of the stories was to entertain and not to edify; and the audience was young, but mature.\textsuperscript{14}

Boccaccio simplifies the complexities of the issue of decorum, though he does not define it. From his apology, it is clear that decorum is not a question of topic and execution; of what is polite or impolite; of what is appropriate or lascivious alone. In a way, the term itself is classicizing. It incorporates the classic philosophical definitions of justice: giving each their due. Choosing an appropriate subject for writing, speaking, painting, and all other arts is not sufficient. Nor is it enough to portray the subject matter with fitting respect. The creator delivers his message to those who can understand it, in fitting spaces, and with clear intentions. In other words, artworks must conform to expectations based on space, audience, intentionality, and impact. If the creator and audience jointly adhere to these principles, then the work is decorous and cannot cause harm. He invites a comparison between art and literature noting that art should also follow the principles of decorum:

\textsuperscript{13} Boccaccio, \textit{The Decameron}, 802.

\textsuperscript{14} Boccaccio, \textit{The Decameron}, 802–803.
“Moreover, my pen should be granted no less freedom than the brush of a painter who, without incurring censure or, at least, any which is justified, depicts Saint Michael wounding the serpent with a sword or a lance and Saint George slaying the dragon wherever he pleases, not to mention the fact that he shows Christ as a man and Eve as a woman…” Here, Boccaccio’s argument devolves into deflective finger-pointing. Unwilling to take the blame for impropriety alone, he hopes to share it with the artists. In so doing, he draws attention to the long-standing debate over decorum in art, which continued into the next centuries.

Two factors reinvigorated the decorum debate in the middle of the sixteenth century. First, the onset of the Protestant Reformation brought a new urgency to the issue of religious art in and of itself. As many historians have documented, some Protestant theologians, and reform-minded Catholics, believed that religious art was totally wonting in devotion, licentious, and, worst of all, could lead to superstition. For some Protestants, most notably in the Swiss confederation, this resulted in a prohibition on certain types of images and outright iconoclasm. At the same time, Luther encouraged religious art focused on biblical themes and patronized the Cranachs, Lucas the Elder and the Younger, as propagandists for his reform in Germany. Still, Luther’s support of the Cranachs and religious art did not include a systematic theorization of sacred art, which was absent from

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his thought.\textsuperscript{18} Similarly, it was not until 1563 and the conclusion of the Council of Trent that the Catholic Church made an official statement on art and its use in religion.

Concurrent with developing Protestant theologies of sacred icons Catholics were participating in a vigorous decorum debate of their own. The cause célèbre that brought the question of sacred art to the attention of so many clerics, painters, and intellectuals was Michelangelo Buonarroti’s Sistine Chapel.\textsuperscript{19} Michelangelo had begrudgingly accepted Julius II’s commission to paint the Sistine Ceiling long before the iconoclastic activity had begun in northern Europe. By 1512, he completed the ceiling to much acclaim. Thereafter, according to Giorgio Vasari, Michelangelo’s frequently sycophantic biographer, Clement VII had discussed painting the Sistine walls with Michelangelo. He envisioned a last judgment for the altar and planned for a scene depicting the fall of the angels on the opposite wall.\textsuperscript{20} For a brief interlude it seemed that the commission might be squashed when Clement died shortly after Michelangelo returned to Rome; however, Paul III reinstated his predecessors commission.\textsuperscript{21} According to Vasari, Paul III’s admiration for the artist made it impossible for Michelangelo to deny him: “I have nursed this ambition for thirty years, and now that I’m Pope am I not to have it satisfied…I’m determined to

\textsuperscript{18} Luther approved of representing Biblical figures and himself and his protectors - the Saxon princes, see Carl C. Christensen, \textit{Art and the Reformation in Germany}, (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1979).


have you in my service no matter what.”

Michelangelo unveiled the *Last Judgment* in 1541 to a variety of responses.

The first two responses, recorded while the painting was still private, laid the ground for future commentary. First, recorded by Vasari, was the criticism of Biagio da Cesena, who censured it severely: “He answered that it was most disgraceful that in so sacred a place there should have been depicted all those nude figures exposing themselves so shamefully, and that it was no work for a papal chapel but rather for the public baths and taverns.” For revenge, Michelangelo used Biagio’s likeness for his depiction of Minos ushering souls into hell. All Biagio’s efforts could not force the hand of the painter or his patron to erase the likeness. The other, likely spurious, but often-repeated, comment came from Paul III: “Lord, charge me not with my sins when Thou shalt come on the Day of Judgment.” Whether or not Paul’s pious expression was true, its meaning is clear: the pontiff was so moved by the fear of judgment that he felt compelled to pray for his deliverance from hell. Many texts recount at least a few of the contemporary responses to the *Last Judgment*. In general, they are separated into two classes: churchmen and artists, though there was room for some critics, notably Pietro Aretino, who did not fall into either category. The detractors of the *Last Judgment*, mostly clerical, cite two prevailing

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24 Vasari, *Lives*, 379. Perhaps it was a self-proclamation to divinity that Michelangelo could personally assign someone to hell for eternity without even the pope daring or able to protest.

problems: the abundance of nudity and how the painting concealed its meaning by its difficulty.

For the supporters of Michelangelo, mostly artists, the work symbolized the height of artistic achievement. Among this group the two most notable figures are Michelangelo’s biographers and friends, Ascanio Condivi and Giorgio Vasari; however, many scholars treat their works as mouthpieces for Michelangelo’s point of view.\(^\text{26}\) This criticism tends to be more pronounced when it comes to Condivi’s biography, which “might reflect Michelangelo’s own [view], since he [Condivi] wrote his biography under Michelangelo’s watchful eye in response to Vasari’s ‘errors; in the 1550 edition of the *Lives.*”\(^\text{27}\) It is true, that their approaches differ slightly. Condivi’s first words on the chapel vault are remarks on Michelangelo’s depth of humanity and genius, he says: “Michelangelo expressed all that the art of painting can do with the human figure, leaving out no attitude or gesture whatever. The composition of the narrative is careful and well thought out.”\(^\text{28}\) Thereafter he describes the painting in detail breaking it down into its constituent figural groups and concludes much as he began: “Suffice it to say that, apart from the sublime composition of the narrative, we see represented here all that nature can do with the human body.”\(^\text{29}\) When it comes to the problematic aspects of the fresco, Condivi is relatively silent. On Bartholomew, he says only that Michelangelo depicted him holding his skin. His treatment


\(^{27}\) Barnes, *Michelangelo’s Last Judgment*, 72.


\(^{29}\) Condivi, *Life*, 87.
of Saints Blaise and Catherine is similar. He only mentions the implements of their martyrdoms, the iron combs and the wheel, respectively.\textsuperscript{30} Moreover, he makes one comment about nudity concerning the resurrected bodies: “Some are naked, some are clad in the shrouds or winding-sheets in which they were wrapped when carried to the grave…”\textsuperscript{31} A reader of Condivi’s biography would only get the impression that the painting was delightful. His evaluation is totally devoid of any awareness of the potential offensiveness of Michelangelo’s work.

Vasari’s approach is a little different. Like Condivi he was similarly impressed with Michelangelo’s craftsmanship. As noted above, Vasari did record negative reactions, namely Biagio da Cesena’s, which preceded his own positive evaluation: “When the Last Judgment was revealed it was seen that Michelangelo had not only excelled the masters who had worked there previously but had also striven to excel even the vaulting that he had made so famous; for the Last Judgment was finer by far, and in it Michelangelo outstripped himself.”\textsuperscript{32} As is customary with Vasari, praise of Michelangelo knew no bounds. Vasari’s description, a precursor to Condivi’s, also waxes lyrical about the artist’s great skill and depth of his human awareness: “To any discerning critic the Last Judgement demonstrates the sublime force of art and Michelangelo’s figures reveal thoughts and emotions that only he has known how to express. Moreover, anyone in a position to judge will also be struck by the amazing and unusual gestures of the young and old, the men and women…The Last Judgment must be recognized as the great exemplar of the grand manner

\textsuperscript{30} Condivi, \textit{Life}, 87.

\textsuperscript{31} Condivi, \textit{Life}, 84.

\textsuperscript{32} Vasari, \textit{Lives}, 380.
of painting, directly inspired by God and enabling mankind to see the fateful results when an artist of sublime intellect infused with divine grace and knowledge appears on earth.”

It is not exaggeration, then, to say that Vasari comes close to divinizing Michelangelo.

The artist has recreated humanity on the wall of the Sistine Chapel; the only difference between him and God: it took him more than six days. What of the question of decorum that Vasari introduced with Biagio’s comments? Vasari offers a full-throated defense: “for in this painting Michelangelo observed all the rules of decorum, and gave his figures the appropriate expressions, attitudes, and settings.” One wonders what exactly Vasari means by “rules of decorum.” It seems that he avoids the obvious concerns proclaimed by Biagio by changing the definition of decorum. By ignoring the issue of nudity, he does not define decorum by emphasizing the harmony of the work to its purpose and location, but by the treatment of figures within the work. Furthermore, he treats the question of audience rather differently than other interpreters: “Michelangelo’s figures stir the emotions even of people who know nothing about painting, let alone those who understand.” In sum, for Vasari, Michelangelo is the creative master of design, and the painting communicates a perfect religious message that moves the beholder to greater piety for fear of the day of judgment.

Despite the best efforts on the part of Vasari and Condivi the critics would not be stifled. In substance, the variety of responses suggest two different approaches to Counter-Reformation art. Schlitt juxtaposes the divergent responses to define a polarized debate.

33 Vasari, Lives, 382.
34 Vasari, Lives, 382.
35 Vasari, Lives, 382.
that evolved from the tension between “Renaissance humanistic culture…and the conservative values of a Counter-Reformation ideology.” Art historians today do not treat both sides with the same respect. For example, Hall labels the criticisms of the *Last Judgment* as a “disturbing undercurrent.” Similarly, Schlitt often introduces Michelangelo’s critics with dismissive adjectives. For example, she calls Don Miniato Pitti “conservative,” which, to my mind, suggests that the audience should take his comments only as a reflection of a religious agenda rather than sincere and legitimate criticism. Unfortunately, these reactions may deceive readers and viewers by minimizing just how lively and far reaching these types of critiques were.

Nino Sernini, who sent reports about the *Last Judgment* to anxious audiences in Mantua, recorded other negative reactions amidst his own praise: “the reverend Theatines are the first who say that the nudes displaying themselves in such a place is not right…Others say that he has made Christ beardless and too young, and that Christ does not possess the majesty that [should] become him, and so, in a word there is no lack of talk.” Don Miniato Pitti echoed many of the same complaints: “I had preferred the vault…to the wall…Because in it there are a thousand heresies, especially in the beardless skin of St. Bartholomew while the flayed one has a beard, which demonstrates that the skin is not his own.”

