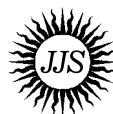




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# A Universal Language: Jesuit Catechism at San Vitale in Seventeenth-Century Rome

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## Abstract

This article examines a significant yet overlooked example of Jesuit catechism initiated in 1607 in San Vitale, within the Roman novitiate, for the local multinational, impoverished community. Despite its importance, scholars have largely neglected both this activity and its impact on the liturgical space. Drawing on unpublished manuscripts and iconographic sources, this study reconstructs the catechism's purpose, structure, and reception, with particular attention to the uniqueness of its sound. Conducted by novices of various nationalities, it represents the first known example of systematic Jesuit teaching of Christian doctrine in multiple languages by native speakers. The missionary vocation of this exercise is reflected in San Vitale's iconographic program, forging strong connections between sacred space, images, and teaching. The catechism provides a unique case for understanding the material, sensory, and emotional dimensions of Jesuit instruction for the uneducated in early modern Italy.

## Keywords

Jesuit catechism – Rome – multilingualism – art and architecture – sound – senses – emotions

Today, entering the fifth-century Roman Basilica of San Vitale e compagni martiri in Fovea reveals a quiet atmosphere.<sup>1</sup> Yet in the early seventeenth century, its “sensoryscape” was markedly different.<sup>2</sup> At that time, the building, newly renovated by the Society of Jesus, hosted a lively weekly event: the multilingual teaching of Christian doctrine by Jesuit novices to hundreds of poor individuals of all nationalities, who gathered to sing prayers, listen to sermons, and collect alms of bread and money. San Vitale’s catechism serves as a major case study for understanding the material, sensory, and emotional dimensions of Jesuit instruction for the uneducated in early modern Italy. Despite its significance, however, it has remained largely underexplored. Art historians have primarily focused on San Vitale’s decoration, mentioning its catechetical function only in passing and relying on later sources.<sup>3</sup> Conversely, studies on religious education and music in late Renaissance Rome have examined institutions other than the Jesuit novitiate.<sup>4</sup> Tellingly, the most comprehensive study of San Vitale’s catechism only partially reconstructs this activity, overlooking key documents needed for a thorough analysis.<sup>5</sup>

- 1 Luigi Huetter and Vincenzo Golzio, *San Vitale (Le chiese di Roma illustrate, 35)* (Rome: Stabilimento Tipografico Armani di M. Courier, 1938), 5–28; Johannes Terhalle, *S. Andrea al Quirinale von Gian Lorenzo Bernini in Rom* (Weimar: Verlag und Datenbank für Geisteswissenschaften, 2011), 75–91.
- 2 I borrow this concept from Emanuela Vai, “The ‘Sensoryscape’ of the Good Friday Procession in Early Modern Venetian Bergamo,” in *Listening to Confraternities: Spaces for Performance, Patronage and Urban Musical Experience*, ed. Tess Knighton (Leiden: Brill, 2025), 25–61, here 32n27, where she discusses it in relation to the earlier notion of “soundscape.” On the latter, see Jonathan Sterne, “Soundscape, Landscape, Escape,” in *Soundscape of the Urban Past: Staged Sound as Mediated Cultural Heritage*, ed. Karin Bijsterveld (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2013), 181–94.
- 3 Huetter and Golzio, *San Vitale*, 5–28; Gauvin A. Bailey, *Between Renaissance and Baroque: Jesuit Art in Rome, 1565–1610* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 185–86; Terhalle, *S. Andrea al Quirinale*, 90–91.
- 4 See Noel O’Regan’s and Anne Piéjus’s work on Roman lay confraternities and Philippe Neri’s Oratorio, most recently: Anne Piéjus, “Artistic Revival and Conquest of the Soul in Early Modern Rome,” in *Listening to Early Modern Catholicism: Perspectives from Musicology*, ed. Daniele V. Filippi and Micheal Noone (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 149–72; Noel O’Regan, “Music in the Curricula of Charitable Religious Institutions in Early Modern Rome,” in *Music and Religious Education in Early Modern Europe: The Musical Edification of the Church*, ed. Hyun-Ah Kim (Leiden: Brill, 2023), 198–224; Noel O’Regan, “Architecture, Acoustics and Performance Practice in Three Roman Confraternity Oratories Before 1650,” in *Music, Performance, Architecture: Sacred Spaces as Sound Spaces in the Early Modern Period*, ed. Klaus Pietschmann and Tobias C. Weißmann (Baden-Baden: Georg Olms Verlag, 2024), 99–110.
- 5 Michela Catto, *Un panopticon catechistico: L’arciconfraternita della dottrina cristiana a Roma in età moderna* (Rome: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 2003), 172–76.

Drawing on unpublished manuscripts, iconographic sources, and material evidence, this article addresses this scholarly gap by examining the catechism's purpose, structure, and reception. In doing so, it seeks to clarify previously undefined aspects such as the date of its inception, the actors involved, and the development of the catechism over time. Two primary seventeenth-century settings are identified, shedding light on eight previously unnoticed fresco inscriptions in the nave of San Vitale that are directly connected to this instructional practice. Particular attention is given to the role of chant, emphasizing the relationship between singing, learning, and emotions. Finally, the article highlights what appears to be a unique characteristic of this catechism: its performance in several languages by native speakers addressing their compatriots. The universal vocation inherent in this exercise is reflected in San Vitale's iconographic program, underscoring ideas of missionary endeavor and sacrifice for faith.

This case study of San Vitale's catechism employs an interdisciplinary approach, drawing on insights from the history of religious education, the history of the senses and emotions, musicology, historical sound studies, and art history. It has two complementary objectives. On one hand, it deepens our understanding of Jesuit instruction in early modern Italy, pointing out how the Society participated in the Catholic Church's efforts to educate the ignorant and convert heretics. On the other hand, it shows how early modern catechetical instruction encompassed sensory, cognitive, and emotional stimuli, ritualized and embedded in a painted liturgical interior. In this sense, the study advocates an embodied and acoustic historical understanding of early modern churches, emphasizing the relationship between liturgical interiors and the individuals who animated them with their presence, feelings, and, above all, their voices.<sup>6</sup>

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6 For methodological discussions, see Deborah Howard and Laura Moretti, *Sound and Space in Renaissance Venice: Architecture, Music, Acoustics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 1–16; Susan Boynton and Diane Reilly, "Sound and image in the Middle Ages: Reflections on a Conjunction," in *Resounding Images: Medieval Intersections of Art, Music, and Sound*, ed. Susan Boynton and Diane Reilly (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015), 15–30; Bissera V. Pentcheva, "Introduction," in *Icons of Sounds: Voice, Architecture, and Imagination in Medieval Art*, ed. Bissera V. Pentcheva (London: Routledge, 2021), 1–18; Klaus Pietschmann and Tobias C. Weißmann, "On the Interrelation of Music and Sacred Space in Early Modern Europe: An Introduction," in *Music, Performance, Architecture: Sacred Spaces as Sound Spaces in the Early Modern Period*, ed. Klaus Pietschmann and Tobias C. Weißmann (Baden–Baden: Georg Olms Verlag, 2024), 9–15; Nicolas Terpstra, "Introduction: Sounds of Body and Spirit—Sense, Space, and Motion in Confraternities," in *Listening to Confraternities: Spaces for Performance, Patronage and Urban Musical Experience*, ed. Tess Knighton (Leiden: Brill, 2025), 1–22.

