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(Sixteenth–Seventeenth Centuries)

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“Contemplative Likewise in Action”: Jesuit identity and the Church (Sixteenth–Seventeenth Centuries)

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Introduction

In his commitment to explaining the institution of the Jesuit order, an eminent figure in the early history of the Society of Jesus, Jerónimo Nadal (1507–80), used the expression *simul in actione contemplativus* (contemplative likewise in action) to define Ignatius of Loyola’s (c.1491–1556) spirituality, which was the inspiring and essential source of Jesuit identity.¹ The balancing of “action” and “contemplation” was not always stable within the Society itself; often the dialectical relationship between the two was difficult to maintain. Inner misunderstanding and factional divisions, sometimes potentially disruptive threats, beset the early Society, questioning its founding principles and the basis of its identity. At various times, firm intervention from the order’s leadership was required to mend fractures, silence dissidents, and ensure unity and stability among the *socii*.² External forces and broader dynamics too exerted pressure on the maintenance of internal cohesion, fomenting questions on some of the crucial motives of Jesuit self-understanding. As will be argued in this essay, very strong pressures coalesced in the mid-seventeenth century, bringing out some unresolved tensions between Jesuit spirituality and the Roman church’s orthodoxy during a stressful period of major transformations and redefinitions of the social role of religion in a setting when European thought on the whole was undergoing the stress of profound realignment.³

Throughout their history, the Jesuits encouraged spiritual experiences centered on mental prayer. Together with spiritual direction that served to interpret them in light

1. Jerónimo Nadal, “Patris Hieronymi Natalis in examen annotationes,” *Monumenta Historica Societatis Iesu* (MHSI), *Epistolae P. Hieronymi Nadal Societatis Iesu ab anno 1546 ad 1577*, 5 vols. (Madrid: Typis A. Avrial, 1898–1905), 4:649–53, quotation at 651. On Nadal’s central role in the construction of Jesuit memory and self-understanding in the early Society, William V. Bangert, S.J., *Jerome Nadal, S.J. (1507–1580): Tracking the First Generation of Jesuits* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1992); Manuel Ruiz Jurado, S.J., *Jerónimo Nadal: El teólogo de la gracia de la vocación* (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 2011); Ignacio Riera Ramos, *Jerónimo Nadal (1507–1580) und der “verschriftlichte” Ignatius: Die Konstruktion einer individuellen und kollektiven Identität* (Leiden: Brill, 2015); Guido Mongini, *Maschere dell’identità: Alle origini della Compagnia di Gesù* (Rome: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 2016), 25–29, 98–112, 301–9. On Nadal’s expression, Joseph F. Conwell, S.J., *Walking in the Spirit: A Reflection on Jerónimo Nadal’s Phrase “Contemplative Likewise in Action”* (St. Louis, MO: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2003).

2. Michela Catto, *La Compagnia divisa: Il dissenso nell’ordine gesuitico tra ’500 e ’600* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2008); Esther Jiménez Pablo, *La forja de una identidad: La Compañía de Jesús (1540–1640)* (Madrid: Ediciones Polifemo, 2014); Guido Mongini, “Para solos nosotros”: *La differenza gesuitica; Religione e politica tra Ignazio di Loyola e Claudio Acquaviva* (Alessandria: Edizioni dell’Orso, 2019).

3. The reference is to Paul Hazard’s still thought-provoking *The Crisis of the European Mind 1680–1715* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1990) (original ed. *La crise de la conscience européenne 1680–1715* [Paris: Boivin, 1935]).

of Ignatius's own interior illumination, they served as the foundational roots of the Society of Jesus. The several inquisitorial proceedings Ignatius had to face under charges of *alumbradismo* in Spain, France, and Italy are well known.⁴ Such allegations had posed a real threat to the enterprise of the first companions, and their memory of this existential challenge to their order was jealously guarded and carefully reworked by the Jesuits themselves as one of the most radical but constitutive elements of their identity. Influential and aged Jesuits, companions and confidants of Ignatius himself, took on his spiritual legacy and by allusions and reticence—following a Jesuit form of narration (according to the *nuestro modo de hablar* [our way of speaking])—molded it into the Jesuit corporate identity. At Ignatius's instigation, Nadal was the author of a delicate operation of constructing the self-image of the Jesuit community. Between the 1550s and 1560s, he visited colleges and houses, from Spain and Portugal to Italy, France, and Germany. During this tour, his mission consisted of a series of *pláticas* (talks) to explain to members of the Society throughout Europe essential aspects of being a Jesuit. In carrying out this operation (with the approval of Ignatius himself, as mentioned), Nadal had a prominent role in promoting a common ideology and unifying norms and practices among the increasing membership of the order.