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36 Schlitt, “Painting, Criticism, and Michelangelo’s *Last Judgement,*” 116.

37 Hall, *Michelangelo’s Last Judgment,* 34.

38 In Schlitt, “Painting, Criticism, and Michelangelo’s *Last Judgment,*” 125. Below I trace how scholars interpret Aretino’s position on the *Last Judgment.*

39 In Schlitt, “Painting, Criticism, and Michelangelo’s *Last Judgment,*” 121.

40 In Schlitt, “Painting, Criticism, and Michelangelo’s *Last Judgment,*” 125.
were hyperbolic. Nonetheless, they propose a concern about sacred art that theorists would continue to echo for decades to come: it ought to reveal truths. In Miniato’s view, the depiction of Bartholomew is logically inconsistent. How could his resurrected body be hairless while his flayed body has a beard? Miniato identified an inconsistency without recognizing Michelangelo’s cunning. What he fails to acknowledge is that Bartholomew’s face represents Aretino, while the flayed skin depicts the artist himself. Another figural group that drew criticism was that of St. Blaise and St. Catherine. The complaints about St. Bartholomew and Catherine were not focused solely on nudity. Instead, the erotic suggestion inherent in the positioning of the two figures, was problematic. As Gilio asked: what was Bartholomew doing behind Catherine?

The most ardent critic of the painting was the intellectual Pietro Aretino. There is some irony in his criticism of Michelangelo for betraying standards of decorum since he was himself a pornographer. While it is also true that his comments must be scrutinized in the context of his relationship with Michelangelo, they still reflect a careful understanding of the decorum debate as expressed by others. Aretino was not a friend of Michelangelo and the two had a somewhat strained relationship as the epistolary exchange between them indicates. In fact, it was hardly an exchange at all; Michelangelo rarely replied to Aretino, and never satisfactorily. For Aretino, this slight was surely disheartening. He became the first great art critic of the modern era through his vast

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42 In Hall, Michelangelo’s Last Judgment, 38.

correspondence on art written for public as well as private audiences. In fact, his letters to artists, are perhaps some of his most famous works. Aretino, the great master of ekphrasis, includes detailed descriptions of the paintings as part of his criticism that evoke mental images of the painting. In this way, he shows himself to be an expert judge of painting as well as a master of disegno. He was even wont to liken “his pen with the master’s brush.”

These themes dominate in the first letter to Michelangelo, which is nothing short of adulatory. The letter begins with all due pomp and praise for Michelangelo “If, oh venerable one, it is a disgrace to fame and a sin to the spirit not to remember God, just so it is condemnable to virtue and a dishonor of judgement, for he who has virtue and judgement, not to revere you who are a target of marvels…And I ought to observe you with reverence, since the world has many kings, but only one Michelangelo.” In addition to his general praise of the artist, he also addresses Michelangelo’s specific skill of design: “After his introductory pleasantries, Aretino states his purpose: to prophetically advise Michelangelo about the plan for the Last Judgment. In the passage, he relates his conception to Michelangelo beginning each statement with “veggo,” “I see.” The repetition

44 See Aretino, Lettere Sull’arte; Aretino, Tutte Le Opere.


47 Aretino, Lettere Sull’arte, 1:64 “Si come, venerabile uomo, è vergogna de la fama e peccato de l’anima il non rammentarsi di Dio, così è biasimo de la vertù e disonor del giudizio, di chi ha vertù e giudizio, di non riverir voi che sète un bersaglio di maraviglie…E ben debbo io osservarvi con tal riverenza, poi che il mondo ha molti re e un solo Michelagnolo”.
of the verb underscores the sense that his description is a relation of a prophetic vision. It also highlights his mastery of ekphrasis; the reader sees the vision just as clearly as the writer. What he envisioned for Michelangelo’s fresco did not become reality. To Aretino, who reveled in being a counselor to artists, especially Titian, this was insulting. Another critical feature of the first letter is that it contains the basis for Aretino’s criticism of the Last Judgment in later letters, that it might be difficult for many viewers to understand.  

In his ensuing letters Aretino attempts to hide his desperation for one of Michelangelo’s drawings behind his adulation. In lieu of asking the artist for a painting outright he waxes lyrical about his great skill. In the end, he never received his desired drawing, an infamous slight to the art collector. The change of tone in his letters reflects his displeasure. By the time Aretino penned his final letter to Michelangelo he was primed for vindictive invective. Resisting the temptation to quote the letter in full, one can draw many salient points from it. First, he praises Michelangelo for his design, but condemns the image for lack of decorum, “I blush before the license…which you have used in expressing ideas connected with the highest aims and final ends to which our faith aspires…Michelangelo…has chosen to display to the whole world an impiety of irreligion only equaled by the perfection of his painting!”  

He chastises Michelangelo for his audacity to paint indecorous images in a place as solemn and holy as the Sistine chapel and for exhibiting saints and angels “without earthly decency…and without celestial honors.”  

He compares the Last Judgment to pagan art claiming that it is fit for “some voluptuous

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48 Aretino, 1:64 "possà pormettere de le cose che promettono le figure de la Capella a chi meglio sa giudicarle che mirarle."

49 Klein and Zerner, *Italian Art, 1500-1600*, 122.

50 Klein and Zerner, *Italian Art, 1500-1600*, 122–23.
bagnio [bath house]” and that that even people visiting brothels would “shut their eyes in order not to see [its content].” Finally he encourages the Pope to destroy the image rather than let it offend viewers. It must also be noted that Aretino laments again that Michelangelo did not take his idea for the design of the image into account and that he would he never sent him a personal image. Aretino makes clear that he felt slighted, but insists that Michelangelo’s painting is too complicated for simple audiences, does not convey appropriate religious meaning, and is unfit for the sacred space because of its lack of decorum.

Scholars have each emphasized various elements of this invective in their evaluation of Aretino’s letters. Norman Land stands apart insofar as he takes Aretino’s criticism at face value, drawing attention to the issue of decorum itself noting that “Aretino was dismayed by Michelangelo’s representation of nudes whose postures he found irreverent and whose genitalia were not covered.” In a similar vein, Clare Robertson emphasizes Aretino’s attack on the painting based on its setting. Bernardine Barnes offers many possibilities, from Aretino’s vindictiveness to his religious fervor. She settles on the argument that Aretino was trying to achieve mass appeal among a more conservative

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51 Klein and Zerner, *Italian Art, 1500-1600*, 123.
52 Klein and Zerner, *Italian Art, 1500-1600*, 124.
54 Land, *The Viewer as Poet*, 139.
popular audience.\textsuperscript{57} Melinda Schlitt prefers the most mundane of all possibilities: Aretino was vindictive, and desired revenge since he never received a painting from Michelangelo’s hand.\textsuperscript{58}

Despite what some may think, it is clear that the negative reactions were significant. In fact, to the dismay of the artists, the austere Paul IV favored the interpretation of the critics, and he was determined to have the piece destroyed. He designed a renovation of the papal chapel that required destroying the altar wall and Michelangelo’s fresco with it. Some good fortune behind historical contingency spared Michelangelo’s masterpiece when Paul IV died before his plans could come to fruition. Nonetheless, the voices of the critics won out. Even if the chapel would not be destroyed, it would be censored in 1565, shortly after the conclusion of the Council of Trent. Daniele da Volterra, an assistant of Michelangelo’s, was charged with making the changes that included covering nudes with loincloths and adjusting the figures of Catherine and Blaise. He added drapery to the bodies and turned Blaise’s gaze toward Christ and away from Catherine’s backside.

\textbf{II. Trent and its First Interpreters}

The Michelangelo debate was important in that it puts the discussions on art held at Trent into context. The Council Fathers at Trent formulated their decree on art as the debate of the \textit{Last Judgment} raged. The decree, and debate surrounding the \textit{Last Judgment}, champion the cause of sacred art and echo many of the concerns as well. In theory, the decree was meant to inspire a new age of sacred art that would be fruitful to the faithful without any


\textsuperscript{58} Schlitt, “Painting, Criticism, and Michelangelo’s \textit{Last Judgment},” 128.
suspicion of indecency. This is how the first implementers of Trent interpreted the decree, and what they intended to communicate to artists in their treatises. In the remaining part of this chapter, I trace what Trent and its implementers wrote about art, which I show is frequently in opposition to how art historians interpret art of the era.

*Twenty-Fifth Session of the Council of Trent*

In just two days in early December of 1563, the Council Fathers prepared a decree on Purgatory; on relics, invocation of the saints, and sacred images; on regulars and nuns; and on indulgences in addition to reform decrees that covered a variety of topics related to the episcopate, clerical concubinage, and prebends. Given the overwhelming number of topics addressed, it was all hasty work to be sure. Nevertheless, it was important and timely work. The importance of addressing sacred art only became apparent to the theologians gathered at Trent with the introduction of French influence. The iconoclasm that occurred at the behest of reformed traditions in France spurred the Council to discuss and give guidance on sacred art.

As it related to images, the decree had two overarching purposes: to reaffirm the validity of images in the Christian tradition as the Council of Nicaea had in 787 against reformed traditions; and to uproot abuses concerning images. It is important to note that the decree on images was closely related to another important part of Catholic devotion: the saints. It stands to reason that these topics were so closely related in the minds of the theologians at Trent since the saints were among the most frequent subjects of religious art. The Council first affirmed that it was the duty of bishops and other ecclesiastics to “diligently” teach the faithful correctly about the invocation of the saints and the reverence

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of relics as well as the “legitimate use” of images. On images in particular the Council stated that “images of Christ, the virgin mother of God and the other saints should be set up and kept, particularly in churches, and that due honour and reverence is owed to them…” The Council based its defense of images on the theory that “honour showed to [the images] is referred to the original which they represent: thus, thorough the images…we give adoration to Christ and veneration to the saints, whose likeness they bear.” While the decree did not list exactly how these images should be venerated, it prescribed some beneficial practices regarding images including kissing, uncovering the head, and genuflecting before the image.

Beyond fulfilling the objectives of ordinary piety the Council outlined two purposes behind keeping images:

the faithful are instructed and strengthened by commemorating and frequently recalling the articles of our faith through the expression in pictures or other likenesses of the stories of the mysteries of our redemption; and that great benefits flow from all sacred images, not only because people are reminded of the gifts and blessings conferred on us by Christ, but because the miracles of God through the saints and their salutary example is put before the eyes of the faithful, who can thank God for them, shape their own lives and conduct in imitation of the saints, and be aroused to adore and love God and to practise devotion.

