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# Perpetually Abolished, Entirely Extinguished

## The Society of Jesus Suppressed

By John W. Padberg, S.J.

**O**n the early evening of August 16, 1773, a papal functionary along with a small group of soldiers came to the Jesuit Curia in Rome. They summoned Father General Lorenzo Ricci and his assistants and presented to Ricci a document entitled “Dominus ac Redemptor” (“Our Lord and Redeemer”) from Pope Clement XIV. In it, in the words of the document itself, the pope said that “in the fullness of apostolic power we put out of existence and suppress the Society of Jesus; we do away with and abrogate each and every one of its offices, ministries, works, houses, schools, colleges...in

whatsoever land they exist...as well as its statutes, usages, customs, decrees and Constitutions, and we declare perpetually abolished and entirely extinguished all authority of the superior general and of provincial superiors and visitors and any and all superiors in the afore-mentioned Society...” Some days later Father Ricci and his assistants were imprisoned in Castel Sant’Angelo. After two years of strict confinement there deprived of enough food, heat, and light, Ricci died a papal prisoner on November 24, 1775.

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Thus did the supposedly universal suppression of the Society of Jesus take place.

But the piecemeal extinction of the Society had begun previously over a period of 14 years before 1773. For decades the Society had been the *bête-noir* of several quite hostile groups. They included, first, the Jansenists in their rigorist interpretation of Christian life and, on the other hand, many so-called “philosophes,” the deistic or materialistic thinkers of the 18th century French Enlightenment who saw the Jesuits as defenders of an obscurantist church. Second, there were national governments intent on their supremacy in church-state relationships. Third, there were some powerful enemies in Rome who opposed a variety of Jesuit theological opinions and pastoral practices in Europe and Jesuit attempts in foreign mission lands to present the faith in a way consonant with the social and cultural concepts and structures of the peoples of those lands.

The destruction began in 1759 in Portugal, where the government had been determined to bend the Church to its will. For years its leader, Pombal, had waged an unremitting pamphlet war of slander against the Jesuits, seen as defenders of the papacy. Finally, they were packed into ships and unceremoniously dumped on the territory of the Papal States. From the missions in Brazil they were shipped back, many of them to rot in Lisbon dungeons for years.

In France in 1762 the ardently Gallican Parisian Parlement, which had been for almost 200 years anti-Jesuit, decreed the dissolution of the Society of Jesus there. As its decree went on page after page, the Society was guilty, among other crimes, of “simony, blasphemy, sacrilege, magic, witchcraft, astrology, idolatry, superstition, immodesty, theft, parricide, homicide, suicide and regicide...blaspheming the Blessed Virgin Mary...destructive of the divinity of Jesus Christ...teaching men to live as beasts and Christians to live as pagans.” If so, the Jesuits were certainly busy.

In 1767 in Spain, King Charles III, influenced especially by his regalist government ministers to fear the Jesuits, banished them from Spain and all of its possessions, including most of Latin America. Within three days, in Spain itself in March-April 1767, 2700 Jesuits were forced out onto the roads to its port cities thence to be shipped and dumped on the Papal States.

On February 2, 1769, Pope Clement XIII, a staunch defender of the Society of Jesus through all those years, died. After a conclave of several months, with the governments of Spain, France, and Portugal alternately threatening and bribing the participants, finally Cardinal Lorenzo Ganganelli was elected as Pope Clement XIV. Then began four years of incessant harassment and bullying of the pope by the Spanish and French ambassadors to the Holy See. The threats went so far as to

include hints of schism if he did not suppress the Society universally. Unable to stand up to the pressure of the Bourbon courts, Clement finally did so.

The apostolic works of the Society of Jesus around the world were destroyed. Their schools (more than 700 of them) were closed. Their libraries were either confiscated or trashed. Their churches were turned over to others. Their overseas missions were ruined. More than 22,000 Jesuits were no longer such. In most circumstances individual ex-Jesuits had to make their own way, with the exception of the work of one young Spaniard, Joseph Pignatelli. Over the long, long years of the suppression he effectively kept united at least in mutual support a great portion of the Spanish former Jesuits.

For the suppression to take effect canonically, “*Dominus ac Redemptor*” had to be promulgated by the bishop of each diocese in which a Jesuit community was located. This circumstance kept a remnant alive in one place, Russia, contrary to the expectations of everyone, because the document was not promulgated there.

Now onto the stage of this drama came an act with a whole new cast of characters. It included two popes, both favorable to the Jesuits but constrained by the intransigence of Spain and France, an ambitious archbishop, a puzzled superior, a supposedly amused king, and, most importantly, a ruler who tolerated no opposition. It was a serious drama with touches of what was almost comedy.

To start with the popes, Pius VI had been elected after Clement XIV died in 1774. He reigned until 1799, one of the longest papacies and one in its last ten years burdened with the antireligious events of the French Revolution. He and his successor, Pius VII, pope from 1800 to 1823, were each for some time imprisoned by the revolutionaries and Napoleon. Pius VII wanted to restore the Society, but in the turmoil of the time he could not do so.

The archbishop was Stanislaw Siestrzencewicz, a convert to Catholicism, auxiliary bishop of Vilna and soon to be elevated to a much higher post.

