A Global Clergy, A Bureaucratic Machine, A Cause for Hope

A Review of *The Jesuits: A History* by Markus Friedrich (2022)

Iñigo Lopez de Oñaz y Loyola was bedridden in his thirtieth year and then, as a result, had an awakening that changed his life—and the world. As Markus Friedrich writes in *The Jesuits,* his monumental (854-page) history of the Roman Catholic religious order, Iñigo's convalesce, the result of his having been severely wounded while fighting the French in Pamplona in 1521, "triggered a critical assessment of his life... The trauma of his injuries made him question his existence up to that point. He changed his ways entirely and set forth on a spiritual and physical journey of self-discovery.*

We know Iñigo today as St. Ignatius of Loyola, founder in 1540 of the Societas Iesu, or Society of Jesus, whose mandate was the conversion to Christianity of the entire globe. On April 7, 1541, within a year of the order's founding, Francis Xavier set sail from Lisbon with two other newly ordained Jesuits on a Portuguese ship bound for India. By the time of Ignatius's death in 1556, his priests and brothers had created a vast network of missions in Asia, Africa, and South America. In Japan alone they laid claim to more than 800,000 converts—despite the banishment and persecution of Christians there in the 1600s. The Jesuits would, of course, insinuate themselves deeply into North America, too. Friedrich rightly characterizes the order as "a global clergy." But he cautions his readers that the uniformly black-robed men should not be considered to have been a homogeneous entity. There is truth in the old joke that Friedrich quotes: "Three Jesuits, four opinions." Ignatius believed, nonetheless, that the Jesuits would grow together spiritually even across great distances and differences if they were constantly informed about the fate and accomplishments of their "brothers." To that end, annual reports were compiled, printed, and distributed.

Because of the unprecedented nature of their geographical task, Jesuits were among the first Europeans to take up the systematic study of foreign languages. The men posted to what would become the United States and Canada were required to learn at least one Indigenous language. Since one's mother tongue is intertwined with one's culture, they also studied the customs, attitudes, behaviors, and social institutions of their would-be proselytes. But making use of that kind of skill and knowledge would not have been enough to bring about the Christian revolution they envisioned. Two types of crisis repeatedly helped the missionaries creep in: plagues and famines. And while these circumstances put the missionaries themselves in harm's way, they had their faith to buoy them, along with a willingness to be martyred for the cause. Friedrich writes that Jesuits were supposed to behave toward their parents as if those mothers and fathers had already died. But those parents would have been—and probably were—well advised to behave towards their children in the same way. Early travel was treacherous, let alone what await them at their destinations. During some phases of the Jesuits' history, half of the men who embarked for China never even made it there.

The Jesuits were aided in their missionary work by their liaisons with secular forces—and they in turn aided them. "Keeping public order depended critically on the Jesuits' presence in the early years of many colonies," Friedrich asserts. That collaboration has earned them deservedly harsh criticism in recent years. Jesuits missionaries are also deeply implicated in the

theft of cultural property. They typically took scientific instruments, including clocks (and clockmaking), with them almost everywhere they went. But they sent home more than they left behind, their loot especially heavy in the form of "superstitious," "pagan" idols, which were often considered trophies of success. Alternatively, they destroyed them.

Perhaps their most egregious sin, however, was their participation in the slavery system of North and South America. As Friedrich writes, the Jesuits inevitably became "thoroughly entangled" in it, and like many involved in it, they found ways to justify it. They were, after all, operating according to the mores of the dominant culture in which their would-be converts were themselves immersed. And even slaves were "half-free," one Jesuit wrote, "because their captivity pertained only to the body, never to the soul." Eventually counted among the major slave holders in the hemisphere, the Jesuits did not sell their last 272 slaves** until 1838—"*sold,* not manumitted," Friedrich emphasizes, "because the Jesuits viewed abolitionism as a Protestant way of thinking."

