Prayer
Scripture: I Timothy 1:17
Hymn: 423 "Jesus, Meek and Gentle"

The Racovian Catechism is the most compact and clearest, the
most widely circulated and most highly prized statement of the
doctrine of the Polish Brethren who are often called Socinians.
Faustus Paulus Socinus, an Italian Radical, in Poland became
the leading force in separating the movement from Anabaptists
and giving it a separate existence of its own with its own
system of doctrine. He was a man of brilliant intellect, great
organizing ability, and indomitable will. At the time of his
death in 1604 he was working on an enlarged and improved catechism.
His disciples completed it from his earlier writings and it was
published in 1605 in Rakow where the movement had one of its
strongest churches, an influential college, and a busy printing
press. Socinus' amanuensis, Völkel, took the lead in completing
the Racovian Catechism. Among the associates of Socinus who
developed and spread his tenets were Schmalz, Moscorovius, and
Ostorodt. A little later one of the most prolific writers of
the movement was Johann Crell. Leaders who followed were
Schlichting, Ludwig von Wolzogen and Andrew Wiszowaty, the grand-
son of Socinus. Wiszowaty gathered together the writings of the
movement and published them as the Bibliotheca Fratrum Polonorum.
The first two volumes contained the writings of Socinus. The
movement came to be called "Unitarian" from the title page of the
Bibliotheca Fratrum Polonorum where the title was followed by
the note 'quos Unitarios vocant' (who are called 'Unitarians').

Socinianism was an intellectual and rationalist system of
Christian doctrine on a supernatural basis. It asserted the
necessity and fact of a divine revelation, maintained that the
Scriptures are its authoritative record, and declared that reason
is the sole and final arbiter of truth.

Because the Polish Brethren were a development within the
Minor Church of Poland, which was a revolt from the Major Church,
the Reformed or Calvinist Church, Socinianism was first of all
a revolt against Calvinism. Since many of the leaders in the
early development of the movement had been Catholics, Lutherans,
or Anabaptists, Socinianism was also a revolt against both
Catholicism and Protestantism in all its forms. The Minor Church
had been infiltrated by Anabaptism and Socinus had no sympathy
for the doctrine, life style or social reforms of the Anabaptists.
Often the Socinian movement has been confused with the Anabaptists
because both movements were hated and persecuted by both
Catholics and Protestants. Many early Socinians had been involved
in the Anabaptist movements.

Socinus and the other early leaders who prepared the way for
and helped shape the movement came from patrician families of
wealth, education, and influence. Often for generations the
families had been professional people such as doctors, lawyers, judges, and professors. They were caught up in the intellectual and religious ferment of Renaissance and Reformation. They had a strong sense of individuality and revolted against the dogmas and moral laxity of the Catholic church and the dogmatism and intolerance of Lutherans and the Reformed. Many had fled from the Inquisition and Protestant intolerance to Poland and Transylvania where the rulers allowed religious liberty. Most of the early leaders were men of noble character, intellectual energy, and dialectical skill. Socinianism has been described as the first embodiment of the theistic humanism of the Renaissance in a church.

THE RACOVIAN CATECHISM: A WAY TO ATTAIN ETERNAL LIFE

The Catechism opened with the words:

The Christian religion is the way of attaining eternal life which God has pointed out by Jesus Christ and it may be learned in the Holy Scriptures, especially in the New Testament.

The will of God for men is that they believe in God and obey his will. Obedience to the will of God is revealed in Scripture and exemplified in the life of Christ as a life of joy in God, prayer and thanksgiving, renunciation of the world, humility, and patient endurance. Such a life is rewarded with the forgiveness of sins and eternal life.

THE DOCTRINE OF GOD:

The first article is the doctrine of God. He is the supreme Lord of all. He is the great omnipotent free will, the supreme individual personality. God's will is entirely free, bound by no law that the human mind can formulate. At his own pleasure he can ordain laws and appoint rewards and punishments. It is his very nature to will to do no evil. God is One. There can be no more beings than one who possess supreme dominion over all things. To speak of Three Persons is to speak irrationally. The Holy Spirit is only an energy and not a person. God may delegate His power or share it, and this he has chosen to do. He chose to elevate Jesus and to share his power with him. This doctrine of God ruled out predestination, original sin, and the necessity of imposing a penalty for sin or any doctrine of forgiveness in relation to law. God created man free to obey or to disobey. God is free to reward or punish. He is free to forgive on any terms he chooses. Man's mind is not capable of understanding God's ways nor competent to pass judgment on God's ways. The Socinians were greatly influenced by the philosophy of Duns Scotus on the free will of God.