## Origin and Audience

The origin of San Vitale's catechism is attested in an unpublished manuscript titled *Report on the Christian Doctrine* (1607–8).<sup>7</sup> Written by several hands, the *Report* was likely compiled within the Jesuit novitiate or House of Probation located on the hill of Montecavallo (now the Quirinale). When the catechism was introduced, San Vitale had recently been restored and redecorated (1597–1603) (Figure 1), through funding by noblewomen Giovanna d'Aragona (1502–75) and Isabella della Rovere (1552–1619).<sup>8</sup> The driving force behind this renovation was Superior General Claudio Acquaviva (in office 1581–1616), who also oversaw the church's iconographic program.<sup>9</sup>

Once San Vitale was renewed, Acquaviva sought to promote its use as a liturgical space. As stated in the *Report*, during a visit to Clement VIII (r.1592–1605), a few months before the pope's death, Acquaviva was asked what remarkable things he had seen during a recent trip to Naples. He replied that “among all, what moved him more was seeing a multitude of wretches gathered to learn and sing the Christian doctrine.”<sup>10</sup> Acquaviva was referring to the catechism held weekly by Pietro Antonio Spinelli (1555–1615) in the Neapolitan *Casa Professa*, later in the church known as the Gesù Nuovo.<sup>11</sup> Spinelli had likely been inspired by the earlier example of the College of Lecce, the first city where the Jesuits instituted this practice according to the *Report*, and where his friend and former confessor Bernardino Realino (1530–1616) had lived.<sup>12</sup> Deeply impressed by what he had witnessed in Naples, Acquaviva argued that such an activity, rooted in both instruction and charity, should also take place in Rome. The newly rebuilt San Vitale offered an ideal setting, with the novitiate supplying many catechists trained in such exercises.<sup>13</sup>

7 Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu [hereafter ARSI], *Rom.* 129-1 (*Relazione della Dottrina Cristiana incominciata a farsi a poveri mendichi in St Vitale alli 18 di luglio l'anno 1607 sino alli 23 del medesimo dell'anno 1608*), fols. 248<sup>r</sup>–253<sup>r</sup>. I thank Mr. Mauro Brunello, archivist, for his generous and kind assistance.

8 Bailey, *Between Renaissance and Baroque*, 166–69; Terhalle, *S. Andrea al Quirinale*, 81–88.

9 ARSI, *Vitae* 144-I, fol. 74<sup>r</sup>. Bailey, *Between Renaissance and Baroque*, 168, 327n79. On Acquaviva, Pierre-Antoine Fabre and Flavio Rurale, eds., *The Acquaviva Project: Claudio Acquaviva's Generalate (1581–1615) and the Emergence of Modern Catholicism* (Chestnut Hill, MA: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2017).

10 ARSI, *Rom.* 129-I, fol. 248<sup>r</sup>: “tra tutte più l'havea mosso il veder quella moltitudine di pezzenti radunati insieme imparare e cantare la dottrina christiana.” All translations are by mine unless otherwise noted.

11 On Pietro Antonio Spinelli, see ARSI, *Vitae* 27; Antonio Barone, *Della vita del padre Pierantonio Spinelli della Compagnia di Gesù* (Naples, 1707), 38–40 and 101–3.

12 ARSI, *Rom.* 129-I, fol. 248<sup>r</sup>. See Barone, *Della vita del padre Pierantonio Spinelli*, 143.

13 ARSI, *Rom.* 129-I, fol. 248<sup>r</sup>. See also ARSI, *Vitae* 144-I, fol. 60<sup>v</sup>.





FIGURE 1 Giovanni Battista Fiammeri and Rutilio Clemente (coordinators); Annibale Priori and Tarquinio Ligustri (architectural frame); Andrea Commodi, Agostino Ciampelli, and Paul Brill (attributed) (narrative scenes), View of the nave, c. 1597–1603, fresco, Basilica of San Vitale e compagni martiri in Fovea, Rome  
PHOTO: AUTHOR.

Acquaviva's initiative aligns with broader concerns of the time regarding religious education, which the Catholic Church had established as one of its primary missions following the Council of Trent.<sup>14</sup> Beginning with the Schools of Christian Doctrine, and soon followed by Jesuit and Piarist schools, the systematic instruction of young children emerged in the sixteenth century.<sup>15</sup> In this context, the Jesuits were especially committed to extending teaching and spiritual assistance to the poor, the sick, and the ignorant, following the

14 Kathleed M. Comerford, "Cleric Education, Catechesis, and Catholic Confessionalism: Teaching Religion in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century," in *Early Modern Catholicism*, ed. Kathleed M. Comerford and Hilmar M. Pabel (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 241–65; Catto, *Un panopticon catechistico*, 21–59; David Salomoni, *Educating the Catholic People: Religious Orders and Their Schools in Early Modern Italy (1500–1800)* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 1–13.

15 Paul F. Grendler, *Schooling in Renaissance Italy: Literacy and Learning, 1300–1600* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1989), 332–99; Christopher Carlsmith, "The Three Rs: Education in Early Modern Rome," in *A Companion to Early Modern Rome, 1492–1692*, ed. Pamela M. Jones, Barbara Wisch, and Simon Ditchfield (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 485–99, here 494–96; Salomoni, *Educating the Catholic People*, 33–40 and 60–69; Paul F. Grendler, *Humanism, Universities, and Jesuit Education in Late Renaissance Italy* (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 343–71, 390–411, and 450–78.

example of Ignatius of Loyola (c.1491–1556).<sup>16</sup> Alongside official texts such as the *Catechism of the Council of Trent* (1566), the Jesuits produced specific treatises to support this mission, including the *Summary of Christian Doctrine* by Peter Canisius (1521–97), the *Method for Teaching Christian Doctrine* by Diego de Ledesma (1524–75), and the *Short Catechism* (1597) and *Larger Catechism* (1598) by Robert Bellarmine (1542–1621).<sup>17</sup>

The first session of San Vitale's catechism took place under Paul v (r.1605–21) on Wednesday, July 18, 1607, on the vigil of the feast of St. Alessio, who had chosen to live as a mendicant.<sup>18</sup> Among the first sponsors were Cardinals Robert Bellarmine and Andrea Montalto (1572–1629), followed by several Roman nobles who supported the initiative in the years that followed.<sup>19</sup> Acquaviva himself inaugurated the event by delivering a sermon on the dangers of wealth and poverty before an audience of approximately 420 poor individuals.<sup>20</sup> Emphasizing that the Lord loves the poor, the general declared that the Society sought to help them attain the riches of Paradise by instructing them in the rudiments of faith. To balance spiritual nourishment with physical sustenance, each attendee received alms upon departure: a loaf of bread and money equivalent to a *baiocco*.<sup>21</sup>

From that day, the catechism was held at San Vitale every week until 1773, when the Society was suppressed by Clement xiv (r.1769–74).<sup>22</sup> Initially conducted on Wednesdays at 8 PM, it was later moved to 9 PM, rescheduled to Thursdays in 1616, and then to Fridays around 1650.<sup>23</sup> In its first year, attendance occasionally exceeded one thousand, though it later stabilized at an

