

# Nation, Lineage, and Jesuit Unity in Antonio Possevino's Memorial to Everard Mercurian (1576)

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From the time of its founding, the Society of Jesus was unusually open to men of all nations and lineages. The Society retained its inclusive ethos throughout Ignatius's life and the lives of his two immediate successors, Diego Laínez and Francisco de Borja. This ethos came under threat, however, with the death of Borja. Prejudices that were latent under the first three Generals began to be openly expressed within the Society following the election of Everard Mercurian in 1573. It was to combat the disunity that threatened the Society that Antonio Possevino (1533-1611) wrote a long memorial to Mercurian in 1576<sup>1</sup>.

Possevino was born in Mantua and was almost certainly of Jewish descent<sup>2</sup>. From 1573 to 1576 he served as secretary to Mercurian, about whom he wrote a laudatory biography<sup>3</sup>. Possevino's memorial to Mercurian has no title

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<sup>1</sup> Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu, Cong. 20/B, ff. 206-212 (hereafter *Memorial*). The manuscript, an apograph, has not been published.

<sup>2</sup> No modern biography of Possevino exists. The most important scholarship on Possevino has been done by Fr. John Patrick DONNELLY, S.J. For an analysis of Possevino's family background and of some of his principal writings on Jews and New Christians, see J. P. DONNELLY, "Antonio Possevino and Jesuits of Jewish Ancestry," in *Archivum Historicum Societatis Iesu* 55 (1986) 3-31. Possevino was an accomplished and prolific writer (best known for his *Bibliotheca Selecta* [Rome, 1593]), and performed a series of diplomatic missions in the papal service. See J. P. DONNELLY, Antonio Possevino as Papal Mediator between Emperor Rudolf II and King Stephen Báthory," in *Archivum Historicum Societatis Iesu* 69 (2000) 3-56; and J. P. DONNELLY, 323-349.

<sup>3</sup> See J. P. DONNELLY, "Antonio Possevino: From Secretary to Papal Legate in Sweden," in Thomas McCoog, ed., *The Mercurian Project: Forming Jesuit Culture, 1573-1580* (Rome: Institutum Historicum Societatis Iesu, and St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2004), 323.

or date<sup>4</sup>. Its stated purpose was to urge Mercurian to write a “letter of unity” (lettera di unione) that would call attention to the growing divisions within the Society and demand that those who foment these divisions desist from doing so.

The memorial is a hybrid text: part personal letter, part learned exegesis, part polemic, part exhortation. It begins in the middle of a thought, as if this were the continuation rather than the beginning of Possevino’s appeal to Mercurian, and perhaps the continuation of a conversation. Moreover, the memorial is written in code. It is directed, especially in its opening section, against an unnamed opponent whom Possevino calls “N.” The identity of “N” has never been determined with certainty, but evidence in the text suggests that he was Benedetto Palmio, an Italian Jesuit who had been Possevino’s mentor but whom Possevino describes as an inveterate enemy of the New Christians<sup>5</sup>.

Explicitly, Possevino’s memorial is about nationalism, and, more specifically, about rivalries between Spanish and Portuguese Jesuits. Within his discussion of this theme Possevino analyzes the problem of lineage, but at no point in the document does he make explicit reference to New Christians. Instead, Possevino writes of “tale persone” or “simile materia,” and makes a series of similarly ambiguous references to the conflict over lineage<sup>6</sup>. To understand the memorial it is necessary to examine the context in which Possevino wrote and to draw as clear distinctions as possible between his overlapping analyses of divisions based on national origin and lineage.

The Spanish-Portuguese rivalry within the Society grew out of the emergence of national identities on the Iberian peninsula (discernible in Portugal as early as the fourteenth century) and out of the linguistic and political differences that helped to define these identities. Discrimination against New Christians was rooted in the long history of Jewish-Christian relations in the Iberian world and in the tensions produced by the conversion to Christianity of many in the Jewish communities of Spain and Portugal during the course of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

Ignatius of Loyola affirmed his sense of filial attachment to the Jewish people, and, in opposition to the prevailing ethos of his day, insisted that the Society never discriminate on the basis of lineage<sup>7</sup>. The general nature of the

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<sup>4</sup> The date of composition can be inferred from the fact that the memorial was written shortly after the 1576 meeting in Rome of the procurators of the Spanish assistancy. See Antonio Astrain, *Historia de la Compañía de Jesús en la Assistencia de España* (seven vols., Madrid, 1909) III, 8.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> *Memorial*, 208v.-209r, 211r.