According to the decree, the purpose of images was to satisfy at least two parts of the familiar Ciceronian oratorical triad: *delectare, docere, movere*. They were useful to teach the contents of the faith, a critical component of the post-Tridentine era, which witnessed

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60 Tanner, *Decrees*, 773–74 “diligenter” “legitimo uso.”

61 Tanner, *Decrees*, 775.

62 Tanner, *Decrees*, 775.

63 Tanner, *Decrees*, 775.

64 Tanner, *Decrees*, 775.
the publication of dozens of Catholic catechisms, Bellarmine alone published two, one long and one shorter. They could also move the viewer to replicate the life of the saint and increase in piety.

At the same time, the Council understood well the crisis related to images. This crisis had a twofold nature: first, that the faithful misused or misunderstood the efficacy of images; second, that many images did not adhere to the standards of decorum as befitt sacred art. The decree recommended that bishops explain to the faithful that there was not “some divinity or power…in [images]…or because anything is to be expected from them, or because confidence should be placed in images as was done by the pagans of old.”

There was a very serious concern that a misunderstanding of the “power” within images might lead to inappropriate practices surrounding them, which the decree summed up stating:

all superstition must be removed from…use of sacred images; all aiming at base profit must be eliminated…people are not to abuse the celebration of the saints and visits to their relics for the purpose of drunken feasting, as if feast days in honour of the saints were to celebrated with sensual luxury…bishops should give very great care and attention to ensure that in this matter nothing occurs that is disorderly or arranged in an exaggerated or riotous manner, nothing profane, and nothing unseemly, since holiness befits the house of God.

The decree was wonting in terms of an itemized statement of abuses, but it does express a concern with drunkenness.

Where the content of images was concerned the decree is somewhat more careful to explain the troublesome tendencies. First, they strove for theological accuracy in artworks: “no representations of false doctrine should be set up which give occasion of

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65 Tanner, Decrees, 775.

66 Tanner, Decrees, 775.
dangerous error to the unlettered.” If one of the purposes of these images was to teach people the content of the faith, then inaccuracy in images was especially problematic. Second, and both much more infamous and important for this chapter, the decree decried impropriety in art: “all sensual appeal must be avoided, so that images are not painted or adorned with seductive charm and people are not to abuse the celebration of the saints and visits to their relics for the purpose of drunken feasting, as if feast days in honor of the saints were to be celebrated with lascivious luxury.” Once again, the decree refers to the general problem without any specifics; however, it stated clearly who had jurisdiction to interpret and enforce the decree: “no one may erect or see to the erection of any unusual image in any church or site, however exempt, unless it has been approved by the bishop.” The properties of the unusual image went undefined by the Tridentine fathers, who preferred to delegate that responsibility to the bishops. Perhaps in their view bishops would be the best arbiters of inappropriateness in images.

The scholarly consensus regarding the lack of specificity over the decree on images is to denigrate the degree altogether. John O’Malley has suggested that the Council’s decree on art was a relatively minor issue for the Church by pointing to the absence of a Church proclamation; “despite the debate…about what was appropriate for art in religious settings,” that “broadly enforced policy…” Marcia Hall similarly

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67 Tanner, *Decrees*, 775.

68 Tanner, *Decrees*, 775–76.

69 Tanner, *Decrees*, 776 “insolitam…imaginem” emphasis added.

70 See John W. O’Malley, “Trent, Sacred Images, And Catholics’ Senses of the Sensuous,” 28. Wietse de Boer has also recently called the premise behind O’Malley’s assertion into question noting that sacred images and the cult of the saints was a major issue of debate in the years leading up to the Council, see Wietse de Boer, “Trent, Saints, and Images: a Prehistory,” in *Trent and Beyond: The Council, Other Powers, Other Cultures*, Michela Catto and Adriano Prosperi, eds. (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017): 121-144.
dismissed the notion that decorum was of any real concern to the churchmen at Trent.\footnote{See Hall, “Introduction,” in The Sensuous in the Counter-Reformation Church, Marcia B. Hall and Tracy E. Cooper, eds. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 6.}

Advancing the argument a step further, Bette Talvacchia suggests that the treatise writers, who excoriate sensuous art, must hold an exaggerated and overblown stance in light of the sheer number of sensuous artworks that remain extant; as if a subject’s proliferation proves that it did not transgress moral expectations.\footnote{Bette Talvacchia, “The Word Made Flesh: Spiritual Subjects and Carnal Depictions in Renaissance Art,” in The Sensuous in the Counter-Reformation Church, Marcia B. Hall and Tracy E. Cooper, eds. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 50.} Yet, only a brief perusal of art treatises or sermons negates Talvacchia’s assertion entirely. Following Talvacchia, Genevieve Warwick refuses to legitimate the three unanimous voices of Cardinal de Sourdis, Baldinucci, and Maffeo Barberini, who all expressed concern that Bernini’s Apollo and Daphne might offend the chaste eye. She prefers to read their statements as “an admiring testament to the sculptor’s disarming prowess.”\footnote{Genevieve Warwick, Bernini: Art as Theater (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 82-83.}

This poem alone indicates that just how ubiquitous the warnings of art theorists and preachers were, and therefore they must not be ignored. After reviewing Jesuit art treatises, Jeffrey Muller pondered “why some art historians persist in the claim that no substantial body of art theory is available as a means to understand the art of seventeenth-century Rome. That view may result in part from a blind spot that cannot credit as serious the
primary agenda to suppress nudity and promote the standards of sacred painting.” There is no doubt that there were several prominent intellectuals who published treatises on art, in addition to the voices of the preachers like Robert Bellarmine or Gian Paolo Oliva, decrying lasciviousness, as we will see below. It seems likely that the Council Fathers promulgated an imprecise decree for the sake of brevity and expediency in passing the decree knowing that many others would formulate a more thorough theory.

III. Art Treatises

For this reason, it is of the utmost importance to examine the art treatises published after the conclusion of the Council of Trent for insight into the reception of Early Modern Catholic art. In addition to focusing on Bellarmine, I will highlight the writings of the priest and author, Giovanni Andrea Gilio (d. 1584) whose *Dialogue on the Errors and Abuses of Painters* (1564) was the first treatise on art to be written after the conclusion of the Council of Trent;⁷⁵ the reform-minded cardinal archbishop of Bologna, Gabriele Paleotti (1522-1597), who influenced Trent’s decree on images and whose *Discorso intorno alle imagini*


⁷⁵ Mario Di Monte, “Gilio, Giovanni Andrea,” in *Dizionario Biografico Degli Italiani* (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana Fondata da Giovanni Treccani, 2000) Gilio was little known in his own day. His famous criticism of Michelangelo’s *Last Judgment* has drawn much more attention, and for that reason his name and a few pithy details concerning his life surface in many editions and commentaries on sixteenth-century art theory. Beside Di Monte’s entry for the DBdI, the best source for information on Gilio is from the edited and translated volume of Gilio’s *Dialogues* published by the Getty Institute with accompanying introduction and articles; see Giovanni Andrea Gilio, *Dialogue on the Errors and Abuses of Painters*, ed. Carol M. Richardson, trans. Michael Bury and Lucinda Byatt (Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute, 2018); Michael Bury, “Gilio on Painters of Sacred Images,” in *Dialogue on the Errors and Abuses of Painters* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2018); Carol M. Richardson, “Gilio’s Point of View,” in *Dialogue on the Abuses of Painters* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2018); Lucinda Byatt, “Gilio’s Text and the English Translation,” in *Dialogue on the Errors Adn Abuses of Painters* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2018). Though it is somewhat older Scavizzi’s chapter on Trent is also a useful companion to Gilio’s art theory, see Giuseppe Scavizzi, *The Controversy on Images from Calvin to Baronius*, (New York: P. Lang, 1992).
sacre e profane (1582) though unfinished was a fundamental text for future theorists; 76 cardinal archbishop of Milan Federico Borromeo (1564-1631), who was cousin to Carlo Borromeo, and a collaborator of Bellarmine and Paleotti. 77 In the works of these authors, a clear and continuous response to art emerges: cast the sensual images into the fire, and be ever vigilant of their perverse traps! 78 The conflict presented in the question at hand between decorum, art, and sensuality was especially important to top level clerics. The stakes cannot be understated. The overwhelming concern on the behalf of the art theorists was that an image, if too sensual, could incite the viewer to lust. Such a result, far from being salutary, could be eternally damning. The theorists and preachers armed their audience against the slippery slope of lust by recommending the custody of the senses as a means to do spiritual combat with the devil and warned them of the catastrophes that would befall any who did not heed their word. At the same time, some authors- especially earlier ones - were keen to defend the Catholic use and validity of sacred images on the grounds that they were helpful to the faithful. All of these ideas are represented in each treatise to varying degrees as Muller observes of Antonio Possevino’s Biblioteca Selecta (1593) including:

warning against the evil of nudity, insisting on the truth in sacred images,

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76 A modern translation of Paleotti’s treatise is available thanks to the Getty series, see Gabriele Paleotti, Discourse on Sacred and Profane Images, ed., Paolo Prodi, trans., William McCuaig (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2012). Since 1959, Paolo Prodi has been the authoritative source for studies on Paolo Prodi, his biography first published in 1959 remains the definitive study on the Cardinal Archbishop, see: Paolo Prodi, Il Cardinale Gabriele Paleotti (1522-1597), (Roma: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 1959); Paolo Prodi, “Paleotti, Gabriele,” in Dizionario Biografico Degli Italiani (Roma: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana Fondata da Giovanni Treccani, 2014).


78 I treat these men in chronological order, excepting the latter three Jesuits, whom I group as members of the same order, not because they express a shared ‘Jesuit’ perspective on the issue.
recommending to painters meditation on the passion of Christ as a source of invention, counseling a style that would imitate the ancients, invoking recent books about painting that filled in the outlines of the Council of Trent’s decree, relying on the expertise of artists closely associated with the Jesuits, advocating a flexible practice of architecture guided by Vitruvius but open to reason and experience.  

**Defending Sacred Art Against Protestant Critiques**

Robert Bellarmine never wrote a systematic treatise on sacred art; however, he defended the cult of saints, their relics, and images in the second book of the *Seventh Controversy in General of the Church Triumphant* (1587). His main concern is not with the purification of sacred art, but the validation of images against the Protestant critique. This should be unsurprising given that his arguments are contained in his volumes of Christian controversies. As usual for Bellarmine, his main antagonists are Martin Luther and John Calvin. He was not writing a history of art, but a “polemical history of theological arguments about images.”