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- 16 John W. O'Malley, *The First Jesuits* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 117.
- 17 For an overview, see Catto, *Un panopticon catechistico*, 41–49 and 61–76; Thomas Flowers S.J., *The Reform of Christian Doctrine in the Catechisms of Peter Canisius* (Leiden: Brill, 2023), 28–64.
- 18 On the cult of St. Alessio in Rome, see Arnaldo Morelli, "Alexius Romanorum nobilissimus" dagli altari alle scene: Il Sant'Alessio di Rospigliosi/Landi; contesto, drammaturgia e ricezione di una 'historia sacra,'" *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome—Italie et Méditerranée modernes et contemporaines* 124, no. 2 (2012), <https://doi.org/10.4000/mefrim.944> (accessed August 4, 2025).
- 19 ARSI, *Rom.* 129-I, f. 249<sup>v</sup>. See also ARSI, *Rom.* 129-I, fol. 251<sup>r</sup> (Cavalier de Rustici); fol. 251<sup>v</sup> (a portuguese named Jimenez); fol. 253<sup>r</sup> (Ottaviano Vestrio); fol. 253<sup>v</sup> (Andrea Montalto). Huetter and Golzio, *San Vitale*, 18, cite an anonymous, undated source on a donation by Francesco Silla.
- 20 ARSI, *Rom.* 129-I, fol. 248<sup>v</sup>.
- 21 ARSI, *Rom.* 129-I, fol. 249<sup>r</sup>. The *Report* records varying amounts of bread and money for adults and children.
- 22 ARSI, *Rom.* 148, fols. 57<sup>r</sup>–58<sup>r</sup>. See Catto, *Un panopticon catechistico*, 174.
- 23 ARSI, *Rom.* 129-I, fol. 252<sup>r</sup>; ARSI, *Chiesa di Sant'Ignazio* 254, fol. 247<sup>v</sup> and fol. 251<sup>r</sup>; ARSI, *FG* 933, doc. 15. See also Giovanni Antonio Bruzio, *Chiese de' Canonici e de' Regolari et altre del Clero Romano*, vol. 18, 1665–1679, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat.lat 11886, fol. 454<sup>r</sup>

average of about five hundred.<sup>24</sup> The Jesuits primarily targeted poor adult men and women as their main audience. Their instruction was accompanied by confession, initially organized monthly at San Vitale before being relocated to the Gesù, according to the *Opere pie di Roma* (1679) by Carlo Bartolomeo Piazza (1632–1713).<sup>25</sup> By November 1608, confession was also administered during the doctrine sessions to encourage greater participation in the sacrament.<sup>26</sup>

Jesuit teaching at San Vitale developed alongside other preexisting forms of religious instruction in the city. The most significant example is the founding, in 1560, of the Schools of Christian Doctrine by the *Compagnia de' Servi de' Putti della Compagnia della Carità* (Society of the servants of little children of the society of charity).<sup>27</sup> These schools, open to children of both genders, were held in Roman parish churches on Sundays and feast days, led by laypeople, amounting to roughly eighty-five sessions per year. The *Report* documents the intersection between these two initiatives in the story of a child named Marco. During one of the first sessions at San Vitale, Marco served as teacher for younger children and, like an adult, received alms for his participation. The following week, he returned with engravings that he distributed to other children, likely obtained from a parish-based doctrine school, where such visual aids were commonly used.<sup>28</sup>

Nevertheless, the success of this initiative suggests that it was filling a void in the Roman system of religious assistance rather than competing with other pious enterprises. The primary reason for this was the widespread poverty affecting the lower strata of Roman society.<sup>29</sup> As Giovanni Antonio Bruzio (1614–92) clearly stated, the Jesuits opened their doors to an audience that had previously been marginalized: “where so much poverty seems to be excluded in public functions by the frequentation of decently clothed persons, here every ragged man is taught through singing the rudiments of the Catholic

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and Carlo Bartolomeo Piazza, *Opere pie di Roma, descritte secondo lo stato presente* (Rome: Giovanni Battista Bussotti, 1679), 82.

24 ARSI, *Rom.* 129-I, fol. 250<sup>r</sup> (1,100 people), fol. 250<sup>v</sup> (1,072 people), fol. 251<sup>v</sup> (1,400 people).

25 ARSI, *Rom.* 129-I, fol. 250<sup>r</sup>. See Piazza, *Opere pie*, 84.

26 ARSI, *Rom.* 129-I, fol. 253<sup>v</sup>. See also ARSI, *Rom.* 162-II, fol. 415<sup>r</sup>.

27 Catto, *Un panopticon catechistico*, 93–133; Noel O'Regan, “Music, Memory, and Faith: How did Singing in Latin and the Vernacular Influence what People Knew About their Faith in Early Modern Rome?,” *The Italianist* 34, no. 3 (2014): 437–48, <https://doi.org/10.1179/0261434014Z.000000000101>, here 441–42.

28 ARSI, *Rom.* 129-I, fols. 250<sup>v</sup> and 251<sup>r</sup>. See Grendler, *Schooling in Renaissance Italy*, 355.

29 Anna Esposito, “‘Charitable’ Assistance between Lay Foundations and Pontifical Initiatives,” in *A Companion to Early Modern Rome, 1492–1692*, ed. Pamela M. Jones, Barbara Wisch, and Simon Ditchfield (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 199–213.

faith.”<sup>30</sup> The success of San Vitale’s catechism can also be credited to the Jesuits’ adaptive approach.<sup>31</sup> Rather than merely replicating existing models, they tailored the catechism to the specific needs of their audience and the abilities of the teachers.

### Structure and Space

The engraving titled *L'Eglise de saint Vital* (c.1611) by Matthäus Greuter (c.1564–1638) (Figure 2), published in the first edition of *La Peinture spirituelle* by Louis Richeome (1544–1625), is the only known illustration of the Jesuit catechism at San Vitale.<sup>32</sup> During his stay in Rome between 1608 and 1615 as the first Assistant for France to Acquaviva, Richeome lived in the Jesuit novitiate and drew inspiration from this setting for his treatise, published in Lyon.<sup>33</sup> The catechism sessions, which he likely attended, are described at the end of the seventh chapter.<sup>34</sup> The engraving presents a view of the nave from the upper right corner of the counter-façade, depicting the Jesuits as imitators of Christ’s apostles, providing spiritual and material assistance to an audience composed mostly of poor and infirm adult men.<sup>35</sup> In contrast, a few individuals wear finer

30 Bruzio, *Chiese de' Canonici e de' Regolari*, fols. 454<sup>r</sup>–455<sup>v</sup>: “dove tanta povertà pare esclusa nelle pubbliche funzioni dal commercio di persone decentemente vestite, qui ogni cenoso è con canto ammaestrato ne’ rudimenti della fede.”

31 Jeffrey M. Muller, “The Jesuit Strategy of Accommodation,” in *Jesuit Image Theory*, ed. Wietse de Boer, Karl A. E. Enenkel, and Walter S. Melion (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 461–92.

32 Louis Richeome, *La peinture spirituelle ou l'art d'admirer et louer Dieu en toutes ses œuvres, et tirer de toutes profit salutere* (Lyon: Pierre Rigaud, 1611), 682. See Eckhard Leuschner and Jorg Diefenbacher, *The Greuter Family: The New Hollstein German Engravings, Etchings and Woodcuts 1400–1700*, 21 vols. (Ouderkerk aan den IJssel: Sound & Vision Publisher, 2016), 2:297 and 301n449.