<sup>7</sup> See James W. Reites, *St. Ignatius of Loyola and the Jews*, in *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 13/4 (1981).

animus against New Christians within the Society was summarized by the Portuguese Jesuit Manuel Rodrigues (a figure to whom Possevino refers frequently in the memorial), in a treatise Rodrigues wrote to promote the exclusion of New Christians from admission to the Society, even if they were known as faithful Christians.

Although we may know all these men to be Christians and to be constant in the faith, surely the Society should hold them at a distance because of their character, for they stand opposed to the purity of true religion. They are children of this breed, enemies of the cross of Christ, restless, scheming, men who humble others that they themselves might be exalted. They seek the highest offices and wish to be called “rabbi”<sup>8</sup>.

A public effort to curtail New Christian influence within the Society was made for the first time immediately following the death of Borja. At that time, a small group of electors, most of whom were Portuguese, succeeded in convincing Pope Gregory XIII (1572-1585) to decree that Borja’s successor not be a Spaniard. Here Possevino’s complex interweaving of his analysis of national rivalries and anti-New Christian prejudice comes into view – albeit in a shadowy way – for the first time. The natural successor to Borja was Juan de Polanco, one of the early companions of Ignatius and a New Christian. The opponents of the New Christians could not state explicitly that their opposition to Polanco was rooted primarily in his Jewish descent. They could and did argue, however, that after three successive Spanish generals, it was time for a change. Although the papal order was eventually rescinded in order to permit a nominally free election of the successor to Borja, the actions of the dissidents caused consternation within the Society and set the stage for the more bitter confrontations that were to come. Possevino’s memorial is the first Jesuit text following the 1573 election debacle in which the New Christian debate is taken up in a systematic way.

Evidence about the immediate context in which Possevino’s memorial was written is found in his opening reference to the conversations that the Spanish procurators had with Mercurian before they returned to Spain. During their meetings in Rome, the procurators had protested the machinations that surrounded the election of the General three years earlier. Possevino states that the

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<sup>8</sup> “De baptizatis ex progenie Judaeorum” (1593), *Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu*, Inst. 186e, f. 337v, quoted in Francisco de Borja Medina, “Ignacio de Loyola y la ‘limpieza de sangre,’” in Juan Plazaola, ed., *Ignacio de Loyola y su tiempo* (Bilbao: Mensagero, 1992) 586.

procurators were satisfied with Mercurian's assurance that the effort to exclude Spanish candidates would not be repeated.

Implicit in Possevino's memorial is his understanding that Mercurian did not want to write the proposed letter of unity because it would reopen wounds caused by the Spanish-Portuguese rivalry over the Generalate and other issues. But Possevino is interested in discussing those very problems – nation and lineage – which the Spanish procurators had thought were not going to be a continuing issue within the Society and about which “N” and others were stirring up animosities that most Jesuits thought needed to be avoided.

It was evident, and known to almost everyone in the Society and to the most important men of this court, that that person [N] was an adversary not of a few men but of an entire nation, and that this opposition needed to be totally uprooted...for if a remedy had not been introduced it could have caused an irremediable schism in the Society<sup>9</sup>.

The prejudice to which Possevino refers could have caused a schism if unnamed Jesuits – most notably Mercurian, working with Possevino's guidance – had not intervened to provide a remedy. Gradually, however, it became apparent that the divisions within the Society were deeper and more intractable than they were previously perceived to have been. Out of this understanding came the need to address the problem at its roots by means of a letter of unity that would clarify the question of nation and lineage within the Society and ensure that the Spanish Jesuits would understand all aspects of their dealings with the Curia and remain persuaded that future elections would be transparent. Possevino suggests that it is Mercurian's sound judgment that has been most instrumental in checking the spread of the venom that “N” seeks to spread in Spain. Possevino states his case unequivocally: Spanish Jesuits are faithful servants of the Society, and attacks on them constitute “the greatest obstacle before God that our order might face in these times.”

Calling attention to Mercurian's personal history concerning the question of Jesuit unity, Possevino notes that before becoming General, Mercurian had prayed for unity at the third General Congregation, and had always sought to promote this unity, “and to bring nations together, and...finally, by divine grace, [Mercurian] felt no special love either for his own or for any other nation”<sup>10</sup>. Possevino argues that opponents of the Spanish Jesuits were driven by human

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<sup>9</sup> *Memorial*, 206r.