THE MORAL ABILITY OF MAN:

The moral ability of man was one of the fundamental principles of the Socinians. Here they were greatly influenced by Renaissance
Humanism. Every man is born with adequate native power and freedom of will to choose and to follow virtue for himself. Without this power and freedom the moral life would have no meaning.

Both Catholics and Protestants insisted on the absolute bondage of the human will and the utter inability of the natural man to do anything good. The Socinians argued that unless man is free he is not responsible for his acts and no moral quality can be ascribed to him.

REJECTION OF THE DOCTRINE OF DIVINE PREDESTINATION:

Catholics and Lutherans held to a single predestination—God predestines some to eternal life; those who go to hell go there of their own choice. The Calvinists held to double predestination—God has predestinated a certain number to eternal life and a certain number to eternal damnation.

The Racovian Catechism challenged divine predestination:

If, as you state, there be free will, how comes it to pass that so many deny it? They do this because they think they have certain testimonies of Scripture, wherefrom they imagine they can make it appear that there is no free will in those things of which I have spoken. What are those testimonies? They are of two kinds: the one, from which they persuade themselves that they can infer this; the other, by which they conceive that free will is expressly taken away. Which are those testimonies whence they endeavour to infer this? All those that treat of the predestination of God... What is your opinion of this matter? That this notion of predestination is altogether false—and principally for two reasons, whereof one is that it would ascribe to God many things incompatible with His nature. Show me how the admission of this opinion would altogether destroy true religion? This is evident from hence, that all things relating to faith and religion would be in us from necessity; and if this were the case, there would be no need of our efforts and labours in order to be pious. For all exertion and application is wholly superfluous where all things are done through necessity, as reason itself shows. But if exertion and application be taken away from piety and religion, piety and religion must perish.

REJECTION OF THE TRADITIONAL DOCTRINE OF ORIGINAL SIN:

Both Catholics and Protestants accepted the doctrine of original sin. Socinians asserted man was created mortal. He lost neither life nor freedom by Adam's sin. Man is still able to obey the commands of God just as Adam was when he was created. Man's nature is not any more corrupt at birth than Adam was when created. The Socinians denied that man needed to be regenerated or transformed by divine power. The whole Catholic system of
redemption is unnecessary.

Socinians tended to be "once born" men and denied the validity and authenticity of those who claimed to be "twice born." Socinians rejected any kind of mystical conversion experience.

**REJECTION OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE ATONEMENT:**

The Socinians made the Atonement the principal object in their attack on Catholicism and Protestantism. Anselm's Satisfaction Theory of the Atonement was an essential element in the Catholic doctrine of redemption. The Reformers took over the Catholic doctrine. The Socinians declared that God's nature is such that He is in no way bound to require atonement in order that He may forgive sin. God is free to forgive with or without conditions. Christ's work consists in reconciling men to God rather than God to men. Christ's influence is on men rather than on God. The Socinians denied the necessity of transforming the nature of man by divine indwelling and the necessity of making atonement in order that God might forgive. It is not in God's nature to require satisfaction. The Socinians strongly resemble the Moral Influence Theory of Peter Abelard. Christ died to demonstrate the great love of God and the awfulness of sin. He died to awaken men to what sin can do and to the love and righteous will of God.

Christ's death was the great example of the obedience which every Christian should manifest. The obedience of Christ was no greater than He owed for Himself. He could not transfer its value to others. If the obedience of Christ could be transferred to others, in so far as a man felt himself thereby relieved from moral effort for righteousness, his character would thereby be weakened.

The Socinian attack on the Atonement and their doctrine of the oneness of God removed the necessity for belief in the deity of Christ.

**THE REJECTION OF THE DEITY OF CHRIST:**

The Socinians rejected the pre-existence and incarnation of Jesus as the Son of God. Jesus was a truly mortal man while he lived on earth. At the same time he was the only-begotten Son of God, being conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of a virgin. He was separated from all other men and distinguished from them by the perfect holiness of His life. He was endued with divine wisdom and power, and was sent by the Father with supreme authority on an embassy to mankind. His true humanity and genuine moral development gave His life a real ethical value for all his followers. Because of his peculiar and exemplary obedience God rewarded him with a resurrection and a kind of delegated divinity so that he might become the hearer of prayer. By his resurrection He was begotten a second time and became, like God, immortal. He was therefore glorified by God and exalted at His right hand to share His authority and power. He
was divine by office rather than by nature. God made him the
chief director of religion and salvation with supreme authority
and dominion.