33 Judi Loach, “Louis Richeome’s Emblematic Re-use of the Jesuit Novitiate Church of S. Vitale in Rome,” in *Emblematic Images and Religious Texts: Studies in Honor of G. Richard Dimler, S.J.*, ed. Pedro F. Campa and Peter M. Daly (Philadelphia, PA: Saint Joseph’s University Press, 2010), 51–70, here 51–61; Judi Loach, “An Apprenticeship in ‘Spiritual Painting’: Richeome’s *La Peinture spirituelle*,” in *Ut pictura meditatio: The Meditative Image in Northern Art, 1500–1700*, ed. Walter S. Melion, Ralph Dekoninck, and Agnès Guiderdoni-Bruslé (Turnhout: Brepols, 2012), 337–99, here 338–40.

34 Richeome, *La peinture spirituelle*, 783–88.

35 Loach, “Louis Richeome’s Emblematic Re-use,” 56–58; Loach, “An Apprenticeship in ‘Spiritual Painting,’” 358.





FIGURE 2 Matthäus Greuter, *L'Église de saint Vital*, c. 1611, engraving, c. 173 × 120 mm (the page), in Louis Richeome, *La Peinture spirituelle* (Lyon: Pierre Rigaud, 1611), 682

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garments, possibly nobles attending the catechism out of devotion.<sup>36</sup> Only three women can be clearly identified, each carrying a small child.

Greuter's engraving is, in many ways, a faithful reproduction of the initial structure of the doctrine as it is described in the second session of July 25, 1607.<sup>37</sup> The event began with two Jesuit fathers opening the gates of San Vitale's porch, while some novices ensured that the poor took holy water and knelt before the main altar, separating men and women. Ten smaller *scuole*, or *classi*, were formed from the more than seven hundred participants (four for the women and six for the men). Among these groups, two were exclusively composed of *zitelle* and *putti*. Each group was led by five novices, who were stationed throughout the church.<sup>38</sup>

The catechism lasted about an hour and was divided into four fifteen-minute segments, each marked by a bell. In the first, the poor knelt together and recited prayers led by two novices, including the Sign of the Cross, the *Pater Noster*, *Ave Maria*, *Salve Regina*, and *Credo*. During the second, they stood in their classes for group instruction. The third segment featured a veteran Jesuit delivering an exhortation on the value of Christian doctrine, poverty, or charity and food miracles.<sup>39</sup> Finally, the poor knelt again to sing the litanies of the Virgin Mary, along with three *Pater Noster* and three *Ave Maria* in gratitude to benefactors, concluding with the Sign of the Cross. Afterward, they exited women first and received bread and money from two Jesuit fathers stationed at the gates.

Greuter's engraving includes many details consistent with these descriptions, such as the holy water, the loaf of bread, and the wooden pulpit. The confession scene in the upper right corner is also accurate, as the sacrament was administered during the second segment, starting in 1608. Since none of these details appear in Richeome's text, it is likely that the artist, a former Protestant who converted to Catholicism,<sup>40</sup> witnessed the catechism himself. However, the engraving contains discrepancies, most notably the limited presence of women. Greuter also depicted only three of about ten classes, each led by a Jesuit novice holding a long cane and raising his right index finger.<sup>41</sup>

36 ARSI, *Rom.* 129-I, fols. 252<sup>r</sup> and 253<sup>v</sup> (Marchese di Celice); fol. 253<sup>r</sup> (Duchess Sforza with other noble women). See also ARSI, *Rom.* 162-II, fol. 385<sup>v</sup>.

37 ARSI, *Rom.* 129-I, fols. 249<sup>r</sup>–249<sup>v</sup> and ARSI, *Rom.* 162-II, fols. 339<sup>v</sup>–340<sup>r</sup>.

38 ARSI, *Rom.* 162-II, fols. 339<sup>v</sup>. Fewer number were employed in later sessions.

39 ARSI, *Rom.* 129-I, fols. 249<sup>v</sup> (utility of the doctrine); fol. 250<sup>r</sup> (danger of mortal sin); fol. 252<sup>r</sup> (life as a poor Christian; the hermit and the loaf of bread); fol. 252<sup>v</sup> (Christ born among the poor); fol. 253<sup>r</sup> (the Virgin; multiplication of the loaves); fol. 253<sup>v</sup> (the Decalog).

40 Leuschner and Diefenbacher, *The Greuter Family*, 1:xxix–l.

41 On canes, Grendler, *Schooling in Renaissance Italy*, 384. See also André Reinoso, *Preaching of Francis Xavier in Goa, c.1619*, oil on canvas, 104 × 165 cm, Lisbon, Museu de São Roque.

Unlike the partially empty space imagined by Greuter, the nave must have been filled with people.

This initial structure was reconfigured a few decades later, likely to accommodate longer group instruction. Piazza describes this new arrangement in his *Opere pie*, though earlier references appear in mid-seventeenth-century sources.<sup>42</sup> The revised structure retained four segments but varied their duration. The first involved individual teaching in eight *classi* or *circoli*, divided by participants' knowledge. Each group was led by a novice who explained and questioned them about a specific part of the doctrine for about forty-five minutes. The second segment consisted of a shorter collective recitation of prayers; the third, a half-hour sermon delivered by a novice; and the final segment, the singing of the Litanies of the Virgin, led by two novices.

Piazza's account sheds light on eight inscriptions added retrospectively within the architectural frame of the *Martyrs'* scenes (1599–1603) in the nave of San Vitale, ignored by previous scholarship (Figure 3).<sup>43</sup> These are arranged in two mirrored groups along the south and north walls. Each series of four inscriptions refers to a *classe*, numbered from the altar (fourth) to the front door (first). The texts, in the vernacular, are identical on both sides and outline the activities for each class, closely resembling those in Bellarmine's *Short Catechism*.<sup>44</sup> Likely intended for teachers, they may also have assisted literate participants. The fourth and third *classi* (Figures 7–10) prescribe the teaching of simple orations (Sign of the Cross, *Pater Noster*, *Ave Maria*, *Credo*, Commandments) or lists of concepts (Sacraments, Theological and Cardinal virtues, Christian doctrine). The second and first *classi* (Figures 4–6) require the declaration of more complex topics (Commandments, Precepts of the Church, Sins, Four Last Things) and articulated prayers (*Credo*, the Mystery of the Trinity, the Mysteries of the Rosary).

The inscriptions reflect the second instructional model and can therefore be dated to the mid-seventeenth century. Their arrangement may suggest that they were originally intended for separate groups of men (liturgical right, north wall) and women (liturgical left, south wall). However, as attested by Bruzio, by the late 1660s the Jesuits had decided to alternate catechism instruction weekly between men and women, thereby involving eight classes of the same gender at a time.<sup>45</sup> Their numbering suggests a spatial progression, rewarding

42 Piazza, *Opere pie*, 81–84; ARSI, FG 933, doc. 15.

43 For instance, Forcella, *Iscrizioni delle chiese e d'altri edifici di Roma dal secolo XI ai giorni nostri*, 15 vols. (Rome: Ludovico Cecchini, 1877), 11:356–58.

44 The text of the first class on the northern wall has been lost.

45 Bruzio, *Chiese de' Canonici e de' Regolari*, 454<sup>r</sup>.





FIGURE 3 Paul Brill (attributed), *Martyrdom of St. Paphnutius*, 1599–1603, fresco, Basilica of San Vitale e compagni martiri in Fovea, Rome  
PHOTO: AUTHOR.





FIGURE 4 Anonymous, *First class (south wall)*, c.1650 (?), fresco, Basilica of San Vitale e compagni martiri in Fovea, Rome  
PHOTO: AUTHOR.



FIGURE 5 Anonymous, *Second class (south wall)*, c.1650 (?), fresco, Basilica of San Vitale e compagni martiri in Fovea, Rome  
PHOTO: AUTHOR.