In Nadal's talks, the references to the spiritual experience of Ignatius were frequent, according to the idea that Loyola's life reflected the *forma vitae Societatis* (form of life of the Society), that is, every religious and institutional aspect of the Society of Jesus. Not only practices and ministries, organization and governance but every connotation of the Jesuit spiritual path originated from the religious experience of Loyola and his first companions. Besides the talks aimed at explaining to the brethren the principal aspects of the Jesuit institution, such an assumption was also at the heart of Nadal's *Apologia pro Exercitiis* (1554–56).⁵ In this unfinished treatise, a response to the criticisms leveled by the Dominican friar Tomás de Pedroche (d.1569) against the *Spiritual Exercises*, the Majorcan Jesuit made a full vindication of the orthodoxy of Ignatius, the efficacy of his method of discernment, and the authenticity of his illuminist experience on the whole. Other scholars have analyzed Nadal's *Apologia* in more detail.⁶ What is worth noting here is that in his rebuttal of the charges of heterodoxy, Nadal—evidently stung to the quick—lashed out with harsh and aggressive tones, unusual for a master (and theorist) of the Jesuit rhetoric of the *nuestro modo de hablar*. He rebuked the adversaries (exemplified by Pedroche) for being “men without the Spirit,” merely specula-

4. On Loyola's trials, Sabina Pavone, “A Saint under Trial: Ignatius of Loyola between Alcalá and Rome,” in *A Companion to Ignatius of Loyola: Life, Writings, Spirituality, Influence*, ed. Robert Aleksander Maryks (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 45–65.

5. This text remained incomplete and unpublished until the late nineteenth century, even though its parts are scattered among different places: the first and the last sections are in *Epistolae P. Hieronymi Nadal*, 4:820–26, 826–73, while the middle portion is in Juan de Polanco, *Vita Ignatii de Loyolae et rerum Societatis Iesu historia*, 6 vols. (Madrid: Typographorum Societatis, 1894–98), 3:527–73.

6. Guido Mongini, “*Ad Christi similitudinem*”: *Ignazio di Loyola e i primi gesuiti tra eresia e ortodossia* (Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso, 2011), 45–81; Aaron D. Pidel, S.J., “Jerome Nadal's Apology for the Spiritual Exercises: A Study in Balanced Spirituality,” *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 52, no. 1 (2020): 1–36.

tive, incapable of understanding “with the heart and sense of the Spirit.” According to Nadal, they were almost as heretical as the Lutherans, and therefore unable to understand Loyola’s eminently spiritual profile.⁷ In a thorough defense of every aspect of the Ignatian *Spiritual Exercises*, which had been officially approved by Paul III (1468–1549, r.1534–49) in 1548, Nadal vigorously opposed the allegations of *alumbradismo* made by the Dominican censors and affirmed that Ignatius had been truly illuminated by God while claiming the full legitimacy of the religious experience of the founder as the unique and inherent foundation for the whole Jesuit order.

The more “uneasy” elements of Ignatius’s interior illumination were the concerns of other distinguished members of the order. A complex operation accompanied the drafting of the first official biographies of Ignatius. One of the first complete and most important biographies of Ignatius was the one by Pedro de Ribadeneyra (1526–1611), who completed a Latin version in 1572 and subsequently expanded (almost doubled) the Castilian translation in 1583, with a new Latin edition in 1586. Ribadeneyra’s *Vita* would represent the reference text containing the fundamental religious assumptions of the founder’s spiritual experience, much more appreciated within the order than the (too) institutional biography of Ignatius by Pietro Maffei (1533–1603), who published his official biography in 1585. Another interesting case can be pointed out in the ambiguous *Commentarium de origine et progressu Societatis Iesu* (Commentary on the origin and progress of the Society of Jesus [1577]). Authored by Simão Rodrigues (1510–79), one of the co-founders of the Society, the writing is a remarkable example of how prophetic motives and spiritual strands were clearly present and circulated within the group of the first *socci*, fully familiar with the illuminist roots of Ignatian spirituality, albeit superficially disguised or silenced to the outside world.⁸

Although summarily mentioned, such works show how Ignatius’s interior experience constituted one of the most hidden cores of the identity of the early Society, which continued to inspire and be transmitted even within the novitiates—as shown by the case of Father Bartolomeo Ricci (1542–1613), provincial of Sicily in the 1590s and author of numerous writings aimed precisely at novices inside the order.⁹

With the exceptional growth and institutionalization of the Society, internal currents of spirituality revived, sometimes taking excessively mystical or ascetic forms,

7. Mongini, “*Ad Christi similitudinem*”, 79.

8. Composed at the solicitation of Superior General Everard Mercurian (1514–80, in office 1573–80), Rodrigues’s writing was an early historical narration of the Society of Jesus steeped in the climate of expectations that had accompanied its origins. For basic biographical notes on Rodrigues, see José Vaz de Carvalho, “Rodrigues, Simão R. De Azevedo,” *Diccionario histórico de la Compañía de Jesús: Biográfico-temático* [hereafter *DHCJ*], ed. Charles E. O’Neill and Joaquín M. Domínguez (Rome: Institutum Historicum Societatis Iesu, 2001), 4:3390–92. On the composition of the historical memory of the early Society through the writing of the biography of Ignatius, see Mongini, *Maschere dell’identità*, 3–33 and 352–57, on Rodrigues’s text.

