Paper in the Panel Discussion "Lenses, Tools, Filters: What Shaped the Earliest Jesuit Chronicles of Canada"

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I

Thank you for that introduction.

Historians long were tempted to write of a "monolithic" Society of Jesus, a stereotype reinforced by nineteenth-century anti-Jesuit propaganda that envisioned scheming spider-like priests working in unison to achieve world dominance. But the Jesuits also attracted strong minded and individualistic men, whose personalities were not erased by the demands of formation nor completely hidden by the formalism and expectations of conformity that dominated Jesuit correspondence of the period. Ignatius himself reveals multiple sides of his personality in his letters, as do many of the Fathers General who succeeded him. A closer look at Jesuits such as Matteo Ricci, who labored in China, and Friedrich Spee, who campaigned in the Rhineland against the persecution of supposed "witches," shows that important differences persisted in the responses of individual Jesuits to the training that they received and to the environments in which they worked.

The rigor of the formation of Jesuits of the baroque era is legendary. The psychological demands of the Spiritual Exercises were complemented by the hierarchically arranged curriculum of the Ratio Studiorum. To these factors can be added the cultivation of a collective identity through the visual and performing arts, publication of historical and hagiographical works and through a communication network that linked Jesuit throughout the world. Moreover, Jesuits destined for leadership positions were guided towards vows of personal obedience to the pope, which indirectly bound Jesuits to one another in yet another way.

The structure of the Society of Jesus provided for not only the production of the Literae Annuae or "Yearly Letters," but also for a range of writings, from the more or less confidential correspondence with Rome (sometimes filled with complaints about other Jesuits) to widely distributed publications such as the Jesuit Relations. In these documents we see additional tensions prompted by the writer's awareness of the potential "second audience" of his words. John O'Malley, the distinguished historian and a Jesuit himself, has described well one of the functions of documents intended for these multiple audiences: "Besides conveying information and seeking or giving advice, some letters or parts of letters were meant by deliberate design to do more. They had a professedly edifying purpose..."

Moreover, complaints about misbehaving Jesuits might appear on the agenda of the "Detrimenta" committee in Rome, which could recommend action against the offender. Jesuits who contributed to the Relations bore the burden of representing the mission of the Society to fans and possible donors (Olwen Hufton has called the Society the first great fundraising organization, complete with its own mission statement), as well as detractors, rivals, and skeptics.

Another variable in the generation of Jesuit documents that has received little attention from scholars is the actual level of skill in Latin of Jesuit writers. Beyond the inevitable scribal errors made while recopying, I've found undeniable evidence of Jesuit writers failing to grasps basic Latin syntax, or even the misspelling fairly common words: "Pseudo" spelled with the p and s revered, for instance. On another occasion a Jesuit working in a remote corner of Europe apologized to his superior because he had not found much time to study Latin! There is a

tradition—unsupported however by any documentation that I am aware of—that sometimes the least able members of a community would assigned the task of composing the histories of that community.

In a more subtle fashion Jesuit writers with varying degrees of skill in writing Latin leaned on the writings of their colleagues and especially, their predecessors, thereby producing prose that at times reads like an opaque overlay of multiple narratives of several events. And looming behind each of these accounts is the grand narrative of the Societas Triumphans, the "Society Triumphant," which itself was profoundly influenced by the Latin of the Vulgate Bible.

Carlo Ginzburg has pointed out how records of the ideas of the "subordinate classes" are written at one remove from their source by those "more or less openly attached to the dominant culture." This idea has some application to the Jesuits, especially in the case of priests writing about Jesuit brothers or even when higher ranking priests wrote about the coadjutores spirituales who performed the more "hands on" aspects of the Society's apostolic ministry. But Ginzburg's observation must be modified to allow for both the great freedom of action that distance and mobility made possible for Jesuit missionaries, and for the policy of the Society that often permitted an unspecified range of adaptations to, for example, the curriculum of the Ratio.

