

Fabian Fechner

Entscheidungsprozesse vor Ort: Die Provinzkongregationen der Jesuiten in Paraguay (1608–1762). Regensburg: Schnell and Steiner, 2015. Pp. 356. Hb, €50.

Considering the manifold and increasing studies on the Jesuits, it is surprising how much there is that we still do not yet fully understand. In this study, Fabian Fechner has offered insight into a mostly neglected object of investigation: the triennial provincial congregations. These were legal representative assemblies of the Jesuit provinces with specific rights and privileges. In his study, Fechner has made another valuable scholarly contribution by revealing tensions from these negotiations between the local, that is the province, and the global, that is the universal Society with its Roman headquarters. Regarding these two poles, the author refers to Meumann's and Pröve's chapter "Die Faszination des Staates und die historische Praxis" (in their edited volume *Herrschaft in der Frühen Neuzeit* [Münster: Lit, 2004]) and argues that "norm" and "reality" cannot be seen separately. Hence, norms are a product of a perceived reality which in turn was defined by legal foundations and discussions (13) as can be seen when the provincial congregation was discussing the issue of admitting people of "mixed" ethnic background into the order. Rule, on the other hand, is exercised on-site through the constant interplay of multiple institutional hubs such as the provincial congregation, the city council, the *consejo de Indias* or the general congregation of the order (15). Due to this approach, the book fits with a series of publications, which question the centralized character of the Jesuit order, exemplified by Juan Alfonso de Polanco's blind obedience.

In chapters one and two, the author introduces the reader to the place of the Jesuits in the complex imperial structures of Spanish America. In chapter three, he proceeds to the main focus of his study, the provincial congregations with explanations of their legal foundations and observations on their similarities and differences with other provincial congregations in Europe, Asia, and the Americas. After a broad judicial introduction, the author further narrows his focus to the provincial congregations of Paraguay. Fechner laboriously explains the historical sources he relies on, how they were compiled, whom they address and what kind of structural and institutional importance they had. Though his scientifically sound outline is commendable, the reader requires stamina to get to the book's case study, which does not begin until page 185 in chapter five.

The author rejects the notion of a monolithic Jesuit actor in favor of a more dynamic Society comprised of many individual interests and fractions. To be sure, the Jesuits had centralizing elements that were more pronounced than

those of other religious orders, such as the strong position of the superior general who appointed local superiors. But the power of the superior general and the general congregation was balanced by the activities of the provincials, their advisors, and the provincial congregations. The key question for Fechner is how local decision-making processes were negotiated through the provincial congregation. This assembly convened every six years (in non-European territories) and counted around forty participants though the number varied depending on the agenda of the congregation (114–15). Its official duties, according to the exact wording of the Society's *Constitutions*, were limited to the election of representatives for the general congregation or the congregation of procurators and reporting to Rome. These limited official duties have led some historians to underestimate their importance and research value (20).

But, as Fechner points out, the congregation also served as an important vehicle for dealing with questions that arose locally and regionally within imperial space and which had to be dealt with on a provincial level before being addressed in Rome. The writing of *postulata* was introduced by the *Formula congregationis provincialis* of 1567, while the legal introduction of *memoriales* remains still unclear (83, 146–47). In his analysis, Fechner does not simply deliver an isolated analysis of the minutes and files of the congregations' sessions, he puts them into a broader institutional framework taking into account the general congregation and the congregation of procurators in Rome (86). The working language during these congregations was Spanish and the meetings were held in private (146). At the beginning of a congregation, the members elected two *deputati* who chose, together with the provincial, the topics that were to be discussed (*postulata approbata*). Requests and demands of participants that met the approval of a majority of the congregation would be sent as *Postulata Congregationis Paraquariae ad Patrem Nostrum Generalem* to Rome where they were addressed by the congregation or the superior general, who in turn had to respond to them (169).

However, if a request was rejected by a majority it still could be included within the correspondence to Rome as a separate document, a *memorial particular*. Fechner shows that through these *memoriales particulares* we can investigate internal divisions and individual interests. For his case study, Fechner analyzed 522 of these requests from the Paraguay Provincial Congregation which were written between 1608 and 1762, and categorized them into eight topics, such as conflicts between the Jesuits and local bishops (185).

Questions concerning cooperation and competition between Jesuits and local as well as regional actors are complex. In fact, political alliances were based on case-by-case decisions. As Fechner shows within the Paraguay province,

there was often smooth collaboration between Jesuits and other ecclesiastical and public authorities, such as bishops and governors (199, 201–2). But that was not always the case, as he exemplifies with incident between the Jesuits and the bishop of Tucumán, Tomás de Torres. Fechner presents convincing arguments about how the Jesuits involved the Spanish crown and the Holy See in the negotiations in order to prolong decision-making in their favor. If the decision by the Spanish king or the pope was favorable, the Jesuits in Paraguay would use those documents to convince local authorities; if, on the other hand, the decision was opposed to their interests, local Jesuits would delay the procedure by asking for clarification or by raising additional concerns. The use of firearms by Guaraní in the seventeenth century and the implementation of the Treaty of Madrid of 1750 exemplify this strategy (198–99). Furthermore, he shows that although the superior general often did not actively support the Jesuits in Paraguay, proposing compromise as the favorable method of finding a solution, he also did not force their hands (201). Thus, decision-making was left to the provincial, provincial procurator, other local superiors and, especially, the provincial congregation.

Fabian Fechner has written a fine work on the importance of Jesuit local agency regarding decision-making processes at multiple levels of governance within the Society (307). He uses a clear structure and introduces the reader to the institution of the provincial congregation, and offers a helpful case study with the Paraguay province. Moreover, his research is based on historical sources, which have received little attention so far because of their presumed standardized character of negligible political consequence. His research clearly reveals that the provincial congregation was a suitable institution for individuals and minority groups to express their opinion and to make their voice heard in Rome (thus revealing dissent). Due to the thematic breadth of the congregation's discussions, proposals, and decisions the author does not (and cannot) relate in detail each topic with current research literature. Still, researchers familiar with one of these topics will find his findings beneficial to their own investigations. The only significant shortcoming is Fechner's claim to deliver a global historical approach. In light of the global character of the Jesuit order the provincial congregation functioned as a bridging institution in which local and regional knowledge was discussed while global norms provided by Rome were modified. A more in-depth analysis of this intriguing aspect, backed up by a solid methodological framework, would have been a fine contribution to global historical studies. Nonetheless, the merits of this thorough and insightful work are indisputable. It will be an important blueprint for further investigation of other overseas provincial congregations, which will further disclose

structural similarities and particularities and ultimately help us better understand the global nature of the Jesuit order even further.

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