9. On Bartolomeo Ricci, who was for a long time master of novices at Nola College and Sant’Andrea al Quirinale in Rome, before being reassigned as provincial of Sicily, see Guido Mongini, “Racconti autobiografici di vocazione e identità della Compagnia di Gesù: Problemi storici e metodi di indagine,” *Rivista storica italiana* 132, no. 3 (2020): 904–29, esp. 919–21.

which required strict control and actual interventions from the Society's leadership. Such was the case during the generalate of Claudio Acquaviva (1543–1615, in office 1581–1615), who took an open stand on these issues in his famous letter to the entire Society, “Dell’oratione et penitenze come si hanno ad usar da Nostri conforme al nostro Istituto” (On prayer and penance as they are to be used by us following our Institute), dated 1590. In this letter, simply known as “Letter on Prayer,” the fifth general clarified some essential elements of Jesuit spirituality. In so doing, he reaffirmed the legitimacy of the contemplative mode of praying (i.e., mental prayer) in close and indispensable connection with the apostolic engagement, basically a confirmation of Nadal’s definition cited at the beginning.¹⁰

In the seventeenth century, ecclesiastical hierarchies and inquisitorial authorities became more wary and apprehensive of mystical-contemplative manifestations, which they considered dangerously close to heterodox thinking. Since more hostile attitudes grew inside the Catholic Church, stringent regulatory and repressive means were implemented to control such manifestations and bring them back within the reputed bounds of orthodoxy. Growing control from church officials meant that the Society’s space for maneuver vis-à-vis contemplative forms of religiosity narrowed. In a rapidly changing religious and political climate, the ambiguities surrounding the spiritual dimension—which stemmed directly from Ignatius’s life, as seen earlier—raised contradictions among Jesuits at large. More complicated became their positions regarding affective and mystical expressions, prophetic and thaumaturgical insurgencies, that is, the vast and ramified field of beliefs, pious practices, and devotions aimed at spiritual perfection that Adriano Prospero referred to as “charismatic religion.”¹¹ This is not to say that during the seventeenth century the “mystical advance” retreated or faded away. Although it has not yet been sufficiently investigated, the Jesuit commitment toward the promotion and dissemination of spiritual experiences continued to be strong and effective. For instance, Jesuits still played important and active parts in inspiring, supporting, and even publicizing charismatic experiences, acting as prayer teachers, spiritual guides, and directors of conscience; they endorsed such cases with their prestige and reputation as acknowledged experts in the *discretio spirituum* (discernment of spirits). They also authored texts that provided contemplative and spiritual practices with doctrinal legitimacy. To take one of the best-known examples, in 1614 the Jesuit Luis de la Puente (1554–1624) dedicated an entire treatise of his *Guía espiritual*

10. For the text of Acquaviva’s letter, see *Lettere de’ prepositi generali a’ padri e fratelli della Compagnia di Gesù* (Rome: Nel Collegio Romano, 1606), 242–69. A full and critically updated edition of Superior General Acquaviva’s letters to the whole Society is currently being produced that will include critical apparatus and texts in Italian, Latin, and English, with the support of the Institute for Advanced Jesuit Studies, Boston College. For a preliminary overview of Acquaviva’s letters, against the background of his generalate, see Guido Mongini, “Pensare per frontiere: La Compagnia di Gesù nelle *Lettere* di Claudio Acquaviva,” in *I gesuiti sulle frontiere* (forthcoming). Many thanks to Marzia Giuliani, Emanuele Colombo, and Guido Mongini for sharing this information with me.

11. Adriano Prospero, “Dalle ‘divine madri’ ai ‘padri spirituali,’” in *Donne e uomini nella cultura spirituale (XIV–XVII secolo)*, ed. Elisja Schulte van Kessel (The Hague: Netherlands Government Publishing Office, 1986), 71–90, here 75.

(Spiritual guide) to the centrality of prayer, conceived as a true contact with God, and contemplation, defined as the summit of spiritual and religious experience.¹² De la Puente's writing had a very wide circulation, was translated into several languages, and became one of the benchmarks of the Society, a key text in the advance of seventeenth-century mysticism.¹³ The guide focused on the idea of the direct relationship with God, without mediation, of individual access to the divine will, of the inner certainty of inspiration and grace—all great themes of the Ignatian *Spiritual Exercises*. Indeed, no one disputed the fact that (under several veils and cautions) the *Exercises* represented the coalescence of Ignatius's fundamental spiritual visions and his inner illumination—the essential features of Jesuit identity.

On the other hand, and at the same time, Jesuits were engaged in opposing the propagation of a “mystical fever” or, rather, the diffusion of “disordered” and unsound forms of mysticism. Between the last decades of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth century, they ended up adhering to the prevailing positions among the church establishment, determined to eradicate the practice of the “silent prayer” and any unchecked manifestation of spirituality in its midst.