II

As far as can be determined, the subset of Jesuits in formation who "sought the Indies" was always self-selected. Not all who petitioned to be sent on overseas missions were granted their

requests: the makeup of the group of men who finally made their way to these missions (minus those who perished en route) had therefore been shaped by both external and internal factors. Of the external factors, a few hints remain in the Society's records. Jesuit administrators constantly evaluated their subordinates: one entry for a brother working in the Austrian Province, offers the following remarkable assessment: "Judgment: utterly lacking. Prudence, ditto... if he could only conceal his mania, he would be fit for all the duties of a brother." There are also instances of Jesuits being dismissed from the Society after long and seemingly successful years as missionaries. Yet we should not suppose that what might get a baroque Jesuit disqualified for a particular assignment was anywhere close to the categories we might expect to bring about dismissal from a job today. Jesuits who battled demons lurking around their residences or spent hours each day in acts of self-mortification were praised not censured. On the other hand the Society's records are generally silent as to the reasons why a Jesuit was dismissed, perhaps to check the spread of scandalum.

III

The early modern period was on in which much of life was conducted with little of the modern sense of privacy. The current uproar over the dissemination of personal financial data through the internet and especially, embarrassing photos on Facebook would have seemed odd to inhabitants of a seventeenth-century French village, where such information about an individual would have been common knowledge. The Jesuits of Nouvelle France were not only a product of such a culture, but within their own institutional culture they were further conditioned to a lack of privacy. While the missionaries of North America were accorded much de facto freedom of action they nonetheless lived the majority of their lives in public, confessed to one another, and constantly had an awareness that reports of their actions would be read by others.

This public nature of the Jesuit ministry had several consequences, some of which are harder to assess than others. The Jesuits who sought assignments such as the mission to the Huron may have secretly craved the attention—albeit awarded posthumously—that could come from their labors among the barbari. It is of course almost impossible to know which Jesuits might have had this motivation. Coupled with the desire for recognition would have been a drive to compete with other Jesuit missions; a very strong streak of competitiveness runs through the Baroque Society. Even for those Jesuits who humbly sought to remain obscure, the undertaking of a public ministry among a people such as the Huron who themselves lived communally and for much of the year, out of doors, could draw a missionary to see his outward actions, sanctioned by his mission to "care for souls," constituted the totality of his presence in the community. Despite the examination of conscience required by Jesuit training, there is little or no evidence in either the Relations or in less widely disseminated Jesuit documents that Jesuits could or would step back and reflect upon the full spectrum of their motivations—or on the long term material consequences of their actions. Thus the Jesuit accounts of Huron customs are detailed—and therefore arguably "accurate," but naïve.

IV

Finally, we must keep in mind the European context, beyond that specifically of the Society, in which the Jesuits who were sent to Canada had been formed. Allan Greer points out that while barbarus when employed to describe non-Europeans often had a negative connotation, this term and the French sauvage, since they expressed a negation of Christian civilization, might

be an almost underhanded acknowledgement of positive traits in comparison with the de facto decadence of nominally Christian Europe. The process of edification of their readers undertaken by Jesuit authors perhaps consciously or unconsciously included a critique of their own culture.

Among the Latin works the classical trained Jesuit missionaries were no doubt exposed to the Germania of Tacitus, in which the noble Germanic tribes were contrasted for polemical purposes with the effete Romans. This literary model would have held great appeal for Jesuits writing from North America. Then, too, even the 'worst" features of Huron culture: its spirits that the Jesuit interpreted as "demons," its sexual practices, did not pose the threat to European Catholicism that either Lutheranism or Islam presented. Nor did the belief system of the Huron offer a formalized rhetorical challenge to the Jesuits' practices in the way that Jansenism did in their homeland. The Huron, at least for European readers of the Relations, could cause a frisson without threatening any periculum.

Let me conclude with some more speculative observations than the foregoing. I'd like to propose that the Jesuits writers of the Relations knew fear far beyond their hope and expectation of periculum fostered during their European training, and that they also knew the loneliness that comes with the knowledge that you will never again see the places where you grew up, your family or even other members of your new family, the Society. And that although these men were fortified with their religious formation and the glories of their baroque Catholic theology, their multiple acts of disconnection from the community and familiar culture compelled them to wear blinders and resist the assembling of causal chains as the disasters of epidemic and cultural

disintegration unfolded around them. In this they differed only in degree and not in kind from the majority of their brethren elsewhere. But their pivotal position in the history of the Huron gave their blindness a much greater impact, and makes the continued deconstruction of the texts they left us of lasting importance.

Thank you.