The Socinians exalted Christ as prophet, high priest and
king. He is high priest, not because of His sacrifice on the
cross, but because of His Mediation and intercession after His
resurrection and ascension to heaven. He is king because God
has placed him at His right hand and given Him all power in heaven
and on earth to govern, protect, and eternally save all those
who believe in Him.

The Socinians placed the greatest emphasis on Christ as
the prophet. Christ came to make known the will of God. His
work as prophet was consummated in the New Covenant. The New
Covenant contains the precepts and promises of God. Christ's
supreme work was to declare the precepts and to give an example
of perfect obedience to them. That what Christ revealed by
precept and example is truly the divine will is proved by the
holiness of his life, by His miracles, and by his death and
resurrection. More than half of the Racovian Catechism is
devoted to the prophetic office of Christ. The whole Christian
system is viewed under the prophetic office through which is
revealed the will of God and promise is given of a blessed
immortality to those who live in accordance with the revealed
will of God. To be a Christian is to know and to do the will
of God. Faith is the motive leading man to obedience. Faith
without this obedience is of no avail. Knowledge and conduct
are the essential elements of Christian living. The reward is
for those who know and do. It is for them alone.

The precepts are both moral and ceremonial. Two ceremonial
ordinances were given by Jesus, Baptism and the Lord's Supper.
Socinus had refused baptism by immersion and considered it of
little significance. Its only value was a rite of initiation
for Jews and Moslems. His followers restored baptism by immer-
sion. Both Socinus and his followers considered the Lord's
Supper a feast of remembrance. They opposed the Spiritualists
who discontinued the Supper.

Christ fulfilled his prophetic office by declaring the will
of God, by his perfect innocence and perfect example, by his
miracles, and by his death. His death was not an atonement. He
died for sin and not for sinners. He was a victim of sin. His
death was a witness to the guilt and power of sin. Because of
His willing submission to the rage and fury of sin, men have a
right to remission of sins and a new hope in God. In His death
He was a witness to God's boundless love which awakens man to
the need for reconciliation with God. God could have chosen any
other way that He might have wished that was not foreign to His
nature. God chose the cross of Christ to move the hearts of
men to His will.

The Socinians were actually more radical than the Arians
of the fourth century. The Socinians held that Jesus Christ was truly a mortal man who was exalted to the right hand of God. His divinity was an adopted divinity. The Arians held that a pre-existent divine being lower than God became incarnate. The Socinians did teach the adoration and worship of Jesus Christ and held that prayer should be addressed to him.

THE DOCTRINE OF FAITH:

Faith for the Socinians was an attitude of attention to the promises of God and obedience to His precepts. Faith is belief that God exists and is a recompenser and a judge. Bare assent alone of the mind that acknowledges that the doctrine of Christ is true is not attended by salvation. Faith means trust in God through Christ that results in giving oneself up wholly to obey the will of God. Socianism was a system of high ethical demands of high seriousness and even of austerity.

THE ATTACK ON THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY:

Socinians rejected the doctrine of the Trinity. This was the most notorious feature of the system but was not its fundamental and primary interest. The rejection of the Trinity was a corollary of its other positions. Many anti-Trinitarians made the Trinity the main point of attack and many of them became Socinians, but the Trinity was not the main interest of Socinus and his followers. The Trinity was only an incident in a larger campaign. The Racoian Catechism devoted large space to attacking the deity of Christ and the Atonement as erroneous. Only a few paragraphs were devoted to the Trinity. Socinus thought it was good for his followers to know the truth concerning the Trinity but no one would be lost because of belief in the doctrine of the Trinity so long as it did not interfere with worship and service to the one true God.

DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH AND THE SACRAMENTS:

The Catholic doctrine of the church and the sacraments as the means of grace had to fall with the rest of the Catholic system of redemption. The church is simply the community of those who embrace the saving doctrine. Baptism is by immersion but is only a sign and pledge of faith and obedience on man's part. The Lord's Supper is nothing more than a commemoration of the death of Christ.

Common opposition to Roman Catholicism led the Socinians to regard themselves as Protestants—the true Protestants. They condemned and disowned all other Protestant bodies on the grounds that in their attempts at Reformation they had not been consistent in applying their principles.