A Charismatic Experience in Seventeenth-Century Milan: The Oratory of Saint Pelagia

The case of the Jesuit Alberto Alberti (1593–1676) fits into the hectic decades briefly outlined above. Besides offering hints about the ongoing relations between the Society and the Catholic Church hierarchy at a transitional time, the events in which Alberti was involved may help shed some new light on the controversial affair of the heresy of the so-called Pelagini.¹⁴ The Pelagini was one of the many lay devotional movements whose origin stemmed from a broad context of economic crisis, pestilence, and wars, all conditions that favored the proliferation of various devotional expressions and deeper spiritual urges. The movement found fertile ground both among urban and educated classes and in more “popular” and peripheral environments. There were needs and aspirations manifested within a multitude of congregations, confraternities, oratories, and devotional groups, involving local clergy and ecclesiastical figures, laymen

12. On de la Puente, see Manuel Ruiz Jurado, “La Puente, Luis de,” *DHCJ*, 3:2244–45.

13. De la Puente's guide, and other spiritual readings, were popular among the devotees of the Milanese oratory of Saint Pelagia, which will be discussed in the following sections. See, Marzia Giuliani, “‘Dentro’ Santa Pelagia: Il luogo pio, l'oratorio e le pratiche devote,” in *Leresia della preghiera: Gesuiti e Pelagini tra Lombardia e Veneto nel Seicento*, ed. Guido Mongini (Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso, 2021), 1–32, esp. 27–28. For broader reflections on Jesuit spiritual literature elaborated during the generalate of Acquaviva—under which de la Puente's writings should be placed—see Pierre-Antoine Fabre and Patrick Goujon, “The *Spiritual Exercises* in the Development of the Society of Jesus,” in *The Acquaviva Project: Claudio Acquaviva's Generalate (1581–1615) and the Emergence of Modern Catholicism*, ed. Pierre-Antoine Fabre and Flavio Rurale (Chestnut Hill, MA: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2017), 29–42, esp. 29–33.

14. The history of the Pelagini was first brought to light by Gianvittorio Signorotto in his path-breaking monograph *Inquisitori e mistici nel Seicento italiano: Leresia di Santa Pelagia* (Bologna: il Mulino, 1989). More recently, updates and new details have emerged thanks to the opening of the Archive of the Inquisition in Rome, see Mongini, *Leresia della preghiera*.

and women of any social rank.¹⁵ Around the middle of the seventeenth century, such proliferation heightened suspicions among ecclesiastical circles, who were concerned about the extension of these movements and their dissemination of mystical ideals and practices of silent or mental prayer as a means of perfection (and salvation) suited to individuals of every standing, beyond status, gender, and social condition. The increasing fear of such movements from below justified among the church authorities the great demonization of the contemplative method, which by the 1680s would lead to the condemnation of all movements charged with “quietism.”¹⁶ The birth of the Pelagini oratory has to be set against this backdrop of spiritual ferment, in a period of “pre-quietism,” that is, before the full-fledged anti-mysticism offensive and the exemplary condemnations of those who were recognized as representatives of quietist thought, in particular Miguel de Molinos (1628–96), the Spanish priest and theologian who was arrested in 1685 and condemned in 1687; Pier Matteo Petrucci (1636–1701), bishop of Jesi, sentenced to abjuration in 1687 and reduced to silence (his writings were listed on the Index in 1688); François Fénelon (1651–1715), archbishop of Cambrai, whose work was censored in 1699.

Just prior to the church’s official stance against quietism and its apologists, the Pelagini prospered. The movement first coalesced in 1641 around the oratory of the church of Saint Pelagia in Milan, after which it was named. The Pelagini was inspired and led by the Milanese layman Giacomo (Iacopo) Filippo Casolo (d.1656), described in the sources as an “illiterate” man, particularly pious and devout. Having obtained indulgences from Pope Urban VIII (1568–1644, r.1623–44) in April 1644, he succeeded in officially establishing a confraternity of zealous devotees and building local relationships with distinguished clergymen, government officials, and noblewomen. Recognizing Casolo as its spiritual and charismatic head, the original group was able to expand and promote the foundation of several oratories in Lombardy and Veneto in the early 1650s, particularly in Brescia, Bergamo, and Valcamonica, territories then under the Serenissima Republic of Venice. It was precisely in Brescia that the movement was the target of investigations by the bishop Pietro Ottoboni (1610–91) (future pope Alexander VIII [r.1689–91]) and the magistrates of the Venetian Republic, which led to the shutdown of all the oratories in the Brescia area. In June 1655, the papal nuncio in Venice informed Rome of the matter, engaging the machinery of the Inquisition. With inquisitorial procedures underway (in Brescia and Bergamo), the Pelagini leader Casolo died on June 12, 1656. Despite the demise of the founder, the dissolution of the Milanese oratories (1657), and the sentences imposed on some of the movement’s leading members (mostly forced domicile), the thorny affair of the Pelagini did not end.

15. On the success of devotional movements throughout Europe, especially through Marian congregations and the work of the Jesuits, a valuable and important reference is still Louis Châtellier, *The Europe of the Devout: The Catholic Reformation and the Formation of a New Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) (original ed. *L'Europe des dévots* [Paris: Flammarion, 1987]).

