POPULAR AND CATHOLIC: 
THE MODUS DOCENDI OF THE CANONS OF DORDT

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Introduction

In his January 25, 1619 letter from the Synod of Dordt, the English observer John Hales recorded a remarkable incident in which the Dutch professor Franciscus Gomarus rose on the floor of the Synod and responded to an address to the Synod on the extent of the atonement by Dr. Matthias Martinius of Bremen. Hales described how Gomarus tells the Synod, *ego hanc rem in me recipio*, and therewith casts his Glove … and requires the Synod to grant them a Duel …. Martinius who goes in aequipace with Gomarus in Learning, a little before him for his Discretion, easily digested this affront, and after some few words of course, by the wisdom of the Praeses matters seemed to be a little pacified, and so according to the custom, the Synod with Prayer concluded. Zeal and Devotion had not so well allayed Gomarus his choler, but immediately after Prayers he renewed his Challenge and required Combat with Martinius again; but they parted for that night without blowes.¹

The potential violence engendered by theological differences may seem quaint or amusing today (or actually perhaps not!), but the emotions on the floor of the Synod between two orthodox delegates were a microcosm of the severity of the struggles and tensions in the Dutch churches and society that had been extremely serious for over a decade. The National Synod of the Dutch Reformed Churches gathered in Dordrecht, with delegations from most of the Reformed churches of Europe, to judge the theology of the Remonstrants. This theology had challenged basic and important convictions of the Reformed churches and evoked a very sharp response at the Synod.

As the Palatinate delegates wrote in the Epilogue to their judgments for the Synod on the Remonstrant theology: “What is this other than a disparagement of the glory due God in free election, of the praise due to

Christ for redemption, and of the power of the Holy Spirit in conversion? It is also a weakening of Christian comfort in life and death and a tearing up of the certainty of our salvation. Finally it is an enervating of filial fear and trust in the hearts of believers. Rather it inflames the pride of man against God, so that he glories not in God or in Christ, but in himself . . . .”² The Synod believed that in this theological controversy the glory of God and the comfort of the Christian were at stake.

Theological Study at the Synod

The years of theological controversy before the meeting of the Synod had produced lengthy, detailed and, at times, complex theological analyses. These written analyses had revolved around the five points the Arminians had made in their Remonstrance of 1610. The Synod in taking up these five points of the Arminians had all of this historic material as background to its work as well as the oral and written arguments of the Remonstrants presented to the Synod. The theological task before the Synod was weighty indeed. All of the delegates to the Synod believed that the issues before the Synod were vital to the well-being of the Reformed churches.

In mid-January 1619 the president of the Synod directed the provincial and foreign delegations or colleges to work independently to draw up proposed answers to the five points of the Remonstrants. On the ninth of March the colleges began to read their responses on the First Article before the whole Synod in private sessions. The president of the Synod insisted on private sessions lest the Remonstrants or Roman Catholics use any disagreements among the delegates as a way to attack the Reformed theology. The reading of the responses on all Five Articles continued until the last were read on March 21. Subsequently these responses were published in the Acta Synodi, providing a valuable insight for contemporary observers as well as later historians into the approach and theology of the various delegations.