

A Remnant and Rebirth

Pope Pius VII Brings the Jesuits Back

By Thomas W. Worcester, S.J.

In 2013, for the first time ever, a Jesuit was elected pope. Although this was a first and a surprise, the Society of Jesus has always depended on the papacy for its very existence, just as popes have depended on Jesuits as teachers, scholars, writers, preachers, spiritual directors, and missionaries and for many other roles. Pope Paul III approved the Society of Jesus on September 27, 1540; Clement XIV suppressed it on July 21, 1773; Pius VII restored it on August 7, 1814. For two centuries no pope has reversed Pius VII's decision, though certain popes, annoyed or angered by individual Jesuits or by the Society of Jesus as a whole, may have given such action some or maybe even a lot of thought. Clement XIV was a Conventual Franciscan friar while Pius VII was a Benedictine, and thus the story of Jesuit suppression and restoration is in some part a tale of rivalry, of misunderstanding, and/or of sympathy or mutual appreciation between religious orders. That part of the story has yet to be given adequate attention by historians, but here I focus on some considerations that may help us to interpret and perhaps nuance or supplement the term *restoration* for describing what Pius VII set in motion regarding the Jesuits.

How did the Society of Jesus get up and running again after 41 years of nonexistence? And how much continuity or discontinuity was there between the old Society, pre-1773, and what would develop post-1814? In small numbers, there were in fact men who had lived as Jesuits in the period 1773–1814, especially in the Russian Empire, where Catherine the Great had refused to allow legal status to Clement XIV's brief of suppression. Pope Pius VI (reigned 1775–99) largely ignored questions about what remained of the Jesuits, and he was otherwise occupied with patronage of the arts in Rome, with the Austrian emperor's efforts to take all but total control of the Church in his domains, and then with the revolution in France. From very early on in his lengthy papacy (1800–23), Pius VII encouraged efforts to keep the Society alive; and in 1814, almost as soon as he was freed from a lengthy imprisonment by Napoleon, he issued his "Sollicitudo Omnium Ecclesiarum," reauthorizing the Jesuits everywhere.

Jesuit formation had always been lengthy, typically more

than ten years from entrance as a novice to ordination as a priest, and then still longer until final vows, the definitive incorporation of an individual into the Society. But there had sometimes been diocesan priests who entered, and their formation would be shorter, allowing them to take up full-time work as Jesuits relatively quickly. This also happened in 1814 and beyond. An example is Francesco Finetti (1762–1842), a well-known Italian preacher who entered the Jesuits in autumn of 1814. He continued his preaching ministry as a Jesuit, and among his published works is a sermon he preached in Rome in August 1815 on the theme of St. Peter in Chains: he compared Pius VII to Peter, and Napoleon to the pagan Roman emperors; providence had freed St. Peter from incarceration and so too Pius VII, "the most glorious" of pontiffs. This Pope Pius did have a great deal to do with rebuilding the Church in the early 19th century after its near annihilation in the 1790s, and he could arguably be the most important of the twelve popes who have chosen this name. And as I have told my students at the College of the Holy Cross and elsewhere, without Pius VII there very likely would be no Jesuit schools today.

By 1814 there were not a lot of "suppressed" Jesuits remaining. Many of the pre-Suppression Jesuits had died, others had become diocesan priests, and still others had found more secular careers. There were a few suppressed Jesuits in what had become the United States; some of these were eventually readmitted to the renascent Society of Jesus while others chose not to do so. Bp. John Carroll (1735–1815), suppressed Jesuit and from 1789 the first bishop in the new republic of the United States, was still bishop of Baltimore in 1814, though he died the next year. Another perhaps more surprising and fascinating case of what happened to a suppressed Jesuit is Joseph-Ignace Guillotin (1738–1814). In his post-Jesuit years he became a medical doctor and then at the French Revolution was elected to the

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National Assembly, where his proposal for using a certain contraption for carrying out the death penalty was made law; this supposedly humane instrument of execution was named after him. In his later years Guillotin promoted vaccination against smallpox. Dying just a few months before Pius's decree of Jesuit restoration, Guillotin in his burial was reconnected with the Society in a small way, for his tomb is in the Paris cemetery of Père La Chaise, named after a Jesuit confessor to King Louis XIV.

