The story of the rise and fall of the first Society of Jesus like no other religious order’s epitomizes the fate of the Counter-Reformation as a centrally co-ordinated enterprise. The Society’s difficult start in the years 1534–40, which saw its motives and even its orthodoxy questioned by the authorities, resembled the tribulations of the Catholic humanist reformers in Spain and Italy whose quest for reform and reconciliation with the Protestant schismatics exposed them to similar charges from Rome. The hardening of confessional frontiers from about the mid-1540s spelt the end for the broadly inclusive and in parts crypto-Protestant Erasmian movement in southern Europe. Some of its leading lights who remained loyal to the Church, like cardinals Gasparo Contarini (1483–1542), Girolamo Seripando (1493–1563) and Giovanni Morone (1509–1580), played a crucial part in furthering the cause of ecclesiastical reform for which Contarini’s Consilia de emendanda ecclesia of 1536 were to set the tone.¹

However, the contraction of scope for inter-confessional debate of which the convocation of the Council of Trent (1545–63) formed part resulted in the Society of Jesus turning into the shock troops of the Counter-Reformation Church in the ensuing religious conflicts. Few

historians have questioned the crucial importance of the Jesuits’ activities as court confessors, envoys, missionaries and educators for the success of the Counter-Reformation especially in Central Europe in the age of confessional strife between about 1560 and 1648. They were important, though by no means always pliable, instruments of papal policy in the sphere of high politics: thus during the Thirty Years’ War, Jesuit court confessors in Vienna, Munich, Madrid and Paris were exhorted by the Curia to work ceaselessly towards reconciling the Catholic monarchs and aligning them against the Protestant powers.2 Ironically, such alignment came about, if briefly, after the end of the age of religious warfare as an unintentional side-effect of the Diplomatic Revolution and the Seven Years’ War in which all parties, with the notable exception of the Prussian, were keen to play down the confessional dimension of the conflict.3

The process of confessional polarization in the sixteenth and early seventeenth century has been identified as a key determinant in the formation of national identities in Protestant Britain and Europe.4 Conversely, this process contributed to the survival of the Church as a state-backed institution in the Catholic countries. Perhaps the most historically significant outcome of this constellation was a gradual but inexorable shift since the second half of the seventeenth century in the balance of power between the Church and the Catholic princes on the one hand and the institutions of the secular state in the Catholic countries on the other. In the Austrian Habsburg Monarchy, the balance had tilted firmly in favour of the Viennese and provincial governments by the mid-eighteenth century. The origins of this transformation arguably reached back to the very start of the Counter-Reformation under Ferdinand II (1619–1637), it continued in the reigns of Emperor Ferdinand III (1637–57) and Leopold I (1657–1705) and it had become the firm basis of governmental attitudes towards

2 The Jesuit court confessors’ activities as advisers and negotiators during the conflict are discussed by Robert Bireley, The Jesuits and the Thirty Years’ War (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).