The puzzled superior was Fr. Stanislaw Czerniewicz, designated vice-provincial of the Jesuits in the part of Poland that Catherine had taken in the first partition of the country, apportioned to Prussia, Austria, and Russia in 1772, one year before the suppression of the Society.

Most importantly, the person who brooked no opposition and who set all these characters into interaction was Catherine the Great, Empress of Russia, who willed the suppressed Society into continued existence in her recently acquired former Polish lands.

When the first partition of Poland took place in 1772, Russia acquired territory that had a large Catholic population of about 900,000 and also 201 Jesuits in a variety of residences and schools, 18 communities in all.

Catherine wanted to maintain the good will of her new Catholic subjects and to maintain the Jesuit schools, which were by far the best in all her lands. Typical of Catherine, she had decided to organize on her own the Roman Catholic Church in Russia. So in December 1772, she decreed that a Latin diocese for the whole country be set up at Mogilev. She named Siestrzencewicz as bishop. All of this she did without the least consultation with Rome. The land was hers, she was the ruler, and her decisions were law.

Frederick the Great of Prussia also kept the Jesuits in existence but only for a few years. To him is attributed the remark that while the Society of Jesus was destroyed by “their Most Catholic, Most Christian, and Most Faithful Majesties” [of Spain, France, and Portugall], it was preserved by “his Most Heretical Majesty” and “her Most Schismatical Majesty.”

When “Dominus ac Redemptor” arrived in Russia in September 1773, Catherine simply ordered that it be considered nonexistent. She forbade its promulgation; she made this quite clear to the bishop; she informed the Jesuits that she was going to maintain and keep them protected in her lands. Hence the dilemma: What were those Jesuits supposed to do? They knew of the existence of the brief of suppression. They knew Catherine’s public position, and they knew better than to contradict it. They also knew of conflicting opinions in canon law on what they ought to do.

**T**o the forefront now came Czerniewicz as vice-provincial of the “Jesuit” communities now under Russian rule. After the papal suppression he turned out to be the only Jesuit major superior left in the world. When Pius VI succeeded Clement XIV in 1774, Czerniewicz wrote to him through one of the pope’s official secretaries and asked for a sign of what his intentions were for these “Jesuits.”

The reply in Latin came with infinite diplomatic finesse on January 13, 1776: “Precum tuarum exitus, ut auguro et exoptas, felix.” (“The result of your prayers, as I foresee and as you ardently desire, will be a happy one.”) With that enigmatically favorable reply, the Jesuits in the Russian territory had to be content for the moment. But as one sympathetic observer in Rome remarked, “Intelligenti pauca” (“A few words to the wise are sufficient”). The pope could do no more because he had the Portuguese, Spanish, and French monarchs still adamantly opposed to any existence of the Society. Meanwhile Bishop Siestrzencewicz had ordained to the priesthood a group of these former Jesuit scholastics “because of parish needs.”

Then between 1780 and 1783 three events assured the existence and growth of this remnant. A Jesuit novitiate opened; a vicar general was elected; and the pope gave verbal but nonetheless explicit approval of who these men were and what they were doing, at least in Russia. Already in 1779 Catherine had agreed to such a novitiate. Then she agreed that the Jesuits in Russia could call a general congregation to elect a superior. In 1782 it chose Czerniewicz. Catherine finally sent an envoy to Rome to regularize her arrangements for all Latin Rite Catholics in Russia, to approve the Jesuit novitiate, and indirectly to approve the election of Czerniewicz. The pope could not at all give that last approval formally in writing, but publicly in the presence of witnesses three times he repeated “Approbo” (“I approve.”) So, just ten years after the universal suppression, the Jesuits in Russia now had a definitive sign that they were still in existence, if only there. More importantly, as the news got out, it inspired more former Jesuits to join their Jesuit brethren there. But at the same time, “Dominus ac Redemptor” was still canonically in effect and the Society of Jesus was still universally suppressed. But was it? If one had put this whole scenario in the form of a novel or a screenplay today and attempted to market it for publication as a book or production as a movie, it would undoubtedly have been turned down for a total lack of verisimilitude. These events simply could not have happened. But they did.

And then, with the French Revolution, kings were swept away, armies marched, regimes changed. In Western Europe two groups formed, pledged to enter the Society if restored. By 1793 one of the now chastened rulers, the Duke of Parma, asked for Jesuits from Russia. In 1801 Pius VII recognized in writing the canonical correctness of the Society centered in Russia. By 1803 provinces dependent on that group were established elsewhere. In 1805 five U.S. members of the Old Society reentered the group. In Russia itself, over the years four vicars-general, successors to Czerniewicz, were elected, and the Society and its works expanded and flourished. With the defeat of Napoleon, the pope returned to Rome from exile and imprisonment.

On the morning of August 7, 1814, Pope Pius VII celebrated mass at the Gesù in Rome. Then he came to the Jesuit Curia next door and in the document “Sollicitudo omnium ecclesiarum” (“Care for all the churches”) and “despite...‘Dominus ac Redemptor,’ the effects of which we expressly abrogate” he put an end to the Suppression and restored universally the Society of Jesus.

But the Restoration is another story, almost as improbable in its details as is the story of the Suppression itself. ■