While reading *The Jesuits*, I wondered how much nineteenth-century American Protestants missionaries made themselves sufficiently aware of their Roman Catholic counterparts' experiences. British Protestants were their more obvious and acknowledged role models. All Protestant groups could have benefited from studying the ways in which the Jesuits had combatted threats to their health in foreign fields. Few missionaries could sufficiently prepare themselves for the brutal climate conditions they often faced, but the Jesuits did take preventative measures to safeguard their psychological wellbeing. Aware that "spiritual exhaustion" was a threat, their superiors made sure their charges received regular periods of rest. "Every Jesuit's mental, spiritual, intellectual, and physical capacity was routinely evaluated," Friedrich notes. Even so, mental breakdowns were not uncommon.

The sacrament of Holy Orders is as serious a commitment as can be imagined. As a child in parochial school, I was taught that the hottest place in hell was reserved for defrocked clergy. And if whatever they have done is unpardonable, they not only must leave their position but the church itself—guaranteeing a fiery eternity. So it was surprising to learn from Friedrich that Jesuits were dismissed "frequently" for serious infractions, while others equally guilty were transferred "if that could cover up the crime and guarantee their control of the member in question." Bill Vaughn's *The Plot Against Native America**** indicates that some of those morally corrupt men were sent to the boarding schools established by the Jesuits in Canada and the United States for the conversion and assimilation of Indigenous children. The Civilization Fund Act, passed by the U.S. Congress in 1819, provided directly for the establishment of those resident schools in our country, granting the President the power to hire "capable persons of good moral character" to teach the "arts of civilization" to children they believed were "savages." Both Roman Catholic and Protestant missionaries were not only given land on which to build; they were paid on a per capita basis. It would seem to have been in direct violation of the First Amendment, but as Vaughn explains, "because Indians were regarded as foreign nationals there were no serious legal objections." The Jesuits, described by Friedrich as "a bureaucratic machine," were particularly adept at taking advantage of this mercenary opportunity. Their "monarchy," a German author wrote in 1761, "is a machine in which all the wheels turn smoothly as soon as the drive wheel is engaged." Besides, Jesuit missionaries were already intensively courting children, seeing more potential of sincere and permanent conversion in them

than in adults, who often feigned their faith to gain the accompanying perks, including food for the famished.

The Jesuits' peak membership of 22,589 was recorded in 1750, before an anti-Jesuit movement led to their decline and, finally, the suppression of the order by Pope Clement XIV in 1773. It was short-lived. A revitalization began in 1814, just as the first American Protestant missionaries were trying to establish themselves overseas and became the Jesuits' chief rivals. Today the Jesuits are the largest male religious order of the Roman Catholic Church, with over 16,000 members in more than one hundred countries. And besides retaining their reputation for being the most educated priests on the planet, and some of the best educators, they have the added distinction of being well-known as activists for social-justice causes of all kinds. (The very term—*giustizia sociale,* in its Italian translation—was coined by one of them, Luigi Taparelli d'Azeglio, in 1843.) So-called liberation theology, developed by Jesuit thinkers, advocates social and economic change, with the goal being not the "development" of Third World countries but rather the "liberation" of their inhabitants. And even though, as Friedrich notes, "liberation theology was and still is highly controversial both inside and outside the order," it has been quite a turnaround.

What is more, the current pontiff is a Jesuit—the first to have been elected from that order. As an Argentinian, Pope Francis is also the first chosen from the Americas. Friedrich considers the choice a sign of hope, and within a discussion of papal politics, ends his book on an optimistic note, seeing "many signs [that] point toward a reconciliation between the Vatican and the bulk of liberation theology." If that is the case, it means the church may be willing find a way to square its old, traditional standpoints, ideologies, and theories with attendance to "evil, injustice, and pain" (Pope Francis's phrase)—in other words, the true and urgent needs of our troubled world.

*I discuss the phenomenon of youthful convalescent confinement leading to personal metamorphosis in my essay "The Bedridden Artist: Creativity is Often Rooted in Enforced Isolation," published in *DoubleTake*, Winter 2001. See http://www.jeanneschinto.com/uploads/3/1/1/8/31182983/bedridden_artist_1.pdf.

** See *The 272: The Families Who were Enslaved and Sold to Build The American Catholic Church* by Rachel L. Swarns (New York: Random House, 2023).

*** See *The Plot Against Native America: The Fateful Story of Native American Boarding Schools and the Theft of Tribal Lands* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2024).