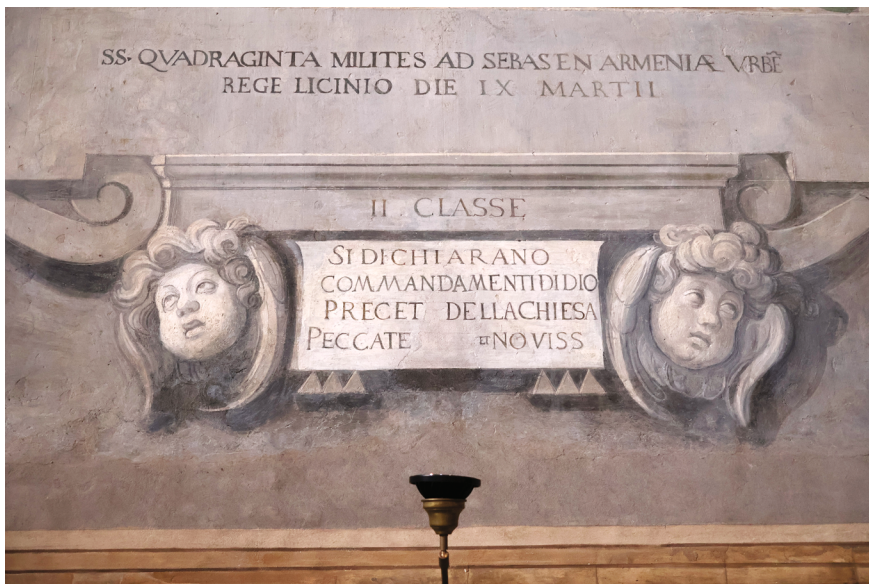


FIGURE 6 Anonymous, *Second class (north wall)*, c.1650 (?), fresco, Basilica of San Vitale e compagni martiri in Fovea, Rome  
PHOTO: AUTHOR.



FIGURE 7 Anonymous, *Third class (south wall)*, c.1650 (?), fresco, Basilica of San Vitale e compagni martiri in Fovea, Rome  
PHOTO: AUTHOR.





FIGURE 8 Anonymous, *Third class (north wall)*, c.1650 (?), fresco, Basilica of San Vitale e compagni martiri in Fovea, Rome  
PHOTO: AUTHOR.



FIGURE 9 Anonymous, *Fourth class (south wall)*, c.1650 (?), fresco, Basilica of San Vitale e compagni martiri in Fovea, Rome  
PHOTO: AUTHOR.



FIGURE 10 Anonymous, *Fourth class (north wall)*, c.1650 (?), fresco, Basilica of San Vitale e compagni martiri in Fovea, Rome

PHOTO: AUTHOR.

increased knowledge. As participants advanced in the Christian doctrine, they moved from the altar toward the exit, closer to the final distribution of alms. While other examples of directional signs are known, particularly in Schools of Christian doctrine, material proof of this is extremely rare.<sup>46</sup> The presence of these inscriptions at San Vitale thus offers valuable insight into spatial organization and movement in early modern religious instruction, while also revealing the role that sound played in this process.<sup>47</sup>

### Voices, Noise, and Emotions

Like most contemporary forms of catechism, the one in San Vitale was also a “sound doctrine,” using simple homophonic singing for its mnemonic and

46 For another example, Alessandro Tamborini, *Le scuole della dottrina cristiana* (Milan: Daverio, 1939), 76–77; Paul F. Grendler, “The Schools of Christian Doctrine in Sixteenth-Century Italy,” *Church History* 53, no. 3 (1984): 319–31, here 323, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3166272> (accessed Augut 4, 2025).

47 On this, Tess Knighton, “Circulating Sound in the City: The Procession in the Context of Historical Sound Studies,” *Artigrama* 36 (2021): 29–39, here 30–33, [https://doi.org/10.26754/ojs\\_artigrama/artigrama.2021368058](https://doi.org/10.26754/ojs_artigrama/artigrama.2021368058) (accessed Augut 4, 2025).

affective powers.<sup>48</sup> Within the Jesuit milieu, Ledesma's influential treatise *Method* stands out for its detailed discussion of vocal and musical methods for teaching doctrine. According to Ledesma, "repeating the lesson and singing multiple times is all the more appropriate as the people are more rustic and ignorant."<sup>49</sup> For him, singing made the doctrine more appealing, as seen in his suggestion to sing in the street to invite listeners, drawing on the idea of music as a "fisher of souls" (Matthew 4:19).<sup>50</sup> Similarly, in India, Francis Xavier (1506–52) rang a bell in the streets to summon people to catechism, a sound strongly associated with Jesuit missionary work.<sup>51</sup>

Ledesma's treatise offers valuable insights into how teaching in the *scuole* or *classi* in San Vitale may have sounded. This is suggested by the *Report*, which recounts Acquaviva teaching the *Sign of the Cross* in the first session. The General is said to have "intoned the words by singing," closely mirroring Ledesma's advice to teachers "to sing word by word," using a single melody.<sup>52</sup> This method, based on vocal interaction, collective interrogation, and individual recitation, also characterized the Schools of Christian Doctrine.<sup>53</sup> Additionally, the eight fresco inscriptions reinforce that a similar approach was used in San Vitale, as indicated by the instructions "to teach" and "to declare." Piazza's account confirms this: novices questioned the poor and had advanced students recite parts of the doctrine aloud.<sup>54</sup>

48 I borrow the expression from Daniele V. Filippi, "A Sound Doctrine: Early Modern Jesuits and the Singing of the Catechism," *Early Music History* 34 (2015): 1–43. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261127915000030> (accessed Augut 4, 2025). See Frank T. Kennedy, "Some Unusual Genres of Sacred Music in the Early Modern Period: The Catechism as a Musical Event in the Late Renaissance—Jesuit and 'Our Way of Proceeding,'" in *Early Modern Catholicism*, ed. Kathleed M. Comerford and Hilmar M. Pabel (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 266–79; O'Regan, "Music, Memory, and Faith," 437–48; Filippi, "Catechismum modulans docebat": Teaching the Doctrine through Singing in Early Modern Catholicism," in *Listening to Early Modern Catholicism: Perspectives from Musicology*, ed. Daniele V. Filippi and Micheal Noone (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 129–48.

49 Diego Ledesma, *Modo per insegnare la dottrina christiana* (Rome: Heredi Antonio Blado, 1573), fol. 13r: "il ridire più volte la lettione et il cantare come s'è detto più conviene quanto la gente è più rustica et ignorante."

50 Ledesma, *Modo di insegnare*, fols. 17v and 52r–53r. See Federico Mompellio, "Filippo Neri e la musica 'pescatrice di anime,'" *Chigiana* XXII, no. 2 (1965): 3–33.

51 Dominique Bouhours, *La vie de saint François Xavier* (Paris: Sebastien Mabre-Cramoisy, 1683), 119, 132, 260. Jutta Toelle, "Todas las naciones han de oyrla: Bells in the Jesuit *reducciones* of Early Modern Paraguay," *Journal of Jesuit Studies* 3, no. 3 (2016): 437–50, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22141332-0030303005>.

52 ARSI, *Rom.* 129-I, fol. 249r: "intonando le parole cantando." Ledesma, *Modo di insegnare*, fol. 11r: "cantando parola per parola."

