Book Reviews

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Le pape noir: Genèse d'un mythe. Petite Bibliothèque Jésuite. Bruxelles: Éditions Lessius, 2013. Pp. 140. Pb, 12 Euros.

It may be hard to believe that for centuries a good number of people were quite convinced that the Jesuits were secretly, powerfully, and insidiously behind much of what was evil in the world. But such was the case, and this was the foundational material for the Jesuit myth. *Le pape noir* tells the story of the origins and development of that myth clearly and succinctly, in a book that contains an introduction, six chronologically-based chapters, and a conclusion, two indexes (of persons and subjects), and a brief but current bibliography.

In the sixteenth century, the novelty of the Society of Jesus, its effective opposition to the Protestant Reformation, its support of the papacy, its widespread and successful schools, the English anti-Catholic and anti-Jesuit propaganda, the spread of the anti-Spanish "Black Legend," and the international character of the Society in the face of such phenomena as Gallicanism, all contributed to the origin of the Jesuit myth.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the modern, increasingly self-consciously national state could not tolerate a well-organized, supranational institution such as the Society of Jesus with its primary allegiance to a church with its headquarters in Rome. Hence such anti-Jesuit accusations as regicide and Machiavellian political intrigue. Of at least equal importance, increasingly on the right, Jansenists accused the Society of Jesus of laxism in moral matters and near heresy in theology. On the left, many of the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment saw in the Jesuits an obstinate continuity in fostering religious superstition in the face of nature and reason. Both groups saw the Jesuits as avidly seeking secular political power while manipulating even an unsuspecting church. The combination of all these forces, and especially the increasing pressure on the papacy by the monarchies of Spain, France, and Portugal, forced Pope Clement XIV to suppress the Society universally in 1773. It nonetheless

survived as a small remnant in White Russia, as Catherine the Great refused to allow the promulgation of the suppressing document to take effect. The French Revolution toppled the old monarchies and Pius VII globally restored the Society of Jesus in 1814.

"The Jesuits are against the liberties of the people" was often enough to rally opposition to the Society in the nineteenth century. After the French Revolution, much of Europe had a fear of supposedly-conspiratorial "secret societies." Conservative clergymen, for instance, were haunted by such fears against Freemasonry, and liberal politicians and intellectuals against the Jesuits. For the latter, the Jesuits were now no longer engaged in activities harmful to one nation or another, but rather at the heart of a worldwide conspiracy to undermine the state, to annul the freedoms that the French Revolution had brought, and to subvert the established political and social order. That the Jesuits of that time were usually very conservative is a reality. It was an understandable reaction to what they had suffered immediately before and during the Revolution and the fear that there was even more upheaval to come. Such conservatism only contributed to the myth.

It was in the later nineteenth century that the myth came to concentrate on one figure, the person at the center of that worldwide plot and all its machinations, the superior general of the Jesuits, the "Black Pope." He was so-called in contrast to the pope himself, who wore white. Behind the supposed political and religious powers of the world, hidden in the shadows, was the real all-powerful mover of events. Novelists rejoiced in the scenario. Alexandre Dumas, for example, in one of his later novels even turned Aramis from *The Three Musketeers* into a general of the Jesuits.

After World War I, the old Jesuit myth lost much of its vigor in Europe, where it had first begun. Why such was the case is not entirely clear. Among the reasons, perhaps, was the advent of the truly fearful worldwide evils of Communism and Nazism. Certainly since World War II, the Jesuits, after being for centuries the object of a *légende noire*, have become the object of a *légende dorée*.

In the United States, where the legend was never so powerful by itself, but rather as a part of a more general anti-Catholicism, it does live on in some of the anti-Catholic publications that even today say, for example, that the Jesuits were behind the Civil War, the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln, the sinking of the *Titanic*, and both world wars; that they control the United Nations and both the FBI and the Mafia; and that the present general of the Jesuits helped bring about the election of President Barack Obama. Added to this are the anonymous ravings of the Internet, which keep alive a few embers of the formerly-ardent anti-Jesuitism. They could be fanned into flame again

by those who must at all costs find an all-encompassing, universal conspiracy at work in the world. What the present reality of a Jesuit pope, Francis, will in the long run do to the legend remains to be seen.

Today, the Jesuits seem to many no longer the bulwark of conservative religion and politics but rather, to the delight of some and the consternation of others, major proponents of what Pope John XXIII hoped Vatican II would do: opening the windows of the church onto the modern world. There are other works, longer and more detailed, that deal with the Jesuit myth, but as a brief telling of the story, this is a well-written, very informative, quite interesting, and judicious treatment of a subject both important and fascinating.

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