<sup>10</sup> *Memorial*, 206v.

passions rather than by divine providence, which has guided the thoughts and actions of Ignatius and all his successors as General to this point. To be faithful to the letter and spirit of the Society's Institute, Mercurian must write the proposed letter of unity.

The Spanish Jesuits themselves had asked Possevino to arrange for what he now calls (for the first and only time in the memorial) a letter of edification. The issues to be addressed were suggested to him, Possevino claims, by Jesuits from "diverse places." He thus portrays himself as being a mere spokesman for Spaniards who wanted to avoid conflicts over national origin by circulating a letter from Mercurian. Possevino adds:

I believe that the aforementioned letter will be of universal consolation, that it will edify everyone, and that it will show that in the heart of [Mercurian] there is no other spirit than that of Father Ignatius and the other Generals, and it will remove every threatening notion from the World. And so I hope that [the letter] will serve to ensure that the hearts of the Society allow themselves to be governed by the paternal providence of Your Paternity, without seeking evasive human remedies, as some men (driven by their passions) have sought, not without notable damage to fraternal charity<sup>11</sup>.

Obedience was a constant problem in the Society from the time of its founding, and would become an increasingly important source of conflict in the 1580s and 1590s, especially on the Iberian peninsula, where the so-called "inquietos" made a sustained bid for greater independence from the Jesuit Curia in Rome. Possevino notes that Mercurian has many times observed, verbally and in writing, that obedience must be rooted in the example set by the Jesuit hierarchy.

Whoever wants subordinates to be under the authority of their superiors must ensure that the superiors know and seek and possess the ability to care for their charges...From this I infer that by divine grace the same precept applies to Your Paternity, if it is resolved that you shall make known your spirit a little more clearly<sup>12</sup>.

Possevino underscores the fact that he is asking Mercurian simply to make more explicit an ethos of unity that Mercurian has always sought to encourage within the Society. Possevino then offers a brief summary of the han-

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<sup>11</sup> *Memorial*, 207r.

<sup>12</sup> *Memorial*, 207r.

dling of the Spanish problem at the time of the meeting of the procurators and argues – employing the opaque language that is characteristic of the memorial – that the procurators, like Possevino himself, seek unity, and that they thought on their departure from Rome that the problem of divisive nationalism within the Society had been resolved<sup>13</sup>.

Following the argument from Jesuit tradition, Possevino turns to an argument to which he assigns even greater importance in making his case for a letter of unity: the need to avoid the perception that Mercurian and the rest of the Jesuit hierarchy are afraid of addressing directly the growing divisions within the Society. Possevino's first line of attack is that "it is the mark of the wise man to change his opinion for the better," and that, furthermore, Mercurian had resolved to counter the divisive words that "N" had addressed to the Spanish procurators<sup>14</sup>. Here Possevino links his opening appeal to the Ignatian tradition of unity to his argument against fear. He affirms that whether one looks to the Constitutions, or to "the example of past Father Generals," or finally to

the disposition of Divine Providence manifested in Sacred Scripture, one cannot see how this fear can be born within a Society whose Institute should be distinguished by the blood that is found in its freedom, and in the fact that it permits no preference for lineage, or for human concerns, which are vestiges of paganism, or for its own honor, such as not allowing oneself to be touched by others or to greet them, as is the custom of some infidels about whom Father Alessandro Valignano has recently written to Your Paternity<sup>15</sup>.

This passage constitutes one of the most powerful critiques of the concept of purity of blood to be found in the vast literature – contemporary and modern – on this subject. Moreover, Possevino here for the first time links debates about nation and lineage to debates about the Jesuit missionary enterprise. Illustrious lineage depends on Jesuit ideals, not on blood. Possevino's argument brings together all the diverse strands of Jesuit opposition to the idea of purity of blood, from Scripture, to the Ignatian tradition, to the ongoing development of Jesuit pastoral ideals, and finally to the common humanity and intelligence of his contemporaries in the Society. The importance of the missionary experience to this argument cannot be overstated. Alessandro Valignano will figure throughout Possevino's exposition, and Possevino will return specifically to the notion

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<sup>13</sup> *Memorial*, 207r.

<sup>14</sup> No written record exists of what exactly Palmio – if he was indeed "N" – said in addressing the procurators.

<sup>15</sup> *Memorial*, 207r.