53 O'Regan, "Music, Memory, and Faith," 441.

54 Piazza, *Opere pie*, 82.

Beyond teaching methods, the *Report* makes clear that noise was an issue at San Vitale.<sup>55</sup> Hearing difficulties prompted several adjustments to improve audibility during the exhortation.<sup>56</sup> First, a bench was placed near the main altar. Then, “for greater convenience of the audience,” it was moved halfway down the nave.<sup>57</sup> Finally, a portable wooden pulpit was brought from the novitiate. The *Report* also mentions disturbances such as crying children, protests from men when almsgiving ended, and loud interruptions, including a woman who once cried out as if possessed.<sup>58</sup> By contrast, the authors express satisfaction when the catechism proceeded “with great quietness.”<sup>59</sup>

The Jesuits also emphasized “the joy of hearing the sound of so many voices” singing the *Pater Noster*.<sup>60</sup> Later, Piazza described the power of these voices, noting their resonance was so strong that it echoed throughout the valley of Montecavallo, once known for pagan cults, now filled with Christian sound.<sup>61</sup> The *Report* also offers glimpses of how participants reacted to the doctrine. On several occasions, the authors noted expressions of piety and devotion among the audience, whether during collective singing or as a response to exhortations.<sup>62</sup> While some authorial bias must be acknowledged, along with the epistemological and ontological distance between archival sensory descriptions and actual embodied experience, these accounts still offer insight into how sound and emotion interacted within the catechism.<sup>63</sup>

One case from 1607 involves a twenty-five-year-old poor man who tearfully requested confession, prompted by “the movement he felt inside after hearing

55 On noise, Niall Atkinson, “Thinking through Noise, Building toward Silence: Creating a Sound Mind and Sound Architecture in the Premodern City,” *Grey Room*, no. 60 (2015): 10–35, [https://doi.org/10.1162/GREY\\_a\\_00174](https://doi.org/10.1162/GREY_a_00174); Ian Biddle and Kirsten Gibson, “Introduction,” in *Cultural Histories of Noise, Sound and Listening in Europe, 1300–1918*, ed. Ian Biddle and Kirsten Gibson (New York: Routledge, 2017), 15–28.

56 ARSI, *Rom.* 129-I, fols. 249<sup>v</sup>, 250<sup>r</sup>–250<sup>v</sup>.

57 ARSI, *Rom.* 129-I, fol. 250<sup>r</sup>: “per più commodità dell’auditorio.”

58 ARSI, *Rom.* 129-I, fol. 251<sup>r</sup> (children); fol. 250<sup>r</sup> (men); fols. 250<sup>r</sup>–250<sup>v</sup> (woman).

59 ARSI, *Rom.* 129-I, fol. 250<sup>v</sup>: “con gran quiete.”

60 ARSI, *Rom.* 129-I, fol. 249<sup>r</sup>: “che era un giubilo a sentire il suono di tante voci.”

61 Piazza, *Opere pie*, 83.

62 ARSI, *Rom.* 129-I, fols. 249<sup>v</sup>, 250<sup>r</sup>–252<sup>r</sup>.

63 See Susan J. Matt, “Recovering the Invisible: Methods for the Historical Study of Emotions,” in *Doing Emotions History*, ed. Susan J. Matt and Peter N. Stearns (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 41–52, here 47–49; Stephanie Trigg and Anna Welch, “Objects, Material Culture and the History of Emotions in Medieval and Early Modern Europe,” *Emotions: History, Culture, Society* 7, no. 2 (2023): 1–8, <https://doi.org/10.1163/2208522x-02010183> (accessed Augut 4, 2025).



the doctrine.”<sup>64</sup> He returned the next day and delivered a long and intense confession, stating that upon hearing the catechism, he abandoned his plan to avoid receiving the sacrament for ten years.<sup>65</sup> A similar episode took place in 1610, when a novice persuaded a sixty-year-old Frenchman to make a general confession of his life. Afterward, the man felt such joy that he exclaimed, “O happy me, O blessed me, behold how much burden I am relieved of. Come now, trouble, come, death, little do I care, I have no more to fear.”<sup>66</sup>

If the catechism moved listeners to feelings of happiness, consolation, and devotion, these emotions extended to the teachers as well. For instance, the Jesuit who received the twenty-five-year-old’s confession was so affected that he said the experience alone was enough to make him happy, even if it were the last act he would perform in his remaining time with the Society.<sup>67</sup> A 1611 report similarly noted: “it is a great consolation to witness the fervor, not only of the novices in teaching the poor, but also of the poor in their eagerness to learn,” bringing great benefit to all involved.<sup>68</sup> These accounts suggest that catechism participants were not only engaged in an educational exchange, but formed an acoustic and emotional community: a group united by spatial and temporal rituals, the sharing of knowledge, and the feelings associated with it.<sup>69</sup> Both the acoustic and emotional dimensions of this experience were enhanced by a unique feature of San Vitale’s catechism: the fact that both the teachers and their audience communicated in their native languages.

### Languages, Images, and Universalism

According to the *Report*, an important change was introduced during the third session of catechism, in the small group teaching segment: “the poor from

64 ARSI, *Rom.* 129-I, fol. 252<sup>r</sup>: “il movimento che havea sentito dentro di se per haver sentito la dottrina.”

65 ARSI, *Rom.* 129-I, fol. 252<sup>r</sup>.

66 ARSI, *Rom.* 162-II, fol. 385<sup>v</sup>: “o me felice, o me beato, ecco di quanto peso mi son sgravato, vengan hora i travagli, venga la morte, poco mi curo, non ho più che temere.”

67 ARSI, *Rom.* 129-I, fol. 252<sup>r</sup>.

68 ARSI, *Rom.* 162-II, fol. 415<sup>r</sup>: “di certo è cosa di gran consolatione il vedere il fervore non solamente de noviti in insegnarli, quanto di essi in imparare.”

69 On acoustic community, Barry Truax, *Acoustic Communication* (Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 2001), 46, discussed by Knighton, “Circulating Sound in the City,” 33 and Terpstra, “Introduction: Sounds of Body and Spirit,” 4 and 9–20. On emotional community, Barbara Rosenwein, *Generations of Feelings* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 3–10, discussed by Jan Plamper, *The History of Emotions: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 67–74.

different nations were gathered into their own classes. They were provided with a catechist who spoke their language, for the Spanish and the French.”<sup>70</sup> In the following weeks, this approach was extended to Poles, Germans, Greeks, and Hungarians, both men and women.<sup>71</sup> Traces of this teaching in several languages by Jesuit native speakers can be found in later reports. The 1609 account states that people from “all nations and languages” participated in the doctrine, while the 1610 report highlights the “diversity of many languages.”<sup>72</sup> The most detailed source is Richeome, who listed at least thirteen nationalities—including Italians, Germans, Poles, Bohemians, Hungarians, Flemish, Walloons, Irish, Scots, English, Greeks, Spanish, and French—all taught in their native languages, in separate groups, and “without confusion.”<sup>73</sup>

The implementation of multilingual teaching at San Vitale raises several questions. No mention of it appears in connection with the Naples catechism of Antonio Spinelli. Jesuit theory, particularly Ledesma’s *Method*, advocates the use of the vernacular, including various Italian-Romance dialects, to teach peasants and the illiterate.<sup>74</sup> These vernacular forms were employed in Schools of Christian Doctrine and Piarist schools and likely characterized teaching at San Vitale beyond the segment divided by nationality.<sup>75</sup> Acquaviva delivered his initial speech in the vernacular, and the same language appears in the eight fresco inscriptions in the main nave. The rationale behind the Jesuits’ decision to implement multilingual teaching, therefore, merits further examination.

