

Claudio Ferlan

I gesuiti. Bologna: Il Mulino, 2015. Pp. 200. Pb, 13 euros.

The publication of a concise general history of the Society of Jesus is always to be welcomed, given the extreme difficulty of such an enterprise. Not only is it a tricky business tying together the early modern and the modern stories of the Society, but the historiography of the latter is still in its infancy. Anyone taking up the challenge will be confronted by contrasting problems: that of mastering the vast bibliography concerning the order until its suppression in 1773, and that of filling the historiographical lacunae in its more recent history. To which we might add the universalism which has always characterized this religious order and which necessarily demands wide-ranging expertise. Claudio Ferlan's volume has succeeded in the task of writing an overall history of the Society of Jesus that balances its different elements in a persuasive manner.

Another characteristic of a concise history must be to impose clear selective criteria at the outset to avoid raising questions without scope for their analysis. Such choices are all the more crucial in the history of an order engaged on so many fronts: from theology, politics, education, and missionary work to literature and the theatre, to name only the most debated. Claudio Ferlan has had the happy intuition of choosing to start out with a number of questions central to recent Jesuit historiography—*modus operandi*, obedience, identity—and pursuing them through the history of the Society, with particular emphasis on its global aspect. The decision to focus his narrative on this universal dimension, and therefore to dedicate extensive coverage to evangelization outside Europe, has helped the author establish a connecting thread between the old Society and the new, and to compensate for the disparity of research into the two periods. It is also apparent that this decision owes something to recent events: indeed the book opens with the election of Jorge Mario Bergoglio, “the first Jesuit pope in history” (7). Though the chosen framework generally works well, given the author's interpretive premises, nevertheless a handful of passages could have done with treatment in greater detail. I will limit myself here to pointing out a few of these.

The first chapter deals with Ignatius and his first companions, emphasizing the importance of the latter's role in the formation of the Society. Given the introduction's emphasis on the importance for Jesuit identity of a concept such as the “negotiated obedience” (10) posited by Antonella Romano, one might have expected this chapter to have dedicated greater attention to Ignatius's troubled relationship with the inquisitorial courts (there is no mention, for

example, of the Roman processes) and more generally on the complex relationship between orthodoxy and heterodoxy in the Society's first formative period, not only in the Spanish but also in the Roman context. We are dealing, after all, with a vital issue that has been the subject of many recent studies, because it is precisely on the ambiguity of these categories that the complex relationship between the Jesuits and not only the Catholic Church but also society at large was founded.

The second chapter is dedicated to the order's successes and a good deal of space is given to two important themes running through sixteenth-century Jesuit history: education and relations with the temporal powers. The author rightly highlights the close connection between these two fronts and the constant self-promotion on the Society's part that throughout the modern period drove a publishing policy supporting the sanctity not only of Loyola himself but of other figures, particularly Francis Xavier. It is no coincidence that the third chapter is dedicated to the Society's missionary effort, nothing if not "an experiment in globalization" (67). The analysis here is extended over time, as is clear from the chapter heading ("1547–1767"). The decision is certainly an interesting one, but problematic for a thorough analysis of the crisis undergone by the Society in the eighteenth century. Choosing to deal in these pages both with the argument over the Chinese and Malabar rites and with the crisis over the Paraguay reductions can readily be understood in an exposition aimed at analyzing the policy of accommodation in both its positive and negative aspects. A consequence, however, of this approach is that the pages on the suppression emphasize jurisdictional quarrels with the European monarchies, drawing on a historical approach heavily indebted to Franco Venturi's interpretation of the period. Though the Society's difficulties with its missionary initiatives are touched on adequately, an insufficient emphasis is placed on how badly relations between the Jesuits and the Roman congregations had deteriorated over the course of the eighteenth century, and how numerous the order's enemies had become within the Catholic Church, even without taking into account the Jansenist controversy, which is dealt with in Chapter Four.

This last section is perhaps the least convincing of the book from a structural point of view. Under the title "Militancy," the author decides to bring together the many battles fought by the Society over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, both lost and won, which leads to an overly schematic reading of the period. As to the survival of the Society in Russia, the need for compression ends by oversimplifying Alexander I's eventual expulsion of the Jesuits, attributing it too readily to the Jesuit's hostility to the spread of Bible societies