THE NECESSITY OF DIVINE REVELATION:

Although the Socinians rejected the traditional system of redemption with all it involved and made much of human goodness
and human reason, they did not find man entirely sufficient to himself. They asserted man's absolute need of light from above in order that he might know the way of life and salvation, that without revelation would be hidden from him. They emphasized the moral ability of man but denied the sufficiency of his knowledge. In spite of their great emphasis on human reason they denied that human reason is enough to guide man in the way of life and salvation.

As you stated at the commencement that the way which leads to immortality was pointed out by God, I wish to know why you made this assertion? Because man is not only obnoxious to death, but could not of himself discover a way to avoid it, and that should infallibly conduct to immortality. How do you prove that he could not of himself discover the way by which he might avoid death and which would infallibly conduct him to immortality? This may be seen from hence, that so glorious a recompense, and the sure means of obtaining it, must wholly depend on the will and counsel of God. But this will and counsel, what human being can explore and clearly ascertain, unless they be revealed by God Himself? (Racovian Catechism Section 2, chapter 1.)

God through Jesus Christ revealed Christianity to meet human needs:

I wish to be informed by you what the Christian religion is? The Christian religion is the way of attaining eternal life which God has pointed out by Jesus Christ, or, in other words, it is the method of serving God which He has Himself delivered by Jesus Christ. Man's supreme duty is to serve God, who will reward the obedient with eternal life, and punish the disobedient with eternal death. How God is to be served no one can discover for himself; He is an absolute sovereign, and has the right to demand such service as He pleases, so long as it is not in its own nature evil and unjust. (Racovian Catechism, Section 3, chapter 1.)

Man can only learn from God Himself the service that God demands. Human reason alone could never guide a man in the way of life and salvation. Without light from above man would perish eternally. Divine revelation is unconditionally necessary and is supplied by Christianity. Christ's supreme work was that of the prophet to declare both by precept and example God's will for men. That what Christ revealed by precept and example is truly the divine will is proved by the holiness of His life, by His miracles, and by His death and resurrection.

THE PLACE OF RIGHT REASON IN SOCINIANISM:

The Socinians made much of the power and authority of human
reason, insisting that human reason had a necessary place in religion as in all other matters.

Of what use then is right reason, if it be of any, in those matters which relate to salvation? It is indeed of great service, since without it we could neither perceive with certainty the authority of the sacred writings, understand their contents, discriminate one thing from another, nor apply them to any practical purpose. When, therefore, I stated that the Holy Scriptures were sufficient for our salvation, so far from excluding right reason, I certainly assumed its presence.

The Socinians used rational arguments in attacking the traditional doctrines of Catholics and Protestants. The irrationality of Catholicism and Protestantism was the principal grounds of their hostility to these systems. All religious truth, like truth in any other sphere, must pass the judgment of the human mind. Nothing contrary to reason can possibly be true in religion or anywhere else. Catholics, such as the Franciscans, Occam and Duns Scotus, in criticising the system of Aquinas, were willing to admit that much in religion was contrary to reason and had to be accepted on the authority of the church. Luther spoke with great contempt of human reason and denounced the schoolmen and humanists because of their dependence on reason. Both Catholics and Protestants denounced the Socinians as rationalists.

THE CHRISTIAN REVELATION CONTAINED IN THE SCRIPTURES ALONE:

The only source of the Christian revelation is the Scriptures. From the Bible alone can the will of God be learned. The Scriptures contain the only revelation from God. His will cannot be learned from the traditions of the church, nor from special communications of the Spirit, nor from the Christian consciousness, individual or collective. The Socinians were very sincere and thoroughgoing on the principle of Biblical authority. The Bible is a divine book, authoritative in all its parts. The miracles of Jesus proved the authenticity and authority of the New Testament. The Old Testament is to be accepted on the testimony of the New Testament to it.

The Socinian emphasis on reason did not weaken the authority of the Scriptures. Their rationalism did have great influence on their interpretation of Scripture. The Bible must be interpreted by the light of reason. The Bible contains nothing irrational. God's will is absolute and his sovereignty unconditional, but he could not act inconsistently with reason any more than he could act contrary to right and justice. Sound reason is one in God and man; there can be no divorce between divine and human reason.

The Socinians had no trouble with the miraculous element in the Scriptures. They believed in the supernatural as firmly as their contemporaries.
With great zeal and seriousness they sought to make their lives conform to what they believed to be the meaning of the Word. With the Socinians Christianity was very much a book religion. Their emphasis on the authority of Scripture greatly enhanced respect for Scripture where ever they were known. Their criticisms of Catholics and Protestants forced both to serious examination of the Scriptural bases of their doctrines. The Socinian emphasis on reason forced all other religious movements to more careful attention to the exegesis of Scripture.