16. Adelisa Malena, “Quietismo,” in *Dizionario storico dell’Inquisizione*, ed. Adriano Prosperi, Vincenzo Lavenia, and John Tedeschi, 3 vols. (Pisa: Edizioni della Normale, 2010), 3:1288–94.

Some adherents were put on trial and sentenced to prison or exile (1558), while in only one instance was the death sentence pronounced: that was the case of an ambiguous and controversial figure, the Milanese nobleman, physician, and alchemist Francesco Giuseppe Borri (1627–95), who had proclaimed himself the leader of a group of former Pelagini and was eventually sentenced to death *in absentia* (1561).¹⁷

Although some powerful patrons attempted to defend the memory of Casolo and rehabilitate his life and thought, the whole Pelagini movement ended up falling under the blows of inquisitorial justice. Even in Milan, an embarrassing reticence fell over the name of the founder and leader of the oratory of Saint Pelagia, despite the esteem Casolo continued to enjoy because of the support of outstanding personalities, including aristocrats and ministers, Lombard and Spanish.¹⁸ Before the veil of silence covered the whole affair and its protagonists, the Jesuit Alberto Alberti stood among the most passionate and obstinate advocates of Casolo and his devotees.

The Jesuit Alberto Alberti and the Pelagini Affair

Born to a noble family in Valsugana del Trentino, northeastern Italy, Alberti entered the Society of Jesus on September 15, 1615 and became a professed of four vows in 1630.¹⁹ He taught rhetoric, mathematics, and biblical exegesis for many years at the Brera College in Milan and was active in spiritual ministries. During this period, he developed contacts with devout groups and religious characters in Milan and its territory, as did other members of the Milanese Jesuit community during the same years.²⁰ A man of high reputation, in the 1640s Father Alberti was sent to evaluate the case of Bernardina Floriani (1603–73) from Rovereto, who was on trial before the Inquisition as a witch and heretic. Thanks to the decisive testimony by the Jesuit, Bernardina was cleared of all suspicion and fully rehabilitated: as her visions and revelations proved to be authentic, she joined the Poor Clares under the name Joan Mary of the Cross and

17. Borri managed to escape, while his effigy was burned in Campo dei Fiori in Rome. He was subsequently arrested in Moravia in 1670 and brought back to Rome via Vienna. Thanks to powerful sympathizers in the Roman curia, the death sentence was commuted to life imprisonment, where in fact he died in 1695. On Borri's vicissitudes, see Lisa Roscioni, "La carriera di un alchimista ed eretico del Seicento: Francesco Giuseppe Borri tra mito e nuovi documenti," *Dimensioni e problemi della ricerca storica* 1 (2010): 148–86, and, on his involvement in the Pelagini affair, Roscioni, "Una storia così strana': Anomalie procedurali ed emergenza mistica nei processi inquisitoriali ai Pelagini e a Francesco Giuseppe Borri (1655–1671)," *Quaderni storici* 138 (2011): 697–727.

18. Allegations and trials against individuals associated with the Pelagini did not stop here; in fact, the events entered a new phase at the end of the century, see Liliana Billanovich, "I Pelagini nell'ondata repressiva degli anni ottanta: Dal processo padovano a Bartolomeo Griffi (1680–1684)," in Mongini, *L'eresia della preghiera*, 159–220.

19. Key biographical information in Pietro Pirri, "Alberti, Alberto," *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, vol. 1 (Rome: Istituto dell'Enciclopedia italiana, 1960), https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/alberto-alberti_res-eb58fb2a-87e5-11dc-8e9d-0016357eee51_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/ (accessed September 12, 2023).

20. See Danilo Zardin, "Sugli scritti del padre Gregorio Ferrari (1579–1659): Prime note di lettura," in Mongini, *L'eresia della preghiera*, 43–74.

became a founder of monasteries and a chronicler of her own ecstatic episodes.²¹

A spiritual father committed to guiding the community of believers, Alberti was also a Latin scholar—so proficient in the language as to contribute to the expanded edition of the *Calepino*, the most famous Latin dictionary of the Renaissance—and authored several works, from rhetorical tracts to theological treatises and handbooks for confessors and preachers.²²

His closeness to the Pelagini and Casolo dates back to the Milan years. While recent studies have stressed his involvement in the Pelagini affair, the substantial documentation preserved in the Archives of the Holy Office (now the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith) has brought to light several unpublished sources about the Jesuit Alberti that are still waiting to be further investigated and studied. Indeed, such documents offer new information that would help clarify certain aspects of his biography, as well as his part in the trial against the Pelagini, at least until the early 1660s.

Confronting the inquisitors, the Jesuit reiterated his positions, eventually compromising his reputation and falling under the charge of heresy himself.²³ Although Alberti was warned by the Society's superior general Goswin Nickel (1582–1664, in office 1652–64) as early as February 1657 not to expose himself and to stop writing in Casolo's defense, he did not obey. In the spring of 1657, he produced a set of papers in which several details emerge showing the influence exerted by Jesuit ideology on the Pelagini movement in general and in particular upon the protagonist of its first phase, namely Giacomo Filippo Casolo.

