THE PRIMACY OF SCRIPTURE IN PETER MARTYR VERMIGLI’S UNDERSTANDING OF THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

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1. Introduction

In the last fifty years Peter Martyr Vermigli, as many other of the ‘Reformers in the Wings,’ has been the object of an increasing number of in-depth studies. Indeed, even since the important Peter Martyr Vermigli bibliography published in 1990 the list of articles and books on Vermigli has grown tremendously.1 Pushed forward by the excellent English-language translation of the Peter Martyr Library, a number of important monographs, and several recent essay collections, the study of Vermigli has become an important topic in any general Reformation study.

Many topics are considered in this recent literature, but one predominant theme recurs – the question of Peter Martyr’s sources. This is not simply a factual question about the biography of Vermigli (although this too has been an important question), but rather a general question about the influences on his thought and his theological vision. Several have attempted to answer this question – usually with titles such as ‘Reformed humanist,’ ‘intensified Augustinian,’ or ‘Protestant scholastic.’2 Several important monographs and articles have been written on the subject, but it does not seem that the debate is settled – at least as far as I read the sources.

Scripture is, as for all Protestants of his time, the authority in Church and life. Yet, Vermigli uses many aids to read Scripture well. It is these

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aids to understanding Scripture which are the nub of the problem in Vermigli studies. In re-considering the sources perhaps it might be best to refrain from giving one title to Vermigli, but consider him, within certain bounds, as an eclectic thinker. Indeed, even the titles ‘Reformed humanist,’ ‘intensified Augustinian,’ or ‘Protestant scholastic’ each need serious qualification. Something about these titles is undoubtedly true, but each can certainly not be given a blanket definition which applies to the whole of Vermigli’s theology. What we see in Vermigli rather is a man who defies easy classification and who gives no evidence that his theological thought has tensions.3

2. Vermigli as Theological Educator

The present topic, theological education, provides an interesting case-study to examine the complexities of this important debate. Indeed, theological education was one of the most important activities of Vermigli’s life. Before fleeing North in 1542 for fear of the renewed Roman Inquisition, Vermigli was, among other important activities, actively involved in forming new Reform-minded clerics.4 After his flight North to join the Protestant cause in freedom, Vermigli’s fully consecrated himself to teaching future pastors. Most of his energy was committed to lecturing on Scripture, but mention must also be made of his lectures on Aristotle’s *Nichomachean Ethics*. A great deal of his teaching is preserved in the commentaries published during or after his lifetime. Only now are these commentaries being thoroughly examined and translated anew.5

Not only did he write about his method and influences in these commentaries, but on a number of occasions he spoke clearly about the method of a theologian. In his successive teaching assignments at Oxford, Strasbourg and Zurich Vermigli set out to encourage his stu-

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