Early modern Rome was largely composed of foreigners, meaning non-native Romans, as well as people from across Europe.<sup>76</sup> Pilgrims who came to the city,

70 ARSI, *Rom.* 129-I, fol. 249<sup>v</sup>: “si unirono in proprie classi li poveri di diverse nationi. Fu dato nella loro lingua il catechista, alli Spagnoli, e Francesi.”

71 ARSI, *Rom.* 129-I, fols. 250<sup>r</sup>–251<sup>v</sup>.

72 ARSI, *Rom.* 162-II, fol. 371<sup>r</sup>: “di tutte le nationi e lingue”; fol. 385<sup>v</sup>: “diversità di tanti linguaggi.”

73 Richeome, *La peinture spirituelle*, 784: “chacun de vous a sa troupe et son escole à part en un meme lieu, et sans confusion.”

74 Ledesma, *Modo di insegnare*, 18<sup>v</sup>. See Alessandro Carlucci, “Communicating in Different Vernaculars Italo–Romance Intercomprehension in Historical Perspective,” in *Languages and Cross–Cultural Exchanges in Renaissance Italy*, ed. Joshua Brown and Alessandra Petrocchi (Turnhout: Brepols, 2023), 65–93, here 68 and 86.

75 See O’Regan, “Music, Memory, and Faith,” 442; Grendler, *Humanism, Universities, and Jesuit Education*, 410.

76 Irene Fosi, “The Plural City: Urban Spaces and Foreign Communities,” in *A Companion to Early Modern Rome*, ed. Pamela M. Jones, Barbara Wisch, and Simon Ditchfield (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 169–83; Joshua Brown and Alessandra Petrocchi, “Languages and Cross–Cultural Exchanges in Renaissance Italy,” in *Languages and Cross–Cultural Exchanges in Renaissance Italy*, ed. Joshua Brown and Alessandra Petrocchi (Turnhout: Brepols, 2023), 11–32.

especially during Jubilee years, often stayed permanently.<sup>77</sup> A male pilgrim, identifiable by his staff, is visible in the background of Greuter's engraving. Rome also hosted several foreign colleges, many of which were founded during the papacy of Gregory XIII (r.1572–85). These included institutions assigned to the Society, such as the German-Hungarian College (1552 and 1579), established by Loyola to train young Catholics against Lutheranism; the Greek College (1577); and the Venerable English College (1579).<sup>78</sup> The novitiate collaborated with these colleges, particularly to provide confessions in various languages. In 1607, records mention priests from "different nations" who spoke "all languages" coming to San Vitale for this purpose, arriving from "all our houses and colleges in Rome."<sup>79</sup> Through this collaboration, the Jesuits achieved more than their original educational goal, as the catechism also led to the conversion of foreign heretics, who were later sent to the Holy Office for abjuration.<sup>80</sup>

The Roman novitiate itself had a distinctly multinational character, partly due to the presence of these foreign colleges.<sup>81</sup> The institution accepted boys, typically aged between sixteen and nineteen, for a two-year probation. After this, they continued their formation with philosophical studies and served as teachers in lower schools. Jesuits were ordained in their early thirties, after completing their theological training at colleges organized by various provinces.<sup>82</sup> A review of the novices who arrived in Rome between the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries shows that Richeome was not exaggerating: the

77 Jeffrey Collins, "Sites and Sightseers: Rome through Foreign Eyes," in *A Companion to Early Modern Rome*, 564–81, here 564.

78 Francesco C. Cesareo, "The Collegium Germanicum and the Ignatian Vision of Education," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 24, no. 4 (1993): 829–41. See Carlsmith, "The Three Rs," 493–494; Matteo Sanfilippo, "I collegi per gli stranieri a Roma: Una introduzione storico-storiografica," in *I collegi per stranieri a/e Roma nell'età moderna. 1. Cinque–Settecento*, ed. Alessandro Boccolini, Matteo Sanfilippo, and Péter Tusor (Viterbo: Sette città, 2023), 7–30, here 14–15.

79 ARSI, *Rom.* 129-I, fol. 250<sup>v</sup>: "sacerdoti di varie nationi venuto da altri luoghi nostri di Roma." ARSI, *Rom.* 162-II, fol. 340<sup>r</sup>: "sacerdoti di tutte le lingue, li quali con molta carità concorrevano da tutte le nostre case e collegi di Roma."

80 ARSI, *Rom.* 129-I, fol. 251<sup>v</sup> (a French heretic in 1607); ARSI, *Rom.* 162-II, fol. 340<sup>r</sup> (three to four heretics of unknown provenance in 1607); fol. 356<sup>v</sup> (a French heretic in 1608). See Irene Fosi, *Convertire lo straniero: Forestieri e Inquisizione a Roma in età moderna* (Rome: Viella, 2011), 25–44 and 67–74. See also the English translation: Fosi, *Inquisition, Conversion, and Foreigners in Baroque Rome* (Leiden: Brill, 2020).

81 Camilla Russel, *Being a Jesuit in Renaissance Italy: Biographical Writing in the Early Global Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022), 18–51, especially 19.

82 See Grendler, *Humanism, Universities, and Jesuit Education*, 394 and 443.

thirteen nationalities he names match those of novices enrolled during his time at the novitiate.<sup>83</sup> Moreover, between 1620 and 1623, three novices from Japan are recorded, though it is unlikely they participated in the catechism in their native language.<sup>84</sup>

Beyond serving Rome's multilingual population, teaching in various languages held special significance for the novices themselves. A glimpse of this appears in Richeome's words: "through this beautiful apostolic exercise, you represent, fifty or so times a year, the memory and the figure of the sacred day of Pentecost, on which all the nations heard the apostles and disciples of our Lord preach in the words and languages of their countries, proclaiming the mighty works of God."<sup>85</sup> In this reading, San Vitale's catechism reenacted the miracle of Pentecost and thus embodied one of the Society's core aims: the global missionary endeavor. Moreover, he suggests that multilingual teaching parallels the visual language of sacred art in the church, which he believes is immediate and universally understandable.<sup>86</sup> Inspired by San Vitale's painted decoration, which "speaks" to them, the novices, according to Richeome, become artists themselves, "painting" the doctrine with their tongues onto the souls of the audience.<sup>87</sup>

Richeome's analogy invites closer reflection on the connection the novices may have felt between what they saw, said, and taught at San Vitale. In line with post-Tridentine imagery, particularly within Jesuit Roman circles, Acquaviva selected an iconographic program for San Vitale that emphasized dying for the faith.<sup>88</sup> Instruments of torture, now lost, once adorned the entrance porch, while the apse and nave featured scenes of martyrdom.<sup>89</sup> In

83 ARSI, *Chiesa di Sant'Ignazio* 254, fols. 124<sup>v</sup>–125<sup>r</sup> (1606); fols. 146<sup>v</sup>–147<sup>v</sup> (1607); fols. 161<sup>r</sup>–161<sup>v</sup> (1608); fols. 167<sup>r</sup>–168<sup>r</sup> (1609); fols. 178<sup>r</sup>–179<sup>r</sup> (1610); fols. 195<sup>v</sup>–196<sup>r</sup> (1611).

84 ARSI, *Chiesa di Sant'Ignazio* 254, fol. 253<sup>r</sup> (1620), fol. 254<sup>v</sup> (1621), and fol. 261<sup>v</sup> (1623).