THE HISTORY OF THE RACOVIAN CATECHISM:

The Racovian Catechism was published in Polish in 1605 at Racow. A German translation was published in 1608 and a Latin translation in 1609. A copy of the Latin version was sent to King James I of England with a special dedication to the king. He ordered it publicly burned in 1614. An English translation was made by J. Biddle and published in Amsterdam in 1652. It was formally burned in 1654 by order of Oliver Cromwell. A revised and enlarged Latin edition was published in 1680. Thomas Rees published an English translation of the revised edition in 1818.

THE FATE OF THE POLISH UNITARIANS:

At the death of Stephen Bathori in 1587 the Catholics and Lutherans wanted Maximilian of Austria to be his successor. The "national party" chose Sigismund, crown prince of Sweden and son of Catherine Jagello. Zamoyski, the general-in-chief with quick, strong hand ended the contest by taking Maximilian prisoner after a fierce battle. Sigismund III (1587-1532) became king of Poland without further dispute. He also succeeded to the throne of Sweden, only to be deposed in 1604 by the Swedes who found his Polish ways offensive. He became known as the "Jesuit King" of Poland. The Jesuits became the power behind the throne, determined to crush the Protestants.

In 1611 when a Unitarian, John Tyscowitz, refused to swear by the crucifix and cast it to the ground as an emblem of superstition, pushed by the Jesuits the king had his tongue torn out, his hands and feet chopped off, and he was burned at the stake. The Jesuits stirred the populace to fierce intolerance and fanaticism. A long series of riots against Unitarians followed, the most notorious being the one at Lublin in 1627 and in Rakow in 1638. Lutherans and Calvinists consented to the Jesuit policy of crushing the liberal sects (the Anabaptists and Unitarians). The Jesuits with an eye to the future gave careful attention to enrolling the sons of nobles in their schools, where they converted them to Catholicism and trained them to back the Jesuit program.

At the death of Sigismund III in 1632 he was followed by his son, Wladyslaw IV (1632-48). The Jesuits found the Unitarian schools worthy rivals and in their way. The university at Rakow under John Crell had become the Athens of the Unitarians. Over
one thousand students were enrolled. In 1638 two students of the Rakow university stoned a wooden crucifix that had been put up on a public street. The students were disciplined and a public apology was made, but the Jesuits were able to persuade the king to close the church in Rakow, to destroy the college, to demolish the printing press, and to order all Unitarian professors and ministers to leave Poland. The destruction of Rakow moved other provincial rulers to refuse asylum to the Rakow refugees. Soon they took similar action against Unitarians.

The Cossack uprising in 1647, caused in part by Catholic intolerance toward the Eastern Orthodox, brought ruin and destruction to areas where the Unitarians were numerous. In the peace treaty the Cossacks were allowed one representative in the Senate. They chose a dignitary of the Eastern Orthodox Church. When he was insulted by the Catholic senators the Cossacks revolted again and this time allied themselves with the Turks. Unitarians again suffered in the destruction which again was worst in territory where Unitarians were strong.

At the death of Wladyslaw IV in 1648, John Casimir was summoned from France to be king. In France he had become a bigoted Jesuit priest and a Cardinal. Early in his reign the Russians joined the Cossacks in the war. Charles Gustavus of Sweden invaded Poland with help from the Prussians. When Prussia deserted the Swedes and the Polish nobles united with great patriotism, the Poles were finally able to bring John Casimir back from exile in Silesia in 1658. One of his first actions was to order all Unitarians and Anabaptists out of Poland within three years. At the end of two years he and his Jesuits drove the Unitarians and Anabaptists out of Poland, confiscating their possessions. The Jesuit Inquisition did one of its most thorough pieces of work in Poland. Unitarians and Anabaptists who were not killed fled to Prussia, Holland and to England. In each of these places they sowed the seeds of new Unitarian movements. From England Unitarianism spread to America. Unitarianism made some of its greatest conquests among Dutch Calvinists, English Calvinists (English Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and Calvinists among the Anglicans) and the Calvinist Puritans of New England. In less than a hundred years after the Unitarians were expelled from Poland with the approval of Lutherans and Calvinists, the Jesuits were able to move against the remaining Protestants and to turn Poland into a Catholic country (1773).

The Polish Unitarians were an important influence in the rise of Arminianism in Holland and in the rise of German Enlightenment. Their rationalism and criticism of the established churches helped prepare the way for both of these movements.