As far as we know, Casolo had been very close to the Jesuits. He had aspired to join the Society of Jesus, begging for admission to be sent on a mission to the Indies. Evidently, the inadequacy of his vocation, and his excessive desire for martyrdom, prevented his entrance. Moreover, other Jesuits, including Father Alberti, discouraged him. Eventually, Casolo ended up taking religious vows privately in the presence of his confessor, that is, Alberti himself, who was also Casolo's spiritual director.²⁴ This episode took place in the context of a severe illness that affected the would-be Jesuit, who, by decision of the then rector of the Brera College, Alessandro Fieschi (1596–82), was hosted in the college and assisted by the Milanese brethren. As his infirmity worsened and death seemed near, "there appeared to him in vision" the blessed Francisco

21. She was eventually awarded the title of venerable (1733), while the process for her beatification was admitted to the Holy See. On her case, see Guido Mongini, *Poteri carismatici e dottrine di perfezione: Brigida Morello di Gesù (1610–1679); Un'esperienza di santità nel Seicento italiano* (Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso, 2012), 196–98.

22. Pirri, "Alberti, Alberto."

23. As maintained in the text, there are several unpublished, and currently unresearched, writings by Alberto Alberti in the Roman archives, especially in the so-called Archive of the Inquisition, that is, the Archive of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Their study might contribute to define Alberti's role in the first stage of the Pelagini affair. The archival unit, containing Alberti's papers that have so far been detected, is Archivio della Congregazione della Fede, *Sant'Ufficio, Stanza Storica* [henceforth ACDF, S. O., St. St.], R3-d.

24. Paolo Guerrini, "I Pelagini di Lombardia: Contributo alla storia del quietismo," *Miscellanea Bresciana* 43 (1953): 59–96, here 65.

de Borja (1510–72), whose biography had been read to him by the nurse brother who was looking after him.²⁵ This incident was narrated in a long memorial by Alberti and sent to the inquisitor of Milan dated March 31, 1657, which evidently was written to endorse Casolo's virtues and goodness of life and counter the outrageous allegations against Casolo (the contents of which still remained unknown).²⁶ An interesting aspect of this defense is that Casolo's entire work and spiritual endeavor were placed under the assistance and protection of the blessed Borja. Not only in Casolo's vision had the blessed Borja promised to heal, but with him Casolo had even "made a pact." As Alberti testified:

In that vision the blessed Borja warned [Casolo] that he should go to Valcamonica for the help of those souls, promising him that he would come with him in company, and I myself, made aware of this, advised him that he should correspond with what the blessed Borja had mentioned to him.²⁷

Mindful of the resonance of these statements—which placed Casolo's activities in a dimension of inspiration and under the seal of a much-celebrated blessed of the Society of Jesus—and of the perplexities they might raise, Alberti claimed that he had in due time informed "our present Father General," that is, Goswin Nickel, adding, "I think that in the archives of our professed house in Rome that letter of mine will be preserved," as further proof of the veracity of his account. It was then by way of "obedience to the blessed [Borja]" that Casolo had undertaken his "mission" to Valcamonica, presumably in the late spring of 1647, and fulfilled "holy deeds," that is, proselytizing and planting Pelagini oratories in that valley.

The reference to Borja, the third general of the Jesuits (in office 1565–72) and a well-revered figure in the order's memory, gave Casolo's actions an aura of righteousness and impeccability. The pious Milanese had been assured of the goodness of all his efforts by charismatic means granted by the blessed Borja: from him, Giacomo Filippo had received the mandate to promote and spread the kind of spiritual practices set at Saint Pelagia. In conclusion, Alberti pointed out that "there is no reason, nor even any apparent probability, that the blessed Borja allowed him [Casolo] to fall into any error, or heresy, even only material, for he had concurred in making him do so many prodigies, which here cannot be fully explained."

For Father Alberti, the denouncement of the Valcamonica oratories and their founding father, Giacomo Filippo, was particularly painful, because such allegations drastically clashed with his own beliefs as a Jesuit. He was convinced that he was witnessing

25. ACDF, S. O., *St. St.*, R3-d, cc. 532^{r-v}.

26. *Considerazioni di Alberto Alberti sacerdote della Compagnia di Giesù proposte al Ill.mo P.re Fra Pietro Giacinto Donnelo digniss.mo Inquisitore di Milano a dì 31 marzo 1657 concernenti la vita di Giacomo Filippo Casolo di S. Pelagia*, in ACDF, S. O., *St. St.*, R3-d, cc. 518^r–544^r. Divided into several parts, the one we take under analysis here focuses on the second chapter, entitled "On the Life of Giacomo Filippo," cc. 524^r–536^v.