He distinguishes between idols, which he defines as false similitudes; and images, which he defines as true similitudes of a thing; and argues that it is right to make images, including images of God, and keep them in churches. Similarly,
in Paleotti’s construction, the appropriate use of images by Catholics is carefully positioned between two dangerous extremes idolatry and iconoclasm. The idolaters adore images as God, while the heretics suppress them or remove them entirely. The Catholic Christian “does not banish images but does not adore them as divine things either. Gazing at an image the mere resemblance of the prototype, the Catholic moderates his veneration to a suitable standard and to the prescriptions of the sacred canons and councils.” The emphasis on the image as a “resemblance of the prototype” resonates with Bellarmine’s notion that images are similitudes of a real thing.

For those, who remained unconvinced that the creation of images was a legitimate Christian endeavor, Paleotti reminded them that there were many faithful and holy artists within the Judeo-Christian tradition including Beseleel and Ooliab, the divinely-appointed architects and decorators of the Ark of the Covenant; Saint Luke, the reputed portraitist of the Virgin Mary; Claudius, Nicostratus, Synphronianus, Castorius, and Simplicius, sculptors who suffered martyrdom under Diocletian rather than applying their skill to fabricating idols; Saint Nicodemus, who according to Athanasius made an image of the Savior responsible for miracles in Beirut; Eucratius who fell ill when he refused to portray Saint Cornelius, but miraculously recovered when he completed the image; Saturninus a painter monk, whose depiction of Saint Gregory between Saints Peter and Paul was so pleasing to God that candles spontaneously lit when they were near the image; and Fra Angelico, a distinguished painter and Dominican friar famous for his holiness. To this

83 Paleotti, Discourse on Sacred and Profane Images, 57.

84 Paleotti, Discourse on Sacred and Profane Images, 78–81. It is interesting to note that he quotes from a life of Albrecht Dürer, who may have been sympathetic toward Lutheranism, relating that “he was a most diligent custodian of sanctimony and modesty, and no filth, nothing indecent, appears in his works, for the chaste thoughts of his mind shunned all such things.”
defense he adds that God was the first image fashioner insofar as he created man in his image; Abraham built an altar; Jacob erected a statue; the Solomonic temple was adorned with pictures, sculptures, and other works; God commanded Moses to make a brazen serpent; and others beside.85 Paleotti’s argument was the traditional defense of images on the basis that they were divinely ordained and that the custom of making images was practiced by holy men and women.

*The Profitable Use of Sacred Art*

Paleotti enumerates that sacred art, like preaching, has three purposes: to delight, teach, and move faithful viewers. Paleotti takes for granted as a general principle that everyone can “feel great pleasure from beautiful pictures.”86 For that reason, he argues that it is superfluous to prove that pictures provide pleasure. Instead, he argues that the delight from images is great. To have pleasure from something is to know it in one of three ways. First, animalistically, meaning through the senses; second, rationally, meaning that knowledge is the result of the assessment of sensorial information; third, supernaturally, meaning God directly reveals knowledge of something. These ways of knowledge produce corresponding delights. In his view, paintings delight sensually through sight from the variety of colors, shadows, figures, and ornaments; they delight rationally through imitation, especially by imitating that which is supernatural or distant from the human experience. Exactly how they delight spiritually is left rather vague, but Paleotti assures his reader that delight from spiritual cognition surpass by far all the others deriving from

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86 Paleotti, *Discourse on Sacred and Profane Images*, 112.
material things by “elevating the soul to celestial love.” In other words, the spiritual
delight derived from sacred images is the elevation of the soul from the quotidian to the
supernatural after ruminating on that which the sense of sight receives. This is, of course,

exactly the position of Bellarmine’s Mind’s Ascent.

So inseparable are historical and theological accuracy that the first topical chapter
of Borromeo’s book, ostensibly on decorum, is a reflection of how a painting’s decorum
itself delights the viewer: “[Decorum] brings particular pleasure to the minds of
viewers…The pleasure created by these arts is essentially the same as the pleasure
produced by living, natural things, except that the artistic representations neither breathe,
speak nor move.” The mimetic quality of painting is in and of itself pleasing, but the
painter’s ability to imitate nature as closely as possible is the basis of its decorum and the
viewer’s delight.

Imitation of nature was closely related to the second purpose of art, to instruct the
viewer about the faith. There was a long precedent for defending art on these grounds as
Gilio points out when he cites Gregory the Great’s trope – reiterated by Trent – that images
were the libri pauperum [books of the poor]: “painting is nothing other than history for
the illiterate; for just as one person learns about what happened by reading a history, an
illiterate person would do so by looking at a painting…the painter with his brush is no less
obliged to portray the plain and simple truth than is the historian with his pen.” The
purpose of painting, especially sacred painting, was to describe an event as it happened

87 Paleotti, Discourse on Sacred and Profane Images, 114.
88 Borromeo, Sacred Painting, 3.
before the eyes of those unable to read. For that reason, the most important goal of sacred history painting was clinging to truth. Federico Borromeo in particular urged artists to depict persons with historical accuracy with attention to their true clothing and features.90 These two features joined together to help move the viewer to revere God and holy persons and model themselves after their actions, “reverence toward God and the Saints – as well as praise, imitation, fear, sorrow, and hope – are precisely the emotions or stirrings of the soul that sacred images can arouse.”91 The conclusions are clear. Art was legitimate because it was profitable to souls. When people viewed decorous images in the right contexts it could move them to great piety and encourage them to live and act like the saints.

_Error and Decorum_

Given the priority placed on instruction and historical truth, it should not be surprising that authors bemoan paintings with historical errors. Indeed, Paleotti takes on the issue of historical accuracy in painting under the heading of “lying and false pictures.” Citing Augustine, he defines falsity as “the signification of a thing that is not actually how it is being signified.”92 His admonitions are easy to understand. The painter’s objective ought to be to represent an object as it was with attention to whatever source he may have at his disposal. For example, he cites biblical evidence to claim that painters should depict King Saul as a tall man, Zacheus as short, and Goliath as a giant. For errors “about the site” he adds that the Magdalene should not be depicted as lying prostrate before the savior when

90 Borromeo, _Sacred Painting_, chs. 4, 7, 8.

91 Borromeo, _Sacred Painting_, 39–41.

92 Paleotti, _Discourse on Sacred and Profane Images_, 218.
she washed his feet since the Gospel text indicates she was standing behind him. Among “errors of quality,” he numbers painting John the Evangelist as a young man while writing the Gospel, since he was known to be old by that time. Among errors “of action” he includes painting someone doing things they never did; for example, painting Saint Peter engaging in combat. Depicting Moses crossing the Red Sea at the time of Nebuchadnezzar would fall under “temporal error,” and it would be an “error of dress” to paint Elias with a delicate physique. Among general errors he includes depicting Peter’s passion as a decapitation scene instead of a crucifixion. The wide variety of errors relating to accuracy prove that he expected painters to pay rigorous attention to historical detail. Similarly Gilio laments that painters frequently depict the following errors: the thieves crucified with Jesus bound with ropes in lieu of nails; Saint Peter as an old man at the time of the Passion; Saint John the Evangelist as a beardless youth at the time of the Passion; Saint Joseph as a decrepit old man at the time of his betrothal; John the Baptist wearing short garments; the Magdalene in luxurious clothing emblematic of a prostitute in lieu of penitential clothing that reflects her conversion; Jerome with a red cardinal’s hat; Francis of Assisi as well dressed; Christ as beautiful and delicate at the time of the crucifixion; Sebastian martyred without arrows; Stephen stoned without stones; and many others beside.

They also fulminated against theological and doctrinal errors. Paleotti delineates five grades of theological error including rash, scandalous, erroneous, suspect, and heretical errors. To these he encourages painters to be wary of superstitious and

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93 Paleotti, *Discourse on Sacred and Profane Images*, 221-222.


95 Paleotti, *Discourse on Sacred and Profane Images*, 160–72. Paleotti describes these errors over the course of seven short chapters.
apocryphal errors. “Rash” errors refer to emphatic declarations of presumptions as truths. He offers, for example, a Last Judgment that implies more women will be saved than men. Scandalous images are those that portray religious figures without dignity including painting a priest at a table with his concubine, or a nun with curls in her hair and makeup on her face. Erroneous pictures “sin in matters of faith or morals but fail to qualify as heretical.” He struggles to identify images that transgress expectations in this category, but suggests that images, which incorrectly portray mysteries of the faith such as the trinity qualify as erroneous. In a display of erudition, Paleotti supplies a variety of theological definitions for the category of the “suspect,” but insists that for his own purposes a simpler definition of a suspect image is required. A suspect image leaves its heresy unclear, but perplexes the viewer all the same. As an example, he describes a painting depicting the demon whispering in the ear of the Emperor Constantine. He frames this as a Lollard heresy, insofar as John Wycliffe asserted that it was the devil who convinced Constantine to bestow temporal goods on the Church. The heretical picture is easier to define. It depicts a theological error made by the intellect, and willfully possessed despite the portrayal of a theological error. For an example, he describes a painting in which a priest takes a wife.

Paintings might fall into the category of superstition for two reasons. First, if the painter worked under some superstitious condition, such as refusing to paint a crucifixion of Peter until he heard a cock crow. Second, if the painting’s subject matter contained some superstitious act such as offering incense to false gods. Apocryphal images, like books, are those that neither have the necessary grounding in canonical or hagiographical texts. An apocryphal picture depicts some sacred action or moment in a depth of detail not revealed

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96 Paleotti, *Discourse on Sacred and Profane Images*, 165.
by Scripture. For example, depicting a rearing horse in the conversion of Saint Paul. The horse is absent in the Lucan account, but tradition and reason suggest that Paul rode on horseback. So long as the depiction is consistent with tradition and good sense Paleotti believes it is permissible.

The final and most ardent concern of the theorists was with a lack of decency in images, which above all, referred to nudity, or even the suggestion of nudity. This was evident from the outset in Gilio’s *Dialogue* and its rebuke of Michelangelo’s nude saints in the *Last Judgment*. Nudity was anathema to the character and custom of saints: “But if we see the private parts of grown men and women, it brings shame and scandal…In the case of saints, apart from making one blush, indescribable remorse would be provoked in the mind, seeing that a saint would not only would have avoided displaying his private parts to others but would not even have looked at them himself…”97 To Gilio, portraying saints in the nude was an issue of historical truth just as much as it was one of propriety. He identified a logical inconsistency in painting extreme practitioners of chastity in the nude. In Gilio’s telling, these saints were so rigid in the custody of their chastity they avoided looking at their own bodies. In particular, he condemns the proclivity to paint John the Baptist in such a way that his tunic “barely covers his buttocks…it would not have been appropriate for him, as a model of chasteness and modesty to show his naked thighs.”98 As was typical though, Gilio’s concern was with the senses of the viewer: “to demonstrate the purity, chasteness and reverend nature of religion…painters must use their brushes and

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colors to instill chasteness through the eyes of their viewers."  