85 Richeome, *La peinture spirituelle*, 784: "par ce bel exercice Apostolique, vous representez cinquante ou tant de fois l'an, la mémoire, & la figure du sacré iour de la Pentecoste, auquel toutes les Nations entendirent les Apostres & Disciples de nostre Seigneur prescher avec les propres termes, & langues de leurs Pays, les choses magnifiques de Dieu."

86 Ralph Dekoninck, "'Liber Idiotae' or 'Lingua Universalis'?: The Language of Images in 17th-century Jesuit Literature," in *Rethinking the Dialogue between the Verbal and the Visual*, ed. Ingrid Falque and Agnès Guidernoni (Leiden: Brill, 2023), 275–95, here 280–90.

87 Richeome, *La Peinture spirituelle*, 783–85.

88 Among the key works, see Kirstin Noreen, "Ecclesiae militantis triumphus: Jesuit Iconography and the Counter-Reformation," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 29, no. 3 (1998): 689–715, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2543684> (accessed August 4, 2025); Brad S. Gregory, *Salvation at Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 272–87.

89 Alison C. Fleming, "Shifting Role Models within the Society of Jesus: The Abandonment of Grisly Martyrdom Images c. 1600," in *Picturing Death 1200–1600*, ed. Stephen Perkinson and Noa Turel (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 375–98, here 377–78, 383.

this regard, San Vitale resembles Santo Stefano Rotondo (1581–82), belonging to the German-Hungarian College, where Niccolò Circignani (c.1517–97) and Matteo da Siena (1533–88) also painted early Christian martyrdom scenes.<sup>90</sup> This cycle was linked to the goal of Rector Michele Lauretano (1544–99) to prepare students for missionary work in Reformed territories and its dangers.<sup>91</sup> A similar intention has been noted in the Roman novitiate and its churches.<sup>92</sup> At San Vitale, this is especially evident in the ten frescoes depicting early Christian martyrs, attributed to Paul Brill (1554–1626), eight of which were later supplemented with inscriptions related to the catechism (Figure 3).<sup>93</sup>

These scenes are marked by a striking dominance of natural landscape over martyrdom narrative, leading Gauvin A. Bailey to describe them as “pastoral scenes of martyrdom.”<sup>94</sup> However, this apparent incongruity was likely intentional on Acquaviva’s part, who had San Vitale decorated with “several martyrdom scenes distinguished by the main provinces.”<sup>95</sup> The inscriptions beneath the ten frescoes give historical context to the location depicted, identifying several areas of the old world such as the Italian peninsula, West Asia, and North Africa (Figures 4–10).<sup>96</sup> The natural settings of the *Martyrs* thus reflect the Society’s universalist ambitions,<sup>97</sup> with notable implications for the later introduction of catechism instruction in front of their images. From the Jesuit perspective, the “rustic” and “ignorant” people of Europe were

90 The reference study is by Leif Holm Monssen, “The Martyrdom Cycle in Santo Stefano Rotondo, Part I,” *Acta ad archaeologiam et artium historiam pertinentia* 11 (1982): 175–310; Monssen, “The Martyrdom Cycle in Santo Stefano Rotondo, Part II,” *Acta ad archaeologiam et artium historiam pertinentia* 111 (1983): 11–106. See Ralph Dekoninck, “Alphabétisation et dissection de l’image: Retour sur le cycle martyrologique de Santo Stefano Rotondo,” in *Aiutando l’arte: Les inscriptions dans les décors post-tridentins d’Italie: Le iscrizioni nella pittura post-tridentina italiana*, ed. Gwladys Le Cuff and Anne Lepoittevin (Bruxelles: Peter Lang, 2022), 133–60, providing a complete bibliography in note 2, 133–34.

91 Monssen, “The Martyrdom Cycle in Santo Stefano Rotondo, Part II,” 62–78.

92 Bailey, *Between Renaissance and Baroque*, 64–68; Loach, “An Apprenticeship in ‘Spiritual Painting,’” 363–365; Gauvin A. Bailey, “A Missionary Order Without Saints: Iconography of Unbeatified and Uncanonized Jesuits in Italy and Peru, 1650–1614,” in *Art and Reform in the Late Renaissance: After Trent*, ed. Jesse M. Locker (London: Routledge, 2018), 240–61, here 247–53; Grace Harpster, “Illustrious Jesuits: The Martyrological Portrait Series circa 1600,” *Journal of Jesuit Studies* 3, no. 9 (2022): 379–97, here 381–82, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22141332-09030004> (accessed Augut 4, 2025).

93 Bailey, *Between Renaissance and Baroque*, 170–71 and 179–82.

94 Bailey, *Between Renaissance and Baroque*, 170.

95 *Vitae* 144 I, 74r: “varij martirij distincti per le principali provinciae.”

96 These are transcribed by Bailey, *Between Renaissance and Baroque*, 180–82, with the exception of *Martyrdom of St. Martinianus, Saturianus, and their two brothers* (“s.s. MARTINIANUS SATURIANUS ORQ FRATRES DUO GENSERICO REGE DIE XVI OCTOB”).

97 Bailey, *Between Renaissance and Baroque*, 179.



not fundamentally different from pagans living in remote lands of the New World.<sup>98</sup> By performing a multilingual catechism before these images of early Christian missionaries and martyrs, novices likely felt a powerful physical and emotional projection into their future roles beyond San Vitale's walls.

This overview of the history, setting, and aims of the Jesuit catechism at San Vitale leads to two main observations. First, the catechism provides an unusually detailed account of how the Jesuits conducted religious instruction in early modern Rome, describing not only its practical aspects but also its spiritual and emotional impact on both audience and teachers. While its topics, structure, and use of chant recall other contemporary models of religious instruction, such as the Schools of Christian Doctrine, San Vitale's catechism stands out within early modern Catholic education. This is especially due to the opportunity for instruction and confession in multiple languages, provided by native speakers. Although multilingual confession is later attested at the Hospital of Santo Spirito in Sassia, the Jesuits of the Roman novitiate appear to have been the first to introduce it systematically in the Holy City.<sup>99</sup> Further research may show whether similar methods were used elsewhere in Italy or beyond.

Second, San Vitale's catechism highlights the importance of an embodied understanding of early modern church interiors in relation to the ritualized activities they hosted. The church's painted interior and the catechism are closely connected through the figure of Acquaviva, who played a central role in shaping both. Whether Acquaviva intended this interplay from the outset remains uncertain. Yet only by examining the activities carried out before the *Martyrs* scenes can we begin to grasp what these frescoes might have meant to the Jesuit novices. Within San Vitale, space, imagery, and catechism were deeply intertwined, as further shown by the later addition of eight inscriptions within the fictive architectural frame of the nave. Ultimately, San Vitale's catechism illustrates the importance of approaching early modern churches not merely as static visual experiences, but as dynamic environments shaped by bodies, emotions, and sound.

98 Grendler, *Schooling in Renaissance Italy*, 356–57. On sound and early modern cross-cultural encounters, see the essays edited by Suzanne G. Cusick and Emily Wilbourne, ed., *Acoustemologies in Contact: Sounding Subjects and Modes of Listening in Early Modernity* (Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publisher, 2021).

99 Piazza, *Opere pie*, 16: "Sono qui più Confessori, e questi che intendono più lingue, valendosi ancora per qualche bisogno di qualche linguaggio straniero, de i Penitenzieri di S. Pietro" (There are more confessors here who understand multiple languages and, for certain foreign language needs, make use of the Penitentiaries of St. Peter).

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