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## The Jesuits and the Church

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# The Jesuits and the Church

STEFANIA TUTINO

Assessing the history of the Society of Jesus within the larger context of the historiography on early modern Catholicism is both difficult and rewarding.

Let me begin by stating the obvious: anybody studying the history of the Jesuits knows that there are excellent reasons why Jesuit studies, as a distinctive field, makes sense. First, the Society of Jesus was a unique institution in the early modern church and with respect to the other religious orders. In early modern times, Catholicism progressively assumed an increasingly globalized, plural, and multifaceted identity, and the Society of Jesus was distinctively well equipped to engage with the manifold challenges of this rapidly changing and widening context, for structural, theological, intellectual, and spiritual reasons.

Second, the Jesuits themselves were aware of their own unicity, and in fact they capitalized on their own “special” features. The Jesuits’ adversaries (coming from both the Catholic and the Protestant sides, and coming from both the clergy and the laity) were not just theologically or intellectually but also polemically invested in polarizing the debates by stressing the “Jesuit” aspects of certain specific controversial doctrines. The Jesuits did not shy from the polemical challenges, and on several occasions they sought, more or less successfully, to embrace the polemical dynamics in order to defend and reaffirm the very unicity and originality of their theological doctrines against their enemies’ attacks. The Jesuits also had an uncommon historical sense and awareness of their own place in history, as anybody who has ever visited their magisterially kept and organized archives will know. This historical awareness sharpened further the Jesuits’ own sense of identity and modern scholars’ sense of the historical unicity of the Society.

At the same time, however, the Jesuits did not live in a vacuum. Jerónimo Nadal’s phrase *nuestra casa es el mundo* (the world is our house) is not only a manifestation of the ways in which the Jesuits understood their own ministry but also a powerful reminder for us all that the Jesuits were active participants to the intellectual, theological, institutional, and spiritual life of the early modern church, as well as contributing greatly to the political, cultural, and social history of early modern Europe and beyond. In fact, the Jesuits’ self-awareness of their own specific role in history was always inserted within the timeless theological dimension of the church, *semper eadem*.

Thus, while the field of Jesuit studies makes sense, considering Jesuit studies as an island rather than a field is problematic and carries some risks. From a historiographical perspective, focusing exclusively on what makes the Jesuits unique might have the consequence of closing off the field of Jesuit studies. This closure would prevent scholars from taking advantage of the immensely fruitful insight that we gain by putting the history of the Jesuits in conversation with the history of the church and

with the history of the world. In the long run, the lack of dialogue and engagement with the scholarship outside of Jesuit studies will make the field dry up, which would be a loss not only for historians of the Jesuits but for all historians.

Historically speaking, ignoring the extent to which the history of the Society of Jesus is connected to the larger history of the church and the world, paradoxically, will encourage us to assume a distorted view of the Society as a monolithic entity and will make us miss the conflicts, debates, and nuances that characterized the theological and intellectual life of the Society. By the end of the sixteenth century, the Jesuits had been remarkably successful in permeating the Catholic as well as the non-Catholic world, which means also that the Society manifested within its own ranks the theological, cultural, and political diversity that it was supposed to embrace and adapt to. Evidence of this can be found in several aspects of the history of the Society: for instance, as the Society created and consolidated Jesuit theological and institutional centers away from Rome, it became clearer and clearer that the interests, needs, and ambitions of the Jesuits living in Coimbra or Alcalá were not exactly the same as those of the Jesuits living in Paris or Louvain or Ingolstadt or at the frontiers of the Catholic world in the Far East or in the Americas. The Jesuit hierarchy in Rome had to maintain a delicate equilibrium between the various souls of the Society by negotiating with important organisms of doctrinal control in the Roman curia such as the Congregations of the Inquisition and Index, in a context in which parts of the administrative and theological structure of the papacy were still in flux. Also, the anti-heretical battle, which was at the center of the theological, and not simply polemical, activities of the Society, contributed to catalyze and solidify the Jesuits' unity around a common doctrinal core, but at the same time it contributed to expose the Jesuits' different theological and intellectual agendas.

We should also keep in mind that not just the Society but even the Roman curia was not monolithic. Rather, it was the expression of different voices within Catholicism, which often sang in very different tunes. We all know that different "factions" were present in the curia, but we would make a mistake if, in this context, we thought of the Jesuits, or other religious orders for that matter, as a compact "interest group." Sometimes this logic did take place, as in the controversy *de auxiliis*, when the Jesuits tried (and were forced to) summon a certain esprit de corps, but even in that case the Jesuit camp was not entirely compact and completely flattened on the Molinist position. In addition to divisions by orders, the curia saw other kinds of alliances, based, for instance, on specific theological views, or on specific competences (canonists versus theologians), or on specific political interests (Spain versus France), on family patronage, on career paths, and so on. From an even larger perspective, we should remember that the world of early modern Catholicism was immensely complex, embracing a great diversity of theological opinions, liturgical styles, spiritual approaches, missionary visions, and so forth.

Given all this, here lies the difficulty that we must confront when thinking about the history of the Society in connection with the history of the church: How can we take stock of the distinct unicity of the Society while at the same time avoiding the pit-

falls of cutting the history of the Jesuits out of the wider context in which the Society was born and thrived? How can we do justice to specificities and singularities while avoiding the pitfall of a kind of historical and historiographical isolationism that does no favor to either the scholars or the object of their scholarship?

The answer to overcoming this difficulty is not to shy away from the tension between the singular and the general but rather to embrace it, and when we do, we will see that the specificities of the Jesuits do not get annulled by being put in conversation with other historical and historiographical trends but rather shine even more. Conversely, inserting Jesuit studies in the wider history of the church will open new ways of inquiry and expose the complexities of the history of Catholicism. Nelson Minnich's and John O'Malley's papers are two wonderful examples of what we gain by embracing the tension between the *species* and the *genus*.

Minnich's paper examines the early modern Jesuits in dialogue with other early modern religious orders. Minnich does not deny and in fact confirms that the Jesuits were "different in various ways from the established monastic and mendicant orders," but being different does not mean being isolated. In fact, Minnich's paper focuses precisely on the Jesuit specificities to explain the complexities and nuances of the relationship between the Jesuits and the other orders. O'Malley reminds us that to understand the specificities of the Society, we have to view its history not simply in the context of the Renaissance or the Reformation but also within the much wider and longer context of the history of Catholic religious life, which, as he puts it, "helped make it what it was." Seeing the Jesuits in the perspective of the centuries-old tradition of Catholic religious life, O'Malley argues, helps us to see more distinctively their own unique contributions, and more specifically their commitment "to the cultivation of secular learning," which set them apart from all other clergy and allowed them to have "one foot planted in the church and the other in the world."

Aside from John's and Nelson's contributions, I believe that this entire symposium has been a great testament to how important the history of the Jesuits is for understanding not only the history of early modern Catholicism but also the history of Europe and indeed the world. We have heard great papers explaining the contributions of the Society of Jesus to political culture, the role of Jesuit spirituality in the process of identity formation *lato sensu*, the social, cultural, and political importance of Jesuit liturgy, the complexities stemming from the Jesuit missions throughout the world. Such wide horizons and open inquiries bode very well for the future of Jesuit studies, which means the future of the history of Catholicism and the future of history.