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The Jesuits in Latin America, 1549 - 2000: 450 Years of Inculturation, Defense of Human Rights, and Prophetic Witness

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The Jesuits in Latin America, 1549–2000: 450 Years of Inculturation, Defense of Human Rights, and Prophetic Witness. By Jeffrey L. Klaiber, SJ. St. Louis, MO: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2009. Maps. Notes. Bibliography. Index. viii, 463. Paper, \$28.95

The Society of Jesus established its first mission in Brazil in 1549, a scant nine years after the founding of the society itself. Between that date and 1767, when the society was suppressed in the Americas, the Jesuits built a reputation as educators, missionaries, entrepreneurs, and advisers to royal authorities. The Jesuits also stood out among the other religious orders for their independence; the close relationship they often enjoyed with authority was not always smooth. On their arrival in Spanish Florida in 1566, they became embroiled in a controversy over their “right of removal,” or their authority to decide the movement of missionaries, claimed by the Spanish Crown under the terms of the royal patronage. The first Jesuits to arrive in Peru publicly criticized the first viceroy, Francisco de Toledo, over the execution of Túpac Amaru, the last Inca monarch, and engaged in a struggle over the responsibilities they would take on. Jesuit missions in Mexico and Peru were often seen by local property owners as rivals for workers. The Jesuits’ defense of the natives in the 30 missions established among the Guaraní at the intersection of present-day Paraguay, Brazil, and Argentina created controversies with both Portugal and Spain, which led to their expulsion from the Americas.

On the restoration of the order in 1814, the Jesuits returned and resumed many of their former activities in a changed America. In the nineteenth century, Jesuits suffered, along with the Catholic Church in general, from the anticlerical bias of liberal politicians. They were expelled a second time from several countries, and their activities were censured in others. However, the Jesuits persisted, returning to former missions and reestablishing themselves as leaders in

education. Questions of social justice became important motivators in the twentieth century, although not without some controversy within the order itself. The second Vatican Council began a new era for the Jesuits in which they were inspired to return to their role of the early mission days as defenders of the Indians. This and the ideas of liberation theology led Jesuits in Latin America to focus on social problems and to promote practical solutions for them. Just as in the early days of the order, this was not implemented without controversy, particularly when Jesuits became embroiled in the often violent politics of the day and with revolutionary movements. These changes evolved at a time when the number of men seeking to join the order declined.

The Jesuits in Latin America is a history of the order, based on author Jeffrey Klaiber's thorough reading of the secondary literature, punctuated by short sketches of the lives of some of its most influential and often controversial members. The author's point of view is that the Jesuits have from the beginning been distinguished by a sensitivity and openness to other cultures, an attitude which he traces to their origins in Renaissance humanism. This sensitivity informed their defense of native peoples and other marginalized groups and influenced (OK to vary word) their approach to missionary work. Klaiber balances this view with the recognition that the Jesuits were often social conservatives and shared the prejudices of their times, but he clearly sees the former as the defining character of the order. The first four chapters of the book are devoted to the Jesuits in the colonial period, with a particular emphasis on the missions until the expulsion in 1767 and less emphasis on Jesuit institutions of learning. This part of the book also includes an interesting chapter on four of the exiled Jesuits, their role as educators about their homeland to a Europe that was often ignorant or misinformed and their contribution to the creation of an American identity separate from that of Europe.

The five succeeding chapters are devoted to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Klaiber argues that in this period the Jesuits became “leading protagonists of social and political change in Latin America” (p. 23), often in the face of resistance by conservatives within and without the order. He sketches the Jesuits’ involvement in movements and events such as Catholic Action, the Mexican Cristero Rebellion, liberation theology, and revolutionary movements, to name a few. The material is organized by country, allowing for easy reference.

The treatment of the various periods of Jesuits history in Latin America is well balanced and provides a good overview of the history of the Society of Jesus in Latin America. This work is also a tribute to many of the significant members of the order and an excellent point of departure for the study of these men and their contributions to the history of the Jesuits.

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