27. ACDF, S. O., *St. St.*, R3-d, cc. 532^{r-v}, and the following citations.

an authentic “holy work” under the patronage of Borja himself, one of the most prominent members of the Jesuit “pantheon.” Alberti’s argumentation suggests that for him what was at stake was not only the reputation of Casolo and the Pelagini but also that of the Society of Jesus itself, involved “in spirit” in the activities of the oratories. The latter were—in his own words—a Jesuit enterprise in all respects, inspired as they were by an illustrious representative of the Society. In the mind of Alberti, and presumably in the minds of other Jesuits and their opponents, the allegations of heresy against Giacomo Filippo reflected on the Society and questioned its heritage of holiness.

From this perspective, a new light is cast on the Pelagini affair. A closer relation seems to connect the emergence of the Pelagini movement to Jesuit spirituality. From this viewpoint, one can better appreciate Alberti’s resolute determination in justifying that experience and its protagonists, including Casolo and the others who were accused in the Brescia trials.²⁸

Alberti’s defense focused on the positive contribution of the oratories and their helpful and edifying effects on the community of devotees. He argued that such experience was not controversial, since it focused primarily on the problem of the *cura animarum*, specifically understood in the Jesuit sense as the “help of the souls” (the Ignatian *ayudar a las almas*), centering on the importance of spiritual direction and in the general religious instruction of the faithful. The charges against Casolo (and, by reflection, against the Pelagini on the whole) regarding the issue of “mental prayer” were rebutted by the Jesuit by appealing to the positions of distinguished theologians (e.g., Thomas Aquinas [1224/25–74]) who had characterized it in the sense of a “certain mental attention” (*aliqua mentis attentione*), necessary as much to mere vocal prayers as to the precept of confession and the act of contrition for one’s own sins.²⁹ In short, Alberti addressed and solved the issue from a practical point of view, focusing on religious instruction and spiritual direction, and not on theoretical arguments. The same argument applied to all oratories that had grown out of the model of Saint Pelagia. In the Jesuit’s apologia, the memory of Giacomo Filippo could not be recalled without considering all the Pelagini groups, and therefore it was necessary to defend *en bloc* the one and the others: the vindication of the pious Milanese layman necessarily entailed that of Saint Pelagia and other oratories, especially those of Valcamonica, then under trial. To this end, Alberti dedicated a *Defensio* (Defense) to a text that played an important role in the Pelagini movement, namely *Libro delle rivelazioni* (Book of revelations). An unpublished manuscript, its contents circulated and were well known among Pelagini circles in Valcamonica. The authorship was attributed to Francesco Negri, known as Fabianino, an “uncouth” and illiterate layman who claimed to have been visited “in spirit” by God and to have received several visions and prophecies (i.e., revelations). A copy of the book, transcribed by a devout layman from the *viva voce* of

28. In fact, copies of Alberti’s apologetic work continued to circulate among Pelagini followers until the 1680s, when a new wave of trials hit key exponents of the movement, see Billanovich, “I pelagini nell’onda repressiva degli anni ottanta,” esp. 196–97.

29. ACDF, S. O., *St. St.*, R3-d, 536^{r-v}.

Fabianino, had come into inquisitorial hands, providing the inquisitors with further proof of the Pelagini's unorthodox practices and ultimately heresy.³⁰ About that book, Alberti was specifically questioned by the Holy Office in Rome, where he was summoned to account for his involvement with the Pelagini on May 12, 1657.

In Rome, Alberti found himself increasingly implicated in the Pelagini affair. In the first stage, the Jesuit still engaged in strenuously arguing for Casolo, the oratory of Saint Pelagia and the ones of Valcamonica against all charges. Addressing a plea directly to Pope Alexander VII (1599–1667, r.1655–67), Alberti begged the pontiff—who would die soon afterward—to have his writings examined, for they contained arguments proving the innocence of Casolo and all those involved in the trials.³¹ Alberti was sure the allegations would turn out to be groundless and asserted his belief with accents and references proper to a Jesuit spiritual context. He declared his motivations were for no other interest than “simply to make a sincere sacrifice to God of [his] whole self [...] more for the pure love, and honor of Your Holiness and the Sacred Congregation, as also for the benefit of all souls,” echoing the Ignatian *Spiritual Exercises*. The Jesuit reaffirmed his ideas, to some extent themselves inspired by God, while presenting himself as a humble and obedient servant of the pontiff and a deferential subject of the inquisitorial congregation. With confidence and good faith, he pleaded for the innocence of the accused, as his writings show. Only the authorities' refusal to consider his reasons and the unexpected worsening of his position within the Pelagini affair explain his growing bitterness and final dismay.

