Inquisitorial Medals and Diplomas

In addition to his wonderful library, Roberto Bachmann also managed to bring together an unprecedented collection of diplomas from the officers and Familiares of the Portuguese Inquisition, as well as medals related to the Holy Office.

Due to their symbology, these medals are undoubtedly related to the Inquisition. However, whether they are connected to the Portuguese or the Spanish Inquisition is a difficult question to answer based solely on the medals alone. In the purest exercise of material history, they have left us alone with their forms and representations. However, far from being mute, they tell us much about the culture of the time in which they were made, when the word ‘distinction’ was not limited to a good education, and all possible mechanisms were used to show one’s place in society, as aptly noted by Fernando Bouza.¹

More jewel than medal, these signs of distinction were undoubtedly made at the order of those who used them. Nor were they made by an institution and granted as a means of gratification, something that can more precisely be defined as a medal or decoration. In a rare English catalogue from the beginning of the twentieth century, they are called badges, namely, tags or insignias, and this was really their function: distinguishing those who wore them by the title they had been granted in inquisitorial courts.²

Some medals, in addition to the inquisitorial emblem (a cross with an olive branch, the symbol of mercy, on the right, and the sword, the symbol of justice, on the left), have a Dominican cross. This makes it seem that these are medals ordered by the Qualificadores of the Holy Office belonging to the order of St. Dominic, something very common in the Portuguese Inquisition. However, there was a second function, connected to the first, which can be seen most especially during the eighteenth century, when it was clearly the main reason people became Familiares of the Holy Office: showing they were part of the racial elite of the Portuguese world. In fact, until 1773 one of the main conditions to become a Familiar, and thus have the right to bear the inquisitorial

symbol, was to be an Old Christian.\(^3\) The medal, like the parchment diplomas signed by the inquisitor general proving that the person named was one of the officers and judges of the Holy Office, were thus material symbols which differentiated at practically all social levels pure Christians from the often hated and always despised New Christians. It was thus a mode of publicity, of divulging a demanded purity of blood.\(^4\) The greatest symbol of this negatively forged identity is the medal of the brotherhood of *Escravos do Santíssimo Sacramento* (Slaves of the Holy Sacrament), an institution created because of the desecration of Santa Engrácia Church (see above, pp. 50–60).

There remains the question of where the badges were used. If we make a parallel with modern brooches, stuck in lapels or pockets, we would certainly not be far from one of their uses, but the fact that all of these medals have two faces and no pin, points to a more informal use (even if in certain cases more sacred). In a 2012 exhibition Fundación Lázaro Galdiano in Madrid displayed several of these distinctive jewels, characteristic of the place their owners occupied in the extremely hierarchical society of that time. The small ring above some of these *veneras*\(^5\) allowed them to simply adorn, in a way that may seem unusual, decade rosaries, and also the traditional 165 bead rosaries, replacing the more traditional crucifix.

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4 Regarding this meaning of publicity, see Fernando Bouza, *Papeles y opinión*, op. cit.

5 This is the exact terms in Spanish for the “distinctive insignia that all knights of each of the orders carry.” Cf. *Diccionario de la lengua española*, 20a ed. (http://buscon.rae.es/drae/).