For good or for ill, as a religious order the Society of Jesus missed out on the French Revolution. That meant missing an extraordinary period for promotion of liberty, equality, and fraternity, human rights and democracy; it also meant missing the Terror and its savage, bloody dictatorship and a campaign to destroy Christianity and compel submission to the state's agenda in religion and everything else. In Europe, post-1814 Jesuits generally allied themselves with a conservative political agenda that sought restoration of monarchy and of pre-French Revolution society. Thus European Jesuits for the most part identified with efforts to undo what the revolution had done and return to a pre-1789 world. Yet this was supremely ironic, for the destruction of the Jesuits had been engineered not by republican revolutionaries but by the Catholic monarchs of Portugal, Spain, and France, who had succeeded in pressuring Clement XIV to do what they told him to do. While post-1814 European Jesuits may have sought restoration of the Old Regime in various ways, in fact the nineteenth century, with its globalization and industrialization, was their inescapable reality, and a thorough-going restoration in politics or religion or anything else was not possible.

Jesuit founder Ignatius of Loyola had insisted on adaptation to circumstances. Jesuits were to give the Spiritual Exercises, for example, in a way that met individuals where they were in their relationship to God. In what ways was this dynamic, flexible Ignatius "recovered" by the restored Jesuits? Jesuit missionaries, most famously Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) in China, had adapted themselves to local cultures; they understood that they were not only to bring God to others but also to find how God was already present wherever they went, perhaps in ways that surprised and transformed them. The 19th century would open a new era of overseas missions, some of them to places Europeans had not gone before, such as the interior of Africa or Australia. It makes no sense to speak of restoration of the Society of Jesus in such places if there were no Jesuits there in the 18th century or earlier. To what extent did Jesuits who were sent to these places attempt to transplant European attitudes and values – imagined as equivalent to "civilization" – and to what extent did they seek to adapt Catholic and Jesuit traditions to local situations? Much more research is needed for an adequate answer. The 19th century would see enormous growth in centralization of the Catholic Church, even as it also reached geographic and cultural peripheries it had previously not known.

In the pre-Suppression Society of Jesus, English-speaking parts of the world had played but a small role, and few

Jesuits claimed English as their native language compared to the many who spoke French, Spanish, Portuguese, or German. But after 1814, both the expanding British Empire and the growing United States proved quite tolerant of Jesuits: as in the case of the Lutheran-turned-Russian-Orthodox Catherine the Great, non-Catholics often proved more supportive of or at least less hostile to the Jesuits than did fellow Catholics or countries that continued to have Catholic majorities. Most expulsions of the Jesuits from one or another country since 1814 – and there has been no shortage of these – have been from such countries, France and Spain among them. Switzerland, with roughly equal numbers of Catholics and Protestants, expelled the Jesuits after the Revolution of 1848 and did not admit them again until by referendum in the 1970s. Meanwhile, in the century and a half after 1814 Jesuits in the U. S. grew from a tiny few to some eight thousand just before Vatican II.

What about elsewhere in the Americas? Like Europe, Latin America had very large numbers of Jesuits active before 1773; and as in Europe, extant churches and other Jesuit buildings from that era or ruins of such buildings continue to suggest the widespread presence and influence of the old Society. But the challenges for Latin American Jesuits in the last two centuries have been many, from coming to terms with newly independent republics in the years after 1814, to surviving eras of ferocious anticlericalism, to serving the poor in societies where they have few to speak for them. November 16, 2014, will mark the 25th anniversary of the martyrdom of six Jesuits in El Salvador, Jesuits killed for their advocacy of justice for the poor. In Latin America, as elsewhere, the question of continuity or discontinuity of Jesuit history remains a complex one, and the history of Jesuits killed for their faith, including a faith that does justice, is no small part of that.

But the story of the Jesuits in Latin America and the story of the Jesuits as intertwined with the history of the papacy took a monumental turn on March 13, 2013. Though it is too soon to say how the election of Jorge Mario Bergoglio, S.J., as Pope Francis will change the Society of Jesus, it may be no less significant an event for Jesuits than what Pius VII did on August 7, 1814. Francis describes himself as from a distant place, from the periphery geographically and perhaps in other ways, as he speaks regularly of the urgent need to minister to the most marginalized people. He is now at the center of the Church, a Jesuit pope, something surely inconceivable two hundred years ago when the existence of any Jesuits at all was no sure thing. Perhaps Francis can teach Jesuits along with their colleagues and collaborators how to use positions of power and privilege for the benefit of people on the margins, the periphery. Perhaps Francis can demonstrate how a pope really can be a servant of the servants of God, one of the ancient titles of the bishop of Rome but one that has not always been visible in action. And perhaps he can play a central role, not so much by decrees or directives as by personal example, not in restoring but in reimagining and reinvigorating a Society of Jesus for the 21st century and beyond. ■