Indeed, for two years Alberti received no news of his plea nor information of other writings sent to the pontiff. Instead, in June 1659 his room was searched, and all his papers were seized by inquisitorial authorities, who afterward sent for him. This time his summoning was part of the prosecution against the already mentioned Francesco Giuseppe Borri. It was an embarrassing and hazardous situation, because of the seriousness of the case. From the evidence at trial, Borri had emerged as a sort of self-proclaimed messianic leader who was surrounded by few disciples, including the so-called “twelve apostles,” some of whom were recruited from the milieu of Saint Pelagia.³² As seen above, Borri was eventually found guilty of heresy, sentenced to death, and burned in effigy as a fugitive. The alleged collusion with such a figure led to a suspicion of ill-repute that the Jesuit vigorously opposed in front of the inquisitors. The Jesuit's apprehension worsened in the course of the interrogation, which focused on his defense of Negri's *Book of Revelations*. All the aspects of the prosecution against Father Alberti

30. A critical edition of Fabianino's “revelations” (presumably the oldest and most complete copy, the one sent to Rome for examination) has recently been published: Francesco Negri, *Il libro di rivelazioni*, ed. Irene Gaddo (Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso, 2021).

31. ACDF, S. O., *St. St.*, R3-d, cc. 485^r–487^r, for following quotations.

32. Borri used to call himself “prochristo,” see Roscioni, “La carriera di un alchimista,” 159; Michela Catto, “Monache nel processo ai Pelagini di Milano: Tra Giacomo Filippo Casolo e Francesco Giuseppe Borri,” in Mongini, *Leresia della preghiera*, 117–35, esp. 133–35.

have yet to be investigated.³³ What is worth noting here is that at this stage the Jesuit had to defend himself (and consequently the Society) from direct involvement in what was judged to be a heretical infection in all respects. Insofar as it is not yet clear how much Alberti's arguments contributed to the final acquittal of the Jesuit involvement, only further analyses will help to clarify the matter and its conclusion in more detail. As far as Alberti was concerned, the whole affair came to an end with the inquisitorial injunction not to pronounce or write anything more about Casolo or the Pelagini oratories, which stifled any fighting impetus in the man who had sustained and struggled for the recognition of that spiritual movement.

Hints for Research

After the judicial order of July 7, 1660, a heavy curtain of obscurity fell upon the Jesuit Alberti. Too imprudent to send him back to that land of heretical infection (as the inquisition had ascertained), better to keep him in Rome, far from the influence of the Pelagini. In the Roman professed house, Alberti was able to give himself to Latin studies and pastoral activities, even becoming the confessor of Superior General Nickel himself. Of his involvement with Casolo and his groups of devotees, he never spoke again. Yet, in his last testimony, before silence on the whole matter was imposed on him *sub iuramento* (under oath), Alberti had neatly asserted his innocence and repeated in passionate and resolute tones his defense of the devotional and charismatic experience of Casolo and the Pelagini. His final words on the matter raised a puzzling aspect about the whole affair in which he had personally participated: If all that thousands of the faithful had seen with their own eyes was a simulation or even worse a form of heresy, if an experienced spiritual director like him (and with him, all his brethren in charge of the Milanese province) had been deceived, what certainty of virtue and sanctity could still exist? Before being discredited, Casolo had been regarded as a "great Servant of God" by both the pontiff and high prelates.³⁴ Marked by too many obscure and controversial points, the whole affair of the pious layman ended up casting doubt on crucial presuppositions of the Roman church's doctrinal and spiritual knowledge, its magisterial function, and ultimately its credibility and authority as an institution of salvation. Behind these uneasy questions, conflicting dynamics within the Catholic Church itself were stirring along a decisive turning point: as the showdowns of the Roman Inquisition were unfolding, the papacy's ascendancy over political powers was declining and new modes of religious devotion were advancing as forms that were more easily integrated into systems of practices overseen by civil authorities. It was a time of transition and redefinition of the space of religion, a time of progressive and drastic narrowing of options for subjectivity and religious autonomy. The Jesuits, mas-

33. For useful insights and remarks, though not exhaustive, see Guido Mongini, "Il gesuita Alberto Alberti e la difesa dell'esperienza religiosa pelagiana: Appunti di lettura," in Mongini, *L'eresia della preghiera*, 93–116.

34. So Alberti maintained in his last writing addressed to the fathers of the Holy Inquisition, between May and April 1660, ACDF, S. O., St. St., R3-d, cc. 595^v–608^r, esp. 606^v–607^v.

ters of spiritual direction, had helped to guide and preserve spiritual options within the enclosure of orthodoxy, not without tensions and contradictions, as Father Alberti shows. In this respect, beyond the phenomenon of the Pelagini, his case points to more general issues that historians might consider for research. Particularly fruitful would be the study of the relations of the Society of Jesus with Catholic societies, within which the Jesuits carried out their “ministries,” and the interaction between Jesuit identity, local needs, and orthodoxy. Another set of questions arises from the role Jesuits played in the affirmation and diffusion of that “charismatic religion” that expressed an alternative or different idea of the church. All in all, it was such expressions of spiritual urgency that the Roman Catholic hierarchies strenuously endeavored to oppose and finally destroyed between the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. In this perspective, the struggle of the ecclesiastical authorities against the Pelagini movement was a stage—historically significant and preceding the fight with quietism—of the more general conflict led by the Roman Catholic Church against the multiple and tenacious manifestations of charismatic religion, which the Society of Jesus had partly sustained and promoted.