– powerfully advanced by Valignano in Asia – that conflicts over nation and lineage constitute a pagan survival that must be expunged from the Society. Possevino then affirms his belief that such conflicts will be resolved by prophetic action (especially action by Mercurian) and by divine grace in the context of the larger progress of the Society and of the church.

Possevino now provides a detailed survey of the pastoral ideals and practices of the first Jesuits. Perhaps the most striking characteristic of this survey is his portrayal of Ignatius as someone who had the courage to fight against some of the prevailing orthodoxies of his day in order to establish the Society and strengthen the universal church. Possevino notes that Ignatius was an outsider in Rome, that he was at one point in trouble with the Inquisition, and that he founded the Society “amidst difficulties that were insurmountable by human means,” relying instead on divine providence. The first manifestation of the workings of divine providence to which Possevino calls attention is the fact that Ignatius

felt that the spirit of God did not make distinctions between people, and that he [Ignatius] believed more in Jesus Christ than in worldly caution...and this remained stamped on the souls of the Society, and he shaped the Society in such a way that nothing moved him to alter it, knowing that “What God has joined together, let no one separate”<sup>16</sup>.

Turning his attention to Ignatius’s successor, Possevino offers a moving tribute to Diego Laínez, in which Possevino’s preoccupation with the question of lineage is implicit. Laínez, a New Christian, was someone in whom Ignatius had complete trust, “without that fear” which, Possevino says, plagues the Jesuit hierarchy in his own day. New Christians of the first generation following the mass conversions of 1492 served in the highest offices, both religious and secular, in Spain and elsewhere, and despite their well-known Jewish heritage – Laínez, for example, was a first-generation Christian – Possevino asserts that no one questioned the effectiveness of their ministry.

Just as the first Jesuits were a diverse group in terms of national origin and lineage, so the Society must remain diverse “that it may be a likeness of that first Society to which God gave so many gifts.” The Jesuits had always viewed

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<sup>16</sup> “quos Deus coniungit homo non sepatet” (Mt 19.06), Ibid. On conflicting Jesuit claims about Ignatius’s views on Jews and New Christians, see Borja Medina, op. cit., and Borja Medina, “Ignacio de Loyola y los judíos,” in *Anuario del Instituto Ignacio de Loyola*, no. 4 (San Sebastián: Universidad de Deusto, 1997) 37-63.

themselves as heirs to the legacy of the first apostles. Nowhere in Possevino's memorial is this idea – and the dire consequences of abandoning the inclusive ethos of the primitive church – more powerfully articulated. Once again, Possevino calls attention to the legacy of the first three Generals, for whom “Divine Providence prepared...an example of the kinds of stones with which the Society should be constructed”<sup>17</sup>.

The Society had existed for less than forty years, yet the sense in Possevino's memorial is of a chasm between the founding generation and the present one. The idea that the Society has fallen away from the purer ideals and practices of previous generations is a constant in Jesuit pastoral thought. And it is precisely at this point in the memorial, as he turns to the generalate of Francisco de Borja, that Possevino advances what amounts to a direct criticism of Mercurian. The criticism reflects the tension in the memorial between Possevino's hopeful appeal to Mercurian's judgment only a few paragraphs before, and his apprehension about the strength of Mercurian's character, especially in comparison with that of Borja, his immediate predecessor. Borja, like Ignatius and Lainez, was a man of deep convictions who had served in the court of Charles V and possessed a thoroughgoing knowledge of religion and politics in Spain. Possevino pointedly affirms that Borja never compromised his own pastoral ideals or those of the Society, as Mercurian risks doing, by permitting discrimination of any kind within the Society.

Possevino's survey of the history of the Society through the generalate of Borja concludes with his recollection that some years earlier an Assistant in the Curia under Borja – presumably Mercurian himself – had come to Possevino to lament the gossip that was circulating within the Society concerning Borja's shortcomings as an administrator, and particularly concerning Borja's acceptance of the many colleges that had saddled the Society with financial obligations that it could not meet. Mercurian had, in fact, contributed to the “murmuratione” about Borja. Reflecting on the conflicts within the Society during this period, Possevino states that the problems that his unnamed companion correctly foresaw would result from the overextension of the Society were as nothing in comparison with the problems that conflicts over nation and lineage threaten to introduce now.

