CHAPTER 12

Jesuit at Heart
Luigi Mozzi de’ Capitani (1746–1813) between Suppression and Restoration

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When the Brief Dominus ac Redemptor sanctioned the suppression of the Society of Jesus on 21 July 1773, Luigi Mozzi de’ Capitani was a teacher at the Collegio dei Nobili, the jewel in the crown of the Jesuit educational system in Milan.

Mozzi was born in Bergamo in 1746, the son of Count Giambattista Mozzi de’ Capitani and Concordia Zanchi.1 He studied at the seminary in Bergamo; at the Jesuit college in Monza; and, against his father’s will, he entered the Society of Jesus in the novitiate of Chieri, near Turin, in 1763. Later, he studied rhetoric and philosophy in Milan (1766–1769) with excellent results.2 Some of Mozzi’s decisions while in the novitiate were particularly influential on his future life. On 15 October 1765, at the end of the biennio, he took a special private vow of loyalty to the Society of Jesus, at a time when Jesuits were being expelled from various European states. In the same period, he exhibited a particularly fervent devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and to his “personal protector” Saint Luigi Gonzaga. Additionally, he took the “blood vow,” which bound one to defend the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of Mary to the point of shedding one’s blood. Finally, during the same years, he asked his superiors to send him to an overseas mission, with a preference for China.3

After the suppression, ex-Jesuits wondered how to keep the spirit of the Society alive: what did it mean to be a Jesuit even though the Society no longer

2 ARSI, Mediol. 18.
3 Bassi, Vita, 11–19. Mozzi’s request was not accepted as often happened to talented young Jesuits, who were destined for teaching activity, and because of the delicate situation of the Jesuit missions of the Society at that time. See Altini, Vita, 37–38.
existed and how could one be, as a common expression of the time put it, “a Jesuit at heart”? For forty years, together with other Jesuits, Mozzi helped to ferry the Society of Jesus from the first part of its life (the so-called Old Society) to the second. His books, his travels, his apostolate, and his missionary activity were intertwined with complex European political events. His extraordinary network of connections, witnessed by hundreds of letters scattered throughout Europe, shows the cohesiveness of ex-Jesuits during these difficult years. Retracing some stages of Mozzi’s life provides an opportunity to study a crucial period in the history of the Society of Jesus through the eyes of a prominent witness, highly renowned during the nineteenth century, but whose memory, in subsequent years, almost completely faded away.

After the Suppression: Hopes and Prophecies (1773–1777)

In 1773 Mozzi left Milan and returned to Bergamo, his hometown, where he refined his studies in theology. Here he was secretly ordained as a priest (1776) and appointed pro-synodal examiner and canon of the cathedral. Later, in 1792, he was appointed archpriest of the cathedral.

Mozzi’s unpublished correspondence (1773–1797) with the ex-Jesuit Nicola Visconti Venosta is crucial for the reconstruction of Mozzi’s life immediately after the suppression. These letters reveal an active network of ex-Jesuits who exchanged books and information and tried to keep the spirit of the Society alive. Mozzi received letters from ex-Jesuits across Europe, copied and distributed them to other ex-Jesuits, and asked his friend Visconti Venosta to do the same. When the latter was in Rome, he put Mozzi in touch with

5 After the suppression Nicola Visconti Venosta, a teacher at the Collegio dei Nobili, went back to Grosio, his hometown; in 1775 he went to Rome, where he was in touch with other prominent former Jesuits; finally, in 1779 he went back to Grosio and married. See Nicola Visconti Venosta and Ugo Cavallari, Memorie spettanti alle famiglie dei Venosta di Valtellina e ai signori di Mazia di Val Venosta (Bettini: Sondrio, 1958). More than 200 unpublished letters written by Mozzi to Venosta are preserved at the Archivio Visconti Venosta, Grosio (Sondrio), b. 21. The letters are not numbered but I provide the dates of the letters. A partial catalog of the letters has been published in Daniele Galanga, “La persistenza dello spirito gesuitico negli anni della soppressione. Lettere di Luigi Mozzi a Nicola Visconti Venosta” (M.A. Diss., Università degli Studi di Milano, 2005–2006).
6 Mozzi used to circulate Venosta’s letters to other ex-Jesuits in Bergamo. See Mozzi to Venosta, 24 March 1774.