Gilio’s themes resonate with the larger issues of the senses in the spiritual life, and he set the agenda for many of the post-Tridentine periods tracts on art.

After Gilio, it became increasingly rare to attack particular artworks on the basis of indecency in artworks. Johannes Molanus (1533-1585), who became a professor of theology at Leuven in 1570 (the very same year Bellarmine was ordained there) was the first theorist of the post-Tridentine period to comment on nudity as a general problem in his *De Picturibus et imagines sacrilibus*.  

For Paleotti, nudity, or as he put it images of male and female saints painted with “scant honesty and abundant lasciviousness,” was the most significant problem with sacred art. What is more, he remarks that “they portray the saints in such a way that they inspire no devotion; indeed, we see them portrayed with manners and visages and ornaments totally alien to the rigor of life and the mortification that the saints being shown always observed.”  

This critique was double edged. On the one hand, Paleotti scolded artists for representing saints in a way that was untrue to their true features and conditions. On the other hand, it hinted at a bigger problem, the portrayal of saints in an idealized and perhaps inappropriately sexualized manner. If he was unclear about that concern in that passage, he elaborates on the point in later chapters. He adds the specific admonition that painters should not depict portraits of saints, or other persons, in a lascivious manner that might arouse libidos. Where saints were the subject matter the

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101 Paleotti, *Discourse on Sacred and Profane Images*, 176.

painter had to attend to two criteria: accurate representation of their appearance, but also their way of life such that their features “all conform to the vow they made in this life to spurn the world and throw off [lust] (lussuria) and earthly delights.” Paleotti’s statement was a stern warning against painters who depicted saints immodestly thereby provoking arousal. So concerned was he with lascivious images, which in his view were the attempts of the devil to corrupt souls, that he actually advocated their destruction. The point is clear: destroying indecent images was preferable to permitting viewers to see them.

Paleotti died before he was able to finish his *Discourses*, which accounts for a certain lack of specificity in its treatment of nudity in images. According to notes, which record his plans, the third book was supposed to concern lascivious and indecent images. Because Paleotti never completed the work, some scholars have suggested that it has received outsized attention. After all, Paleotti only published the *Discourses* for limited circulation among friends for comment. Therefore, it was never widely read in either learned or popular circles. Furthermore, the text remained unfinished, meaning the contents of his planned chapters on lascivious art will forever remain a mystery. These criticisms miss the point on two important bases. First, the text still reflects the beliefs of a post-Tridentine reforming bishop. Second, even if it was not a widely published text, the *Discorsi* was influential. This was true, at the very least, for Federico Borromeo, who

103 Paleotti, *Discourse on Sacred and Profane Images*, 214.

104 See Paleotti, *Discourse on Sacred and Profane Images*, 214 “Being unable to get rid of the use of images, the demon tries to fill them with abuses.” 176.


brought a much higher degree of specificity to the problem of lascivious art than his mentor.\(^{107}\) For him the issue is above all one of nudity and the problem of lascivious portrayals of saints. He states that artists must avoid portraying nudity because it is “of necessity unsuited for the truth of a church teaching; it can also offend the sensibilities of viewers and weaken their religious devotion;”\(^{108}\) especially when the naked legs of saints, and intertwined legs lead to “unsuitable thoughts could steal into viewers’ souls.”\(^{109}\) He adds that the Virgin Mary should not be clothed in tight drapery so “that it clings distinctly to each of her limbs.”\(^{110}\) In addition, he disapproves of nude figures even if the nudity is biblically accurate, specifying images of the Old Testament heroine, Susanna.”\(^{111}\) He rejects painting Adam and Eve’s “innocent nudity” because “the viewers who look at these painted nude bodies are not themselves in a state of innocence; as a result, they are able to blush and conjure up many shameful thoughts.”\(^{112}\) Finally, he decries portraying saints with “bodies so robust and muscular that they seem to be painting athletes, not male or female saints…”\(^{113}\) Given his aversion to nudity, it is especially interesting to note that Borromeo actually owned a copy of Titian’s *Penitent Magdalene*, famous for its bare-breasted

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\(^{108}\) Borromeo, *Sacred Painting*, 21. It is interesting that Borromeo ended up owning one of Titian’s *Magdalenes*.


\(^{110}\) Borromeo, *Sacred Painting*, 23.

\(^{111}\) Borromeo, *Sacred Painting*, 35.

\(^{112}\) Borromeo, *Sacred Painting*, 121-123.

\(^{113}\) Borromeo, *Sacred Painting*, 53. In all likelihood, Borromeo has St. Sebastian in mind, whose martyrdom was typically portrayed in sensual ways with abundant nudity.
portrayal of the Magdalene in a state of so-called “penitential nudity.””\textsuperscript{114} He claims that “what makes this painting particularly admirable is the fact that although the artist depicted her nude he was able to maintain her decency.”\textsuperscript{115} Unfortunately, he does not explain exactly how that was possible. To summarize, Borromeo’s greatest fear in painting was the presence or the suggestion of nudity and sexuality for its potential danger to the beholder.

IV. The Long Legacy of Trent’s Decree on Images

Decades after Bellarmine and the above-mentioned theorists died, questions concerning sacred images continued to vex Catholic spiritual writers. Here, I consider the works of Giovanni Domenico Ottonelli and Carlo Gregorio Rosignoli.\textsuperscript{116} In content, their work hardly differs from their predecessors; however, their context was markedly different. By the time Ottonelli wrote the 	extit{Trattato} in 1652, and Rosignoli 	extit{La pittura in giudicio} (1697), the Council of Trent had ended decades before, and there was hardly any hope left for


\textsuperscript{115} Federico Borromeo, 	extit{Museum}, 181.


\textsuperscript{116} Rosignoli, 	extit{La Pittura in Giudicio}, 256 “il chiuder gli occhi è un escluder le prime specie de’ vizii, le prime scintille della concupiscenza, i primi assalta di Satana.”
unifying Christianity under the Catholic Church. Theorists’ attention therefore focused on the issue of purity in art instead of iconoclasm. Yet, the apology for and anxieties about art had changed so little. It raises a few questions: why did Catholic authors continually insist on defending images against iconoclasts? What about sacred art did not conform to their expectations? If painters did not sanitize sacred art according to the Tridentine decree, episcopal supervision, and the many art treatises at their disposal, why were their images not censored more harshly? Answering these questions is outside of the scope of this dissertation; yet it is also interesting to note that these treatise writers, who were otherwise highly reflective intellectuals, also did not dwell on these questions. Characteristically, they preferred to stick with tradition.

It should come as no surprise therefore that Ottonelli focuses his positive appraisals of sacred images upon a familiar theme, their ability to delight, instruct, and move. The first is delight, which he does not limit to the senses, but extends to reason and spirit like Paleotti. Sacred art primarily pleased the sense of sight through the virtuosity of the painting defined as “the gracious variety of colors, the vagaries of the light, the artifice of the design, the gentility of the ornaments, and the rest, that is seen when the spectator’s soul is filled with wonder.”117 Of course, delight, even delighting the soul, was not the only end for painting. Among its other good uses Ottonelli includes its ability to teach, move the will, and aid the memory. Like so many theorists before him, Ottonelli was wholly unable to resist referring to Gregory the Great when he assures his reader that “these [images] give light to the unlearned, who do not know how to read, nor are they able

117 Giovanni Domenico Ottonelli, *Trattato Della Pittura e Scultura: Uso et Abuso Loro*, eds. Pietro and Vittorio Casale Treviso: Libreria editrice Canova, 1973), 57 “...e questo nasce dalle sacre immagini, quando il senso dell'occhio conosce in quel e la gratiosa varietà de' colori, la vaghezza de' lumi, l'artificio del disegno, la gentilezza degli ornamenti, & il resto, che veduto empie di dolce maraviglia l'animo dello spettatore.”
interpret the meaning of the Preacher well enough concerning certain principal mysteries of the faith, which are necessary to know for salvation.”

Ottonelli believed that the content of images was most efficacious for moving the will. He believed that images of the saints were most effective to inspire people to follow good examples of Christian discipline. Finally, he also believed, like Paleotti, that images invigorated the viewers’ memory.

Aside from Paleotti he cites numerous venerated biblical and patristic sources including Luke’s Acts of the Apostles, the Second Council of Nicaea, John Damascene, Augustine, Gregory the Great, and the Venerable Bede. If these revered sources were not enough, he relates one story about Saint Elizabeth of Hungary (1207-1231). Praying in Church, she raised her eyes to an unspecified painting of Christ hanging from the cross, and her heart was immediately struck, and she was deeply moved such that tears were gushing from her eyes as if they were two rivers. In his retelling the scene compelled her to reflect on her own worldly fortune in relation to Christ’s woeful suffering. Such was her agony in considering this contrast that the color faded from her cheeks as if she died, and she collapsed to the floor, which moved many witnesses. Ottonelli concluded that if an image could have such an effect on the powerful and literate, then it was necessary to

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118 Ottonelli, *Trattato Della Pittura e Scultura: Uso et Abuso Loro*, 62 “Con queste si da lume a gl'imperiti, che non sanno leggere, ne possono bastevolmente intendere dalla voce de' Predicatori alcuni misteri principali, e necessari di sapersi per la salute.” What is most interesting about this passage is that he cites the Gregorian text directly from Paleotti’s *Discorsi*.


120 Ottonelli, *Trattato Della Pittura e Scultura: Uso et Abuso Loro*, 63–64.

maintain them in churches and sacred places. What is more, as a saint Elizabeth represented a model for the faithful to imitate.

