‘Whenever I sat down to study, it felt as if I were going to die.’ This plaint of Antonio Gallonio (1556–1605), who studied and wrote a great deal, was characteristic of his inner struggle, according to his seventeenth-century biographer.¹ Although Gallonio, a priest of the Oratory of Rome, would rather have devoted himself to prayer and contemplation, his spiritual leader Filippo Neri (1515–1595) compelled him to apply his intellectual capacities to the writing of saints’ lives.

Saints were called upon by believers to assist them in their daily tribulations. Saints also functioned as examples; they showed the faithful how to live their lives.² Saints were all-pervasive in early modern Catholic culture and Gallonio’s hagiographical oeuvre constituted a significant contribution to their presence. The choice of words, structure and layout of Gallonio’s various writings was always dependent on their specific function and the nature of the intended readership. The knowledge and the arguments that he used were means of drawing the attention of his readers to the veneration of saints. In his diverse projects he had to deal with a variety of worldly fields of knowledge, such as law, medicine and engineering. Despite his aversion to intellectual ambition, he had to engage himself in these worldly fields of knowledge, as I shall argue in this book.

Gallonio’s hagiographical works differ widely. He wrote an inventory and classification of the tortures to which Christian martyrs had been exposed, in two editions, one in Italian (1591) and one in Latin (1594). He also wrote biographies of holy virgins, both in Italian (published in 1591/1593 and 1597) and in Latin (unpublished). The last work that Gallonio published during his lifetime was the life story of Filippo Neri. This Florentine priest, charismatic leader and thaumaturge, was the founder of the Oratory, an influential ecclesiastical organization in the cultural life of

Counter-Reformation Rome. The publication of Gallonio’s *Vita* of Neri, in Latin (1600) and in Italian (1601), was closely linked to the trial that led to Neri’s canonization in 1622. In addition, Gallonio worked on various projects that were either not published at all or were published much later in the nineteenth century. These vary from a short *vita* of Gallonio’s own female confessant Elena Massimo (1579–1593), to a concise juridical treatise about the acts of devotion that were permitted in veneration of those who had died in the odor of sanctity, but who had not formally been canonized.

In this book I discuss how, in these diverse hagiographical works, Gallonio engaged with elements and techniques from the aforementioned secular disciplines of law, medicine and engineering. We will see that in these engagements he endeavored to claim for the priesthood aspects of the lives of saints that at first sight seemed to be the preserve of worldly experts. His oeuvre, and the context in which it came into being, demonstrates the ambivalence of a priest who wanted to bind the laity to himself without subjecting himself to worldly preoccupations. It is precisely his ambivalence which makes this relatively unknown sixteenth-century priest interesting to the intellectual and social history of the early modern Roman Catholic culture. It shows how a priest wrestled with the world he strove to edify.

1.1 *Gallonio and the Oratory*

Gallonio’s hagiographical work shows how Roman Catholic culture in the early modern period partly rejected worldly interests and partly appropriated them to suit its own interests. This was part of the strategy used by the Church of Rome to steer the devotional and societal lives of its members in specific directions. Religious orders such as the Oratory of Rome, with which the work and life of Gallonio are closely linked, took the lead in this strategy with all kinds of initiatives.

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5 An inventory of the works of Gallonio, published and unpublished, is included at the end of this book. See for a more detailed examination of his hagiographical oeuvre § 2.1.