Possevino again insists that distinctions be made on the basis of sins (*per peccati*) rather than lineage. It is in the context of this exploration of the implications of sin within the Society that Possevino turns to Paul, offering the first of a series of far-reaching pastoral recommendations to Mercurian. Those who harbor hatred towards Spaniards or New Christians (or both) in their hearts, Possevino suggests,

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<sup>17</sup> *Memorial*, 208r.



should do some spiritual exercises on charity, on loving one's neighbor as one-self, and on the things that were said by Saint Paul to the Corinthians in the first chapter, and they should then make a good general confession with any father who is not a Spaniard, in order to make it more transparently. And in this way it is to be hoped that Divine light may be infused with greater clarity than has perhaps been seen until now, for [this light] is... "piercing until it divides soul from spirit...it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart"<sup>18</sup>.

In the assertion that Spanish confessors are unfit for ministry to those who need to confess their hatred towards their Spanish companions, we are able to perceive one of the central pastoral concerns underlying the memorial, for Possevino is insistent that confessions be made to men with whom the penitent can be honest.

The influence of Paul on Possevino is especially important in the context of Possevino's insistence on the efficacy of conversion and on the need for self-examination. Here Possevino's preoccupation with lineage comes near to the surface, although, as noted above, the text never refers directly to New Christians. The theme of self-examination will figure prominently throughout Possevino's long career of writing on the New Christian question. Paul is often interpreted as having been hostile to Jews and Judaism. The memorial's argument on behalf of the New Christians may be read as a confirmation of Paul's prophecy, in the lesson on the olive branch, that the Jews will be even more disposed to embrace Christianity than other non-Christians. Beginning with his reference to Corinthians and continuing throughout the rest of the memorial, Possevino will argue that far from being a hindrance to the Society, Jesuits of Jewish descent are among the Society's most effective members.

By way of evidence for this assertion, Possevino limits himself, at this point, to citing the important work of two Portuguese Jesuits (Manuel de Sá and Francisco Antonio) and of one Spaniard (Juan Maldonado). Later in the memorial Possevino will elaborate on the contributions of New Christians to the Society. His purpose is to advance the proposition that there are two spirits at work in the Society. One is God-given (here Possevino cites Ignatius's Rules for the Discernment of Spirits)<sup>19</sup>. The other is produced by "schismatic spirits (dressed

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<sup>18</sup> *Memorial*, 208v. Possevino's citation ("intuetur cor, et pertingit usque ad divisionem animae ac spiritus, et discernit intentiones cordis") is a slightly altered version of the passage from Heb 4.12.

<sup>19</sup> See Ignatius of Loyola, *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, tr., ed. George E. Ganss, S.J. (St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1970).

in whatever outer skin you wish, and driven by the secular spirit of the world), which seek to obscure the light of the truth and of God"<sup>20</sup>.

Possevino comes close to portraying the enemies of the New Christians as instruments of the devil. It is his first such stark characterization of the divisions within the Society. These divisions, Possevino implies, are a natural consequence of the work of the devil, who sows fear (and separation) rather than love (and unity)<sup>21</sup>.

Possevino now provides a summary of the arguments against writing the letter of unity:

Now, as far as I have been able to gather, there may be three possible causes for the fear of writing the letter of union, namely: injury to the common good; [concern for] a few men from Portugal; and [the desire] not to extend the practice of admitting persons who bring dishonor upon the Society<sup>22</sup>.

The implicit reference in this passage to impure blood is embedded in the text's most important summary of the New Christian problem. Though Possevino's language is opaque, his meaning is clear. His dismissive introduction to the list of impediments to writing the letter – "as far as I have been able to gather" – calls attention to the weakness of the claims of his opponents. More important, Possevino's recapitulation of the causes of fear within the Society contains a subtle but important rhetorical shift. With his reference to the Portuguese minority which forms the core of the opposition to the Jesuit New Christians (his first such reference in the text) and to his opponents' concern with the Society's honor, Possevino strengthens his argument about the true sources of the Society's honor and introduces a key argument into the memorial: that Mercurian cannot allow the future of the Society to be influenced by the petty prejudices of a few disgruntled Portuguese.

This argument will constitute an important element of Possevino's larger effort to isolate opponents of the New Christians, not only in terms of their small numbers, but also in terms of their commitment to the spirit of the primitive church which the Society is meant to embody, and in terms of their fidelity to the Ignatian tradition, the Institute, and the Curia. Possevino pointedly returns here to the example of Ignatius, whom he says experienced "more pressing difficulties" concerning conflicts over nation and lineage but wished never to turn

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<sup>20</sup> *Memorial*, 208v.

<sup>21</sup> For a recent meditation on this theme, see William Sloane Coffin, *Credo