CHAPTER FIVE

CATHOLIC POSTILLENFRESSER:
POSTILS, CATHOLIC REFORM, AND THE
COUNTER-REFORMATION

To the extent that it is written at all, the history of German Catholic preaching after Luther and before the Baroque usually begins in Trent, and does so in 1563.¹ Nothing could be more misleading. That year, it is true, brought an end to the Council of Trent, but the Council had already addressed issues of preaching in 1546. Priests were admonished to preach every Sunday and feast day, and to do so according to their own and their congregations’ level of understanding (capacitas). Preachers were to explain to the commoners, in plain language, what was required for salvation as well as which virtues to cultivate and which vices to shun. These mandates were further refined and emphasized in the decrees of 1563.²

In the Empire there were doubtless numerous slackers who would have done well to consider these Tridentine mandates and begin preaching more regularly. The production of standard sermon collections since 1530, however, suggests that a good number of Catholic priests were preaching frequently, and well before 1563. That year two editions of Johann Wild’s Short Postils came off German presses, bringing the total of complete sets of Catholic postils put into circulation since 1530 to nearly 180,000.³ Since the settlement reached at Augsburg, it is true that only four new postils had been authored, but they and other collections previously released were regularly reprinted for a total of forty-one separate editions in that eight-year period alone (1555–1563).⁴

Catholic postillators, printers, and many of their lay and ecclesiastical

¹ See above, 38–49.
³ Appendix 3, nos. 3–145; not included because they are incomplete sets are nos. 9, 17, & 26.
⁴ Ibid., nos. 104–145.
princes had lent sweat, money, and mandates to these efforts well before 1563. Given their expense, it seems unlikely that all of these tomes languished as mere doorstops, at least not on Sundays, feast days, and perhaps the nights before. The Council of Trent was important, to be sure, both doctrinally and for initiating a number of reforms that would bloom fully only in the later days of the Baroque. Among the most important were the educational reforms that eventually produced better pastors. In the case of German Catholic preaching, however, it would be a mistake to suggest that Trent’s decrees were somehow responsible for a process that was already well underway, even if the quality of preaching eventually improved.5

As was the case with Lutheran postils, the year 1555 is not without its problems as a place to begin the fourth phase of Catholic preaching and sermon production. Earlier demarcations were cleaner: the appearance of the first Catholic postils in 1530, the new works of Corvin and others that required new Catholic responses after 1535, and the victory in 1547 that brought synods, new postils, and the increased print production of sermons thereafter. As was the case for the Lutherans, one may say that by the Peace of Augsburg, nearly all of the first generation postillators were dead. The best Catholic preacher of his age, Johann Wild, had died in 1554, leaving only Georg Witzel, whose collections would continue to be reprinted throughout 1571 but whose original contributions had ended with his Short Postils (Epitome) of 1543.6

Although the Jesuits had already established a college in Cologne in 1544, the trend did not accelerate until after 1550 when they founded other colleges and gymnasia in Vienna (1552), Ingolstadt (1555–1556), Munich (1559), Trier (1560), Innsbruck and Mainz (1561), Dillingen (1563–1564), Braunschweig (1564), Würzburg (1567), Hall (1569), Fulda (1571), Graz (1573), Luzern (1574), Heiligenstadt (1575), Koblenz, Molsheim, and Paderborn (1580), Augsburg (1581),

5 Heribert Smolinsky is certainly aware of earlier efforts in the 1530s by postillators such as Eck, Nausea, and Witzel, but not of the scope and number of postils printed up to 1563. I do not agree that, as he claims, the Tridentine decrees made “…die Predigt noch einmal mehr zu einer zentralen Vermittlungsinstanz” in Germany. Smolinsky, “Kirchliche Predigt—am Volk vorbei? Erfolge und Grenzen der Formung von Frömmigkeit in der Barockzeit,” in Gemeinsam Kirche sein: Theorie und Praxis der Communio. Festschrift der Theologischen Fakultät der Universität Freiburg i. Br. für Erzbischof Dr. Oskar Saier, ed. Günther Biemer et al. (Freiburg i.B., 1992), 286–300; here 287f.

6 Witzel, P-Epitome (1543), the last of his nine important volumes in Appendix 2; described briefly above, 119.