Like their clerical peers writing on the same subject, Ottonelli and his confrere Rosignoli, expressed nothing but horror regarding indecency in art. It is important to note that by Rosignoli’s time, the drive to defend images against Protestants had notably diminished. In fact, Rosignoli mentions neither Luther nor Calvin in his encomium on the good uses of sacred images. Given that Rosignoli was a student of the Jesuits before he came one it is plausible to credit the consistency in their message with the unchanging curriculum of the Jesuits, which evolved little over the course of the seventeenth century after the publication of the Ratio Studiorum.\textsuperscript{122}

Whatever the cause for the consistency, the point remained the same, nudity reigned supreme in their vitriol. Ottonelli lists three reasons against depicting nude bodies. First, the danger of temptation against purity is too great for the painter himself.\textsuperscript{123} This is especially true, according to Ottonelli, because there is temptation present enough when depicting a clothed figure let alone a nude figure which captures “the imagination more profoundly, and immediately will apprehend the less modest parts of human nature with the great danger of losing the precious joy of purity. These temptations will rest in the mind and cause many robust temptations.”\textsuperscript{124} Second, nudity in images is akin to a spiritual


\textsuperscript{123} Ottonelli, \textit{Trattato Della Pittura e Scultura: Uso et Abuso Loro}, 140.

\textsuperscript{124} Ottonelli, \textit{Trattato Della Pittura e Scultura: Uso et Abuso Loro}, 141 “...l’immaginatione più vivamente, & immediatamente apprenderà le parti poco modeste con gran pericolo di perder la pretiosa gioia della purità. Quelle specie resteranno nella mente, e cagioneranno molte, e galgiarde tentationi.”
assault. Painters must avoid nudity so that spectators are not moved to dishonesty.¹²⁵ The effects of viewing these images were catastrophic. To view the lascivious image was to deprave the heart.¹²⁶ As Rosignoli reiterated: the death of the soul entered through the eyes of the body.¹²⁷ Third, painting nudes would result in developing a reputation for being lascivious, intemperate, and inclined to obscenity.¹²⁸ To accompany these he enumerates another ten reasons to avoid all types of impure or scandalous images. First, he claims the painter must be godly and clothe his creation as God clothed the first humans: “Take the example of God, who made Adam and his wife tunics and clothed them.”¹²⁹ Beyond that he laments that dishonest images impede the glory of God and are like sacrificing to Satan; art that ruins the soul, ruins the reputation of art itself. Thereafter, he advises painters on how to refrain from painting scandalous images. They ought to consider the pains of purgatory that await the artificers of scandalous images; their own reputation; the advice of confessors and spiritual directors; and to model their work after the example of “judicious painters.”¹³⁰

Though nothing elicited more anxiety than nudity in art, there were other vices that might pervert an artwork and thereby its viewer. Ottonelli proscribed all manner of lasciviousness. Commenting on an image of Saint Sebastian in a certain unnamed church

¹²⁵ Ottonelli, Trattato Della Pittura e Scultura: Uso et Abuso Loro, 142–43.

¹²⁶ Rosignoli, La Pittura in Giudicio, 237.

¹²⁷ Rosignoli, La Pittura in Giudicio, 246.

¹²⁸ Ottonelli, Trattato Della Pittura e Scultura: Uso et Abuso Loro, 143.

¹²⁹ Ottonelli, Trattato Della Pittura e Scultura: Uso et Abuso Loro, 144 “Prendesi dall'esempio di Dio, il quale fecit Adae, & uxori eius tunicas, & induit eos.” He conveniently cites Genesis 3:21, while skipping over the fact that both Adam and Eve were naked until they committed original sin.

¹³⁰ Ottonelli, Trattato Della Pittura e Scultura: Uso et Abuso Loro, 146–54.
in Florence he decried it not only for its nudity, but also for the air of sweetness in his face, that would “capture the eyes and the hearts of certain women.”  

The second abuse consists in “undevout expressions, indecent clothing, and in other circumstances, with which certain painters often create sacred images such that they do not appear to represent holy persons, but men of common conditions.”  

Specifically, he bemoans undevout faces, indecorous clothing, impure eyes, and immoral female behavior. While some of these issues, are related to how the spectator would receive the image, it seems that Ottonelli also worried about the reputation of the saints themselves.

For Ottonelli, the artist was hardly alone in the endeavor to purify sacred art. A great deal of responsibility lay in the eyes of spectators as well as the pockets of patrons. To some degree, the problem began with the patrons themselves. Ottonelli clarified the issue in the simplest way: possessing obscene images as decorations for the home was a mortal sin. Using a jarring metaphor, Ottonelli likens keeping obscene artworks in the home to “closing one’s eyes to sleep in the midst of serpents.” For the benefit of the reader, Ottonelli offers three remedies to address the problem of these venomous serpents: move them out of view, especially out of view of the unexpecting visitor; cover pictures

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131 Ottonelli, *Trattato Della Pittura e Scultura: Uso et Abuso Loro*, 180 “gli occhi, & il cuore d'alcune donne rimanevano.”

132 Ottonelli, *Trattato Della Pittura e Scultura: Uso et Abuso Loro*, 181 “nell' espressione poco divota; e nel vestito indecente, & in latre ciconstanze, con le quali alcuni Pittori formano spesso le sacre immagini tali, che non paiono rappresentar santi Personaggi, ma huomini di volgar condizione.”

133 Ottonelli, *Trattato Della Pittura e Scultura: Uso et Abuso Loro*, 181.


135 Ottonelli, *Trattato Della Pittura e Scultura: Uso et Abuso Loro*, 323 ”...chiudere gli occhi al sonno in mezzo de' serpenti.”
and clothe statues; and to repaint or remove certain lewd features from the artworks.\textsuperscript{136} To defend these practices, Ottonelli lends the reader the example of none other than Robert Bellarmine. He claims that on one occasion, Bellarmine visited the home of a great lord, whose home was replete with nude statues. The cardinal gently appealed to his host’s piety and encouraged him to find clothing for the statues.\textsuperscript{137} Like Ottonelli, Rosignoli recommends emending these obscene works as a first line of defense against their danger. He likens the impure image to the figure of the Magdalene. If she could convert herself from prostitute to saint by changing her “eyes from arches of unclean arrows she made them fonts of the purest tears; her hair laces of worldly loving, she made chains of divine love; and from impure kisses she made the most holy reverences to the feet of the Savior,” then a profane artwork could become sacred.\textsuperscript{138} In artworks “immodest faces might be colored with virginal modesty; dissolute gestures might be reformed into respectful attitudes; eyes might be directed to look at a crucifix; and hands might be employed in holding an instrument of devotion.”\textsuperscript{139} As for nudes, decency demanded the artist or patron to clothe them.\textsuperscript{140} Otherwise, their obscenity could corrupt forever. In contrast, even the lewdest theatrical performance would end, whereas “scandalous sketches…last a long time exposed in sight, make a continuous war against those who view them, passing from eye

\textsuperscript{136} Ottonelli, \textit{Trattato Della Pittura e Scultura: Uso et Abuso Loro}, 324–28.

\textsuperscript{137} Ottonelli \textit{Trattato Della Pittura e Scultura: Uso et Abuso Loro}, 325. For another version on this story and more analysis, see chapter three.

\textsuperscript{138} Rosignoli, \textit{La Pittura in Giudicio}, 177 “De gli occhi, archi d'immonde saette, fece fonti di purissime lagrime: de' capelli, lacci de' mondani amante, fe' vincoli del Divino amore: e de' baci impuri fe' castissimi ossequi a' piedi del Salvatore.”

\textsuperscript{139} Rosignoli, \textit{La Pittura in Giudicio}, 178 “le facce dipinte inveronconde siano colorite di verginal modestia, che i gesti dissoluti sian riformati in atteggiamenti rispetosi, che gli occhi sian rivolti a mirare un Crocifisso, che le mani sian impiegate in tener uno stromento di devotione.”

\textsuperscript{140} Rosignoli, \textit{La Pittura in Giudicio}, 188.
to eye, and quietly weasel their way into hearts…”  

In instances where the patron might not be amenable to moral advice, the responsibility fell on the eyes of the viewer to exercise extreme caution with their gaze.

To behold impure images was to sit in the school of lust for “with these images the incautious onlookers commit fornication of the eyes.” To avoid assaulting chastity Ottonelli offers three pieces of advice. First, follow the commandment of Christ “if your eye sees an obscenity, and it gives you an occasion to sin, pluck it out and hurl it far from you, that is, do not look.” Second, he points to the advice of Augustine and urges the reader to carefully guard the senses since “Death entered through the windows of the eyes.” If, however, either “by necessity, or by some good motive, we see some impure images, we should be cautious such that the eye does not receive the venom that it can bequeath to the heart and kill the soul with sin.” Third, he reiterated Bellarmine’s advice from the latter’s sermon on David and Bathsheba. He writes, “And as such I advise, he who does not wish to sin looking at impure images, ought to immediately move his eyes from

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141 Rosignoli, *La Pittura in Giudicio*, 7 “Non così i Ritratti scandalosi, che durano luncamente esposti in veduta, fanno continua guerra a’ riguardanti, passano da occhi ad occhi, e s’insinuano tacitamente ne’ cuori.”

142 Ottonelli, *Trattato Della Pittura e Scultura: Uso et Abuso Loro*, 369 “Con queste gli Spettatori incauti commettono la fornicatione degli occhi...”

143 Ottonelli, *Trattato Della Pittura e Scultura: Uso et Abuso Loro*, 379 “Se l’occhio tuo mirando l’oscenità, ti è occasione di peccato, cavallo, e gettalo lungi da te, cioè, non guardare.” One is a little surprised, if not relieved to read Ottonelli’s modification.

144 Ottonelli, *Trattato Della Pittura e Scultura: Uso et Abuso Loro*, 379 “La morte entrò per le finestre degli occhi.” Perhaps Ottonelli’s source text was one of Augustine’s sermons on the fall of Adam and Eve, which expressed the idea that original sin was a result of succumbing to the temptation of the senses (hearing, seeing, touching, and tasting).

145 Ottonelli, *Trattato Della Pittura e Scultura: Uso et Abuso Loro*, 379 “Dunque se per necessità, ò per altro buon motivo, vedremo qualche immagine dishonestà, procuriamo cautela tale, che l’occhio non receva il veleno per tramandarlo al cuore, & uccidere l’Anima col peccato.”
the impurity of the images.” 146 Consistent with tradition, Rosignoli presented the custody of the senses as the last line of defense: “the closing of the eyes is an exclusion of the first type of vice, and the first sparks of concupiscence, the first assaults of Satan.” 147 With these exhortations, Ottonelli and Rosignoli portrayed themselves as yet another voice among many that validated the use of images, and above all, warned about their dangers. What is more, they emphasized like their predecessor, Robert Bellarmine, that, in the secular world the best a Christian can do is maintain careful custody of his senses. In so doing, they upheld the tradition of their confreres and many others that rested the cosmic struggle of Christianity, the conflict between good and evil, on some of the smallest muscles of the human body, the orbicularis oculi. How could he do otherwise?

