

Truth in Text

Venice,

June 16, 1600

Dietrich,

I pray this letter reaches you before you embark on your return trip to Venice. During my time in the area, I have learned of certain developments that have a bearing on your activities in Mainz. Concerned with the spread of heresy in recent years, the venerable fathers of the most sacred Church are becoming increasingly proactive in combating it. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith is absolutely determined to root out the epidemic of false and unholy notions that are spreading throughout Christendom. To that end, the list of books the Church considers unsuitable for the lay public has been growing as of late. I will attach to this letter the most recent list of banned books I have been able to acquire. I trust that you will refer to it judiciously as you go about procuring more books for our trade and will exercise all due caution to ensure that our wares are appropriate for a decent reading public and will bring us no trouble. The need for such care will be made plain once I recount to you some of the events that underscored to me the danger of the present situation.

You may recall a miller in Montereale or some such place called Menocchio. We used to do business with him whenever we were in Friuli and our paths happened to cross. He was held in high regard within his community, and we certainly never had any cause for complaint in our business dealings with him. Menocchio was literate and always interested in getting his hands on more books; his mind was active and inventive, so every book we provided him with planted seeds in his head which quickly grew into strange new ideas that erupted from his mouth with

some abandon. By now you will have remembered that, while fair in his dealings, Menocchio was extremely opinionated and readily argumentative. Our dealings with him were brought to an abrupt halt some time ago when he was convicted by the Inquisition and put under house arrest. However, I had heard that Menocchio was able to reclaim his liberty and thought to try and reestablish our mutually beneficial relation. Upon seeking him out, I learned that his quick mind and quicker mouth had landed him in more, this time permanent, trouble. Menocchio found himself before the Inquisition a second time; rather than send him home with his yellow crosses again, this time the Inquisition sent him to a fiery death at the stake.

In light of Menocchio's fate, I urge you to keep the Church's teachings in mind when selecting printed materials to bring with you to Venice. I trust you to employ your judgment in this matter. Think back to the discussions we once had with Menocchio. Recall how shocked we were when we heard his incredible belief that the world was made from cheese and angels were once worms. Avoid any books that contain such obvious blasphemy. Recall how our discussions with Menocchio would often devolve into heated debate when he propounded upon his more profane beliefs. Our faith could not countenance some of Menocchio's radical pronouncements; we could not swallow the fruits of Menocchio's fecund mind. He denied the divinity of Christ. He claimed that Jesus of Nazareth was a man and could not have been born of a virgin. According to Menocchio, it was because Jesus was a man and not the Son of God, consubstantial with the Father, that he did not take himself down from the cross but died upon it.

Decency and piety of course dictated that we correct such errors for the sake of Menocchio's immortal soul. In our many discussions, we did not just listen to him, but dutifully attempted to dissuade him of his erroneous opinions. Since we are not theologians, we could present no argument sufficient to return him to the true faith. He even denied that his soul would

persist after the death of his body. There was no way for us to persuade him to concern himself with the eternity that awaited his soul since he did not think it was immortal. Ready as he always was with a retort, Menocchio was not an easy man to argue with. What he read he remembered, and once he had acquired a Bible in the vernacular, against the express policy of the Church, he could almost persuade those who listened to him that he spoke the Gospel truth as the priests do. You and I can only speculate from whence he got such a book, but we certainly will not deal in such unwholesome wares. Despite the failure of our rhetoric, we never failed in faith. Although we could never persuade Menocchio he was wrong, we always knew when he was wrong. Keep that same pure faith when selecting books. Menocchio's case demonstrates the dangers of exposing the laity to the wrong texts.

Given this danger, it is fortunate that our learned Church fathers examined Menocchio and his ideas. Clearly, they are better equipped to combat heresy. The Inquisition could correct Menocchio's errors although we had been unable to. From the accounts I have heard, it seemed for a time the Inquisition had succeeded. First, he was a model prisoner and was allowed to return to Montereale under certain conditions. Once back at Montereale, Menocchio was a trusted member of the parish. It appeared for a time that the Holy Spirit, through the work of the Church, had reentered Menocchio's soul and all was well. The Church had acted expediently and mercifully in its actions to preserve the Faith and bring Menocchio back into its flock. It is not an easy task, however, to persuade a man to abandon ideas which he has himself conceived, or thinks he has conceived. Ultimately, Menocchio proved as slow to change his opinions as he had previously been quick to speak his mind. He clearly left the Church no choice but to respond as it did. If only we had had the opportunity to provide him with more salubrious reading materials,

then maybe he would have persuaded himself of the Truth. Then he would have held to that as stubbornly as he did to his heresies.

Although the higher church authorities were justified in eliminating heresy wherever they found it and taking extreme measures whenever the heretic proved intractable, it is unsurprising that someone would fall prey to such mistaken notions as Menocchio did. You will certainly recall that womanizing priest who only ever concerned himself with others' activities and faith, never with his own. It is egregious that such an unholy actor, however saintly a preacher, should be entrusted with the souls of an entire parish. I have even heard it said that after Menocchio's first conviction, Father Odorico developed the custom of keeping a dagger underneath his cloak, claiming it was a joke when clearly it was evidence of a disturbed conscience. With this hypocritical outsider forcing himself upon the parish, it is no surprise that his more immediate, immoral example would better impress itself upon the minds of parishioners than the sacred example set in the life and works of Christ. Much that we heard Menocchio utter in criticism of the Church hierarchy was similar in many ways to what we have been hearing from all others with whom we have conversed throughout our travels in Rudolf's empire. It seems Father Odorico was not the only priest with an inappropriate interest in women, and Menocchio was not the only one who thought the Church more interested in business than in salvation.

Our involvement in the present religious conversation taking place across Europe must be beyond reproach. Nobody expected this Inquisition, but we will react to it accordingly. Our business cannot afford to be associated with the spread of heresy and dissent. As faithful Catholics, we would never consider dealing in texts disapproved of by the Roman Church. Although we never purchased books there, it is now more important than ever that we avoid Hamburg, Berlin, and especially Leipzig. The Church will have no cause for complaint with us

on account of our business in books; we desire nothing but that the many learn the Truth. I urge you once again to select books with a diligent eye towards achieving our ends. Recall our friend Menocchio and consider the power books can have. With that in mind, remember: we must tread carefully; we must tread responsibly. We must not run afoul of morality; we must not run afoul of the Inquisition.

Yours Faithfully,

Ippolito Ippocrito

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