Priestly Violence, Martyrdom, and Jesuits: The Case of Diego de Alfaro (Paraguay, 1639)

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It does not diminish his glory in any way [...] to say that he died of a bullet [while] fighting with a shotgun in his hand, captains the Indians [for] it is licit, just and holy to kill the one who attacks the innocent, defending him or her when they would otherwise be defenseless.1

The question of what makes a Jesuit, the *quidditas jesuitica*, is thrown into stark relief by the extraordinary case of Diego de Alfaro (d.1639) and its apologia, written in 1644 by the former provincial of the Paraguayan province, Diego de Boroa (d.1657).2 Alfaro—superior of the missions of Guairá in the province of Paraguay—took up arms in 1639 and fought alongside his Guarani faithful against *bandeirantes* (slave raiders) from the Portuguese city of São Paulo; in the gunfight with these slavers, Alfaro was killed. Portuguese and Spanish detractors of the Society alike decried the scandal of a priest under arms, yet the Jesuits of the Paraguayan province rallied around their provincial in defending Alfaro’s actions as both heroic and virtuous. From their perspective, his actions were necessary, and he was, according to Boroa’s apologia, even a martyr for the faith.

Documented cases of fighting Jesuits are, it would seem, extremely rare, and Boroa’s letter defending Alfaro’s actions is also remarkable in the claims it makes. Yet, the contention of this essay is first that the presence of the Jesuits in frontier missions around the Paraguay and Uruguay rivers was essential to the way events unfolded in the region, the very same events that brought about Alfaro’s violent death. Second, it was Alfaro’s Jesuit formation and mission that

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1 Diego de Boroa, “Apología y defensorio de la gloriosa muerte del P.e Diego de Alfaro, 18 Enero 1644,” *ARSI, Parag. n.*, fol. 263r. This and all other translations, unless otherwise stated, are my own. My thanks are due to Mauro Brunello of the Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu (hereafter *ARSI*) for his assistance in the research of various aspects of this essay.

2 Boroa was provincial of Paraguay between 1634 and 1640 after which he once again became rector of the College of Córdoba de Tucumán until 1644. Thus he was provincial of Paraguay when Alfaro was killed, and rector of the College of Córdoba when he wrote the apologia (*Diccionario histórico de la Compañía de Jesús*, ed. Charles E. O’Neill and Joaquin Ma. Domínguez [Rome: Institutum Historicum Societatis Iesu, 2001], 1:495).
led him to act in the way he did; while third, the essay will argue that the *quid-ditas jesuitica* was fundamental to the way in which Jesuits (and Boroa in particular) perceived and portrayed these events in order to defend the missions and their populations against their enemies. In order to make this argument, the essay draws primarily on Jesuit sources from the province of Paraguay and, in particular, the above-cited apologia by Boroa, who wrote the letter in 1644 with multilayered intentions. In the first instance, it was a necessary justification of the actions of the Jesuits of the province to their superiors in Rome—in particular, the superior general Muzio Vitelleschi (in office 1615–45) and his successor Vincenzo Carafa (in office 1646–49). Ultimately, the superior general was the one who had to advise and instruct his subordinates on what they should or should not do, especially under such conflictive circumstances, always maintaining the difficult equilibrium between correct moral action based on sound theology and pragmatic politics in a context that could potentially have much wider implications for the work of the Society in those areas controlled by the Spanish and the Portuguese.

Second, the letter was crafted to refute those detractors of the Society who were using the scandal of a Jesuit under arms to their advantage (and to the Society’s disadvantage). Boroa more than managed to repudiate the accusations of the Society’s enemies, as we shall see below, by drawing on his own highly versatile Jesuit education, the *Ratio studiorum*, which was a program whose aim was, “to develop intellectually curious thinkers who could do more than simply repeat dogma.”

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3 The letter was directed to Muzio Vitelleschi who was the superior general until his death (February 9, 1645). According to a note on the back of the copy held in the Arsi, Boroa’s letter was replied to on November 30, 1646. As such, the reply would have come from Vincenzo Carafa who was elected superior general on January 7, 1646, or either of the secretaries of the Society: Alexander Gottifredi (in office 1644–46) or Ludovico Bompiani (in office 1646–April 24, 1649) (Johannes B. Goetsitouwers, *Synopsis historiae Societatis Jesu* [Leuven: Typis ad Sancti Alphonsi, 1950]), 29–30, 82, 86.

4 Unfortunately, the copy of the reply to Boroa’s letter (in Epp. Gen.) that would normally be kept in Rome is not held by the Arsi—I am grateful to Mauro Brunello of the Arsi for verifying this. Further research is necessary to discover if the original letter can be located in the Jesuit collections in the Archivo General de la Nación de Argentina or the regional archives of Córdoba de Tucumán. As yet, I have not been able to locate the reply and so, unfortunately, a consideration of the superior general’s response (and thus the official Jesuit position) is beyond the scope of this particular essay which will therefore be limited to a consideration of the opinion of the Jesuits of the province of Paraguay, linked to broader currents of (Jesuit) scholarly thought.