**Conclusion**

In much of this chapter and the preceding the reader may increasingly feel as if there were an echo. That is very much by design. Time and again, the story of the senses and the spiritual life is one of profound continuity. It is an issue western spiritual writers have grappled with for millennia. Their approach became increasingly consistent, even if increasingly paradoxical, as time progressed. This was as true when they applied the principles of use and custody of the senses to the world of the arts. In Christianity sacred art had long been permitted, and in fact exalted for its ability to delight, instruct, and move its viewers to greater piety. Even under periods of assault from various iconoclastic

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147 Rosignoli, *La Pittura in Giudizio*, 256 “il chiuder gli occhi è un escluder le prime specie de’ vizii, le prime scintille della concupiscenza, i primi assalta di Satana.”
movements, art had vigorous supporters. This fact was undeniably true in the wake of the Protestant Reformation.

The Council of Trent supported images as a means for learning the faith and for encouraging viewers to become ever more pious. Of course, that learning depended almost exclusively on the sense of sight. At the same time, Trent’s decree on sacred art voiced the concern of many that images not only inspired superstitious practices, which the Church was trying to uproot; but also, could be extremely dangerous to viewers if not executed with proper decorum. An unintentionally sensual image might have the exact opposite effect that the pious hoped for. Instead of leading a soul to greater piety, it might wholly corrupt them. Surely, this was precisely what all these bishops, preachers, and theorists hoped to avoid. One thing is absolutely clear, despite the Tridentine decree on images, artistic images that ignored expectations of decorum continued to remain in sacred spaces, and continued to be produced by artists. The onslaught of treatises for decades following the Council stand as a witness to that fact.

Resistance to and disobedience of Trent’s decrees and aspirations perfectly articulate the paradox presented in this dissertation between the application and custody of the senses for spiritual profit by giving it a material context. On the one hand, in the appropriate setting using sight could lead to salvation. On the other hand, in a more complex scenario sight could easily lead to damnation. The problem with sacred art, perfectly pious or otherwise, is that many images scrutinized and criticized by these preachers remained in situ in churches for many viewers to behold for centuries. Even within the walls of a church, during a sensuous Catholic service, a viewer had to practice
judicious use and custody of the senses. It was eternal salvation and eternal damnation that hung in the balance.
Conclusion

In this dissertation I have explored a pivotal theme of longstanding significance as it was understood and applied in a period marked by turmoil and change: the application and custody of the senses in the spiritual and practical elements of Catholicism. When scrutinized this theme explores Catholicism in its theological and theoretical perspectives as well as its practice in the worship lives of individuals. It sheds light on what people believed and how they lived. The world of early modern Catholics was one permeated by paradox, and this theme proves no exception. On the one hand, a flourishing of sacred art, architecture, music, preaching, devotional cultural, and a renewed innovation in meditative practices encouraged Catholics to think, feel, and pray with their senses more than ever. Indeed, sensuous language saturates the writings of the saints and mystics of the age, who powerfully describe their mystical experiences as events that occurred at the level of the human body. On the other hand, the religious culture of the day also demanded careful custody of the senses, abstemiousness, and self-abnegation to tame the flesh, subdue the body, and prize the spirit.

The culture, as many have pointed out, was one of regulation, but that regulation was not defined exclusively by examining thoughts and beliefs in order to separate the orthodox and the heterodox. It stimulated perceptions and emotions to elevate mundane experience into divine encounter. Preachers and pastors like Robert Bellarmine did not impose custody of the senses merely to encourage mortification and suffering for their own sake, but for the purpose of ordering oneself to the possibility of greater openness and awareness to the practice of their belief. To them it was of paramount importance so that souls might achieve the greater metaphysical realities of the afterlife. They believed
so ardently in the blissful rewards and unspeakable torments of the life to come that they were driven to avoid it whatever the cost.

Despite the vigorous debate, theological upheaval, and innovation that mark the period of the Reformations, this issue remained a complex constant in Catholicism. The story emphasizes consistency and great continuity, but that should be no surprise. The reformers and leaders of the Catholic Church in the Early Modern period were above all keenly aware of tradition and history. When they sought inspiration they turned to the ways, practices, and teachings of generations past. This was especially true for the central figure of this dissertation: Robert Bellarmine, influential theologian and preacher, devoted pastor and reformer, keen historian and controversialist, notable bishop and spiritual author. His life was marked by study and imbibing that tradition. His centrality and stature within the Catholic Church lend an authority to his voice and opinion shared by very few people of his age. In his writings and sermons, he communicated the central ideas of Catholic theology and encouraged the Catholic faithful to practice their religion.

Like his contemporaries and clergymen who responded to the Protestant critiques at the Council of Trent, Bellarmine’s thought depended on the past. For that reason, the first chapter of this dissertation explored ideas about the body and soul, use and custody of the senses in the western tradition from Plato to Bellarmine. It is no exaggeration to say that the same theories regarding the senses, their use, and custody arise throughout the canon of great thinkers. Thus, by the Early Modern period, the paradox was so well established and held so much authority that even Protestant refutations of it were mired in inconsistency. No one could deny that the appropriate use of the body and the senses were part of the Christian life if not pivotal for salvation, nor could they wholly disregard
the deeds of the body and its ability to succumb to temptation and sin. These ideas carried throughout the Catholic Reformation, where theologians and preachers taught the faithful the contents of the faith and how to practice it in sermons, spiritual writings, and catechisms. These encouraged the faithful to know their senses, to use them, and tame them. Furthermore, the Church would directly mediate holiness to the faithful by engaging their senses through the sacraments including Eucharist and baptism, and absolving them of their sensuous sins through confession and extreme unction.

The faithful were also offered examples to emulate in the saints and martyrs (as well examples to avoid in sinners and heretics) through preaching and painting. For this reason, the third chapter explored Robert Bellarmine’s sermons on the saints and sinners as well as the rewards and punishments the holy and unholy would experience in the afterlife. Unsurprisingly, the saints emerge as careful custodians of their senses who knew how to use their senses to move them toward greater contemplation. The sinners use their senses only to indulge their illicit desires. The extreme sensuous bliss of the former in heaven matches the intense anguish of the latter in hell, according to Bellarmine, his contemporaries, and the tradition they drew from.

The final chapter explores the serious implications of the paradox by examining how it played out in art and writings on art. Sacred art was meant to delight, instruct, and move the faithful to greater piety by placing before their lives the example of the saints with exquisite artistic skill. At the same time, preachers like Bellarmine and art theorists railed against indecency in art defined as immodest or nude portrayals of saints. They agonized over the damning possibility that indecorous images could incite the lust of their viewers undermining the purpose of the artwork altogether.
Together these chapters have considered Catholic beliefs and practices in the post-Tridentine era as something more than an assault on the senses in order to indoctrinate a class of unwitting faithful succumbing to sensuous onslaught. Surely, it was an aspirational religion with extremely high demands, but it was participatory, requiring intense engagement from its adherents, while remaining all too conscious of their fallenness. Many of its heroes and exemplars were extraordinary in their ability to deny themselves, and yet many of those did not always walk a straight and narrow path. The picture of Catholicism that emerges is one that was understanding of the human condition, the relation of the senses to the emotions, and religion’s role in maintaining social order. Just as they have developed a fuller image of Catholicism and the beliefs and practices of its followers in the early modern period, so too has it reconsidered its chief proponent Robert Bellarmine. Over time, Bellarmine’s lifelong involvement in the protection of Catholic theology led to an image of the man as an enemy of science and Protestantism, encouraged only by dogmatism. This dissertation reveals him for how he understood his life’s mission: as preacher, pastor, and caretaker of souls. That mission earned him the respect not only of Catholics, but also of Protestants throughout Europe. This reappraisal of Robert Bellarmine, therefore, does much to shed light on cross-confessional relations of the early modern period.

At the outset, the purpose of this dissertation was to explore the role of the senses in early modern Catholicism through the writings of its most important and influential theologian, Robert Bellarmine. This restricted scope limited the exploration and findings of this study. In many ways, it focused on the very center of Roman Catholicism, Italy, and even more specifically, Rome. Furthermore, it emphasized the ideas of some of
Catholicism’s most elite clergymen in place of laypeople. At the same time, every effort was made to unlock lay experience by examining popular and vernacular works. If these do not perfectly capture the thought of individual Catholics, then it should shed light on the ideas and mental networks to which they were exposed.

The relationship between Catholicism and the senses was not as some have described it. Early Modern Catholicism was not merely defined by its sensuous aesthetics, its “smells and bells.” Instead, the reform of Catholicism enacted a culture steeped in sensory regulation. That regulation depended on embracing a paradox. Catholic worship required use of the senses, both physically and imaginatively, to spur thoughts toward contemplation of the divine and to move people toward greater piety, and also custody of the senses through abnegation and mortification to spurn temptation that dragged people toward sin. This paradox was not new. It belonged to a long and venerable tradition that had many iterations in the biblical and classical traditions. All of these stemmed from ideas about the world of material versus the world of spirit characterized by Greek philosophers in the theory of the idea or form versus matter, and by Christians through Paul’s dichotomy between flesh and spirit.

The paradox had emerged in earlier iterations, to be sure. The characteristics of late medieval piety, for example, demonstrate the paradox in action. Sensuous expressions of devotion and reigning the temptations of the flesh structure medieval piety. Mystics, Consistent with the epithalamium of the Song of Songs, spoke of their longing for God in explicitly sensual terms. The relationship between the mystic and the divine was sensual and intimate as the many extant images of the Nursing Madonna, *Virgo Lactans* suggest. This iconography decorated the pages of manuscripts and chapel
altarpieces alike. In them the bare-breasted Virgin feeds the infant Jesus or a Christian saint, especially Bernard of Clairvaux. Could there be a more sensual expression of intimacy in Sacred Art? The iconography was so sensual that it was explicitly discouraged after the Council of Trent on the grounds that it was indecorous.¹ In part the new methods employed by artists, especially the discovery of perspective made these images and others all the more lifelike vivid, and therefore problematic.² At the same time, those same mystics and others pursued mortifications of the flesh and abandonment of the world with a renewed vigor. Catherine of Siena was famous not only for her visions but also for the intensity of her mortifications of the flesh. Similarly, the anchorite movement embodied by Julian of Norwich, and inspired by early Christian eremitism insisted on total physical isolation from the world.

Suffice it to say that the paradox and its practical implications were not new, and yet, within early modern Catholicism the distance between its extreme poles widened. Furthermore, the burden of the individual Christian to embrace both extremes developed as well. Mortifying the flesh while living in isolation was not always the clear and simple route to Christian perfection. Instead, the ideals shifted. Growing from the roots planted by the mendicants, the Jesuits promoted an ethos of “contemplatives in action.” The goal was to live and act in the world, but not to be of it; to use the body in the world and raise the spirit to higher contemplation but defend the senses from the onslaught the world


presented. Still questions remain. What inspired this shift? What changes occurred that presented contradictory ideas of the body’s danger and usefulness together?

Answering this question relies on consideration of context. Early Modern Catholicism in Rome grew out of the culture of the Italian Renaissance. The humanists fostered a new understanding of the human body emphasizing human the power of human reason and vaunted status as created by God instead of drawing attention to human lowliness compared to the divinity. This concept expressed itself most famously in Giovanni Pico della Mirandola’s encomiastic oration on the excellence of human beings and human intellectual efforts, but it also permeated the culture at large. Renaissance artists obsessed with using the tools of perspective to make images more lifelike did not make them more realistic, but more idealized. Artists, like Michelangelo, were dedicated to exploring the perfection of humanity, which they showcased by embellishing features. The fuel that kept the humanist fire burning was deep immersion in the classical tradition. For humanists, it was impossible to deny human achievement when faced with the overwhelming accomplishments of the Greeks and Romans in the arts, architecture, and linguistic style. The Catholic theologians of the era also imbibed this culture. Robert Bellarmine himself confesses that as a youth he composed Latin poems using only words attested to in Virgil’s lexicon. Faced with a culture that

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5 Quiviger, The Sensory World of Italian Art, 59-60.

6 Bellarmine, Autobiography, 2.
valorized human achievements and the excellence of the human, and reading the biblical texts in Genesis, Bellarmine and other theologians understood that the human body and its senses were the most useful tool to appreciate the created world and therefore God. At the same time, the valorization of Classical culture presented a problem insofar as it was pagan. For this problem, the classicism of Roman humanism had a solution. They applied the skills and learning of humanists to Christian education, recovering the texts of early Christians and the lives of early saints.7 Those texts filled with martyrdom accounts and spiritual combat through shocking feats of asceticism doubtless reminded early modern theologians about the dangers of temptation of the flesh. Indeed, as indicated in the preceding chapter, the teachings of Augustine and Gregory the Great on the custody of the eyes was ubiquitous in the writings of Catholic moralists. Bellarmine’s thought is steeped in the teachings of early Christianity.8 Thus as much as Renaissance humanism may have spurred theologians toward devotional practices that emphasized using the body and creation as a means to enhance meditation, so too did it force them to live up to the ideals of early Christianity’s ascetic saints.

The Protestant reformation’s rejection of the cult of saints presented a more immediate context from which to explain early modern Catholicism’s embrace of the sense paradox than Renaissance humanism. For one, the experiences of early Christian

7 D’Amico, Renaissance Humanism in Papal Rome, 144.

8 Even a cursory examination of his theological and historical works demonstrates his deep knowledge of early Christianity, see especially Robert Bellarmine, De Scriptoribus Ecclesiasticis Liber Vnus: Adiunctis Indicibus Undecim, & Brevi Chronologia Ab Orbe Conditio Vsque Ad Annum MDCXII (Paris: Sebastiani Cramoiys, 1644). Of course, Bellarmine was not alone. Another extremely influential saint living in post-Tridentine Rome, Philip Neri, was famous for continually reading the works of the desert fathers, see Jonathan Robinson, In No Strange Land: The Embodied Mysticism of Saint Philip Neri (Kettering: Angelic Press, 2015).
ascetics came alive anew for early modern Catholics in the form of martyrdom and persecution at the hands of Protestants (and in the mission fields of Asia, Africa and the New World). Furthermore, in the Catholic imagination Protestant worship and theology denied the soteriological benefits of ascetic works such as fasting and mortifications of the flesh. Recall that Catholics criticized Protestant theology and individual reformers for licentiousness on these grounds. Catholics armed with the example of the saints, maintained that these good works and custody of the senses were both valid and highly beneficial. At the same time, Catholics also perceived Protestant worship as asensuous, especially after iconoclastic outbreaks. While the changes that reformers introduced to the decoration of church interiors and liturgical rituals are more accurately described as aesthetic developments, to early modern Catholics these transformations were a refutation of valid, helpful, and traditional practices. Therefore, the vigorous Catholic interest in using the senses in worship and devotion confirmed longstanding Catholic practice and defined itself against these innovations. To Catholics the world was still very much enchanted, a place where the natural and supernatural mingled through the power of divine grace with the senses as the conduits of that grace. Intercessory prayers, masses, votive offerings, pilgrimage, and touching relics could yield miraculous

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9 See Gregory, Salvation at Stake.

10 See Cochalaes, de actis et scriptis Martini, 69, 162, 316.

11 For analyses of iconoclasm in the Reformations, see Eire, War Against the Idols and Bruce Gordon, Zwingli: God’s Armed Prophet (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), 101-108.

12 This worldview stands in pure contradistinction to Max Weber’s famous interpretation of the Protestant Reformation, which ushered in an age of reason and the “disenchantment” or “unmagicification” Entzauberung of the world.
healings.\textsuperscript{13} Images possessed a talismanic power to actualize what they signified.\textsuperscript{14} Furthermore, as in the experiences of Philip Neri, the mere sight of an image could eliminate the gap between divine and human through mystical transportation.\textsuperscript{15} Given the many witnesses that testified to Neri’s image-induced raptures, and others like it, Catholic theologians felt that there was adequate evidence to confirm that individuals could derive enormous spiritual benefit from appropriate use of the senses.

This study grounds early modern Catholicism’s approach to the senses within the context of Renaissance humanism and the Protestant Reformation clarifying that Catholic theology and spirituality was not merely reactionary and opposed to Protestantism, but responsive to theological and cultural movements. At the same time, these movements were likely not the only ones which influenced early modern Catholicism’s formulation of the longstanding paradox of the senses. Two dynamic cultural changes offer questions that this dissertation did not explore may have contributed to the paradox of the senses in early modern Catholicism and could provide fruitful grounds for future research. What impact did cross-cultural encounters from the mission fields have on Catholic understandings of the body and the senses? In many instances, missionaries were very surprised with some of the practices they encountered, and in others they were impressed though suspicious. Take for example the overwhelming ascetic practices of Rose of Lima and Kateri Tekakwitha both of whom modeled themselves after Saint Catherine of Siena.

\textsuperscript{13} See Paolo Parigi, \textit{The Rationalization of Miracles} (New York: Cambridge, 2012).


\textsuperscript{15} Costanza Barbieri, “‘To be in Heaven’ St. Phillip Neri Between Aesthetic Emotion and Mystical Ecstasy,” in \textit{The Sensuous in the Counter-Reformation Church}, Marcia B. Hall and Tracy E. Cooper eds. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 208.
Decades after her death, Rose of Lima became a model of virtue for Gian Paolo Oliva for the intensity of her self-mortification.  

Similarly, the Jesuit fathers, Claude Chauchetière and Pierre Cholenec, who recorded the ascetic virtues of Kateri Tekakwitha, were impressed by the severity of her austerity. What exactly drew Kateri to embrace Christian asceticism so fiercely? Alan Greer notes how certain mortifications and austerities were part of Mohawk battle preparation rituals. Whatever the cause behind the intensity of indigenous austerity, Catholics drew inspiration from their example. Another pertinent question remains. How did the increased emphasis on empirical studies as a way of knowing affect ideas about the body and its senses? Francis Bacon emphasized using the sense to observe particularities. In his theory, compiling these observable facts produced knowledge. There were also mistrust of the senses, as indicated in the thought of René Descartes. Descartes preferred to begin the process of inquiry with general principles and then move toward observable facts once he could validate their reliability. For the former the senses were imperative, and for the latter, information gleaned from them had to be doubted.

The doubts of the natural philosophers reflect those of the theologians, who knew the sense paradox well and understood that the senses were at once the ladder to heaven and the gate of sin. For these thinkers and their audiences, the body’s five senses became the place where the metaphysical battle between good and evil became a real one. The outcome of that battle was significant not only for the individual, but also for society. The

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17 For a full account of Kateri’s austerity, the Jesuit reaction to it, and explanations for it see Alan Greer, *Mohawk Saint: Catherine Tekakwitha and the Jesuits* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), ch. 5.

18 It is worth noting that Descartes was educated by the Jesuits and that Bacon was an admirer of Jesuit education.
wrong choices, misapplying the senses, had the potential to corrupt the entire social order. Furthermore, those choices would resound in the cacophony of hell and the choirs of heaven. To understand the paradox of the senses, its moral and spiritual demands, and its weighty eternal consequences for faithful Catholics is to understand what made Catholic reform of the early modern period distinct. Reform as an ideal and a concept is almost as old as Catholicism itself.

The Catholic Reformation in some ways is the antithesis of earlier movements of reform in the monasteries, which endeavored to restore monastic customs to the supposed pristine ideals of their founders. Practically this usually meant subjecting monks to greater austerity, rigors, and solitude in an effort to remove even the temptations of sin. Reformed monasteries, would be like Thomas More’s *Utopia*, a fictional place, whose inhabitants do not sin. In the mind of medieval monastic reformers, such a place would be a new Eden. For More, that interpretation misses the mark. Utopians do not sin because they have some special virtue, in fact, Utopians are not Christians, and therefore do not have grace, redemption, or salvation. They do not sin, because they have structured a society in which there is no occasion for sin. In some ways, this idea is antithetical to the Catholic Reformation. Its proliferation of uncloistered religious orders and its emphasis on lay spirituality demonstrate new ideas about living a good Christian life in the world. Its most significant saints, Charles Borromeo, Ignatius Loyola, Francis Xavier, Philip Neri, and Robert Bellarmine were all active in contemporary society. Even Teresa of Ávila passed a remarkable amount of her time traveling between convents spreading her reform movement, instead of remaining cloistered within one place. Collectively, these saints dedicated themselves to charitable works, practiced traditional
mortifications, and found solace and even mystical ecstasy by participating in Catholicism’s sensuous aesthetics. Their heroic virtue was to overcome the temptations of the world through custody of the senses, cooling of the passions, and the fervent embrace of the spiritual life. They did what saints were supposed to do, model a good Christian life. Early modern Catholicism paved a path for holiness and virtue for all Catholics. That road depended on embracing Catholicism’s sensuous aesthetics in liturgical and devotional life, and on waging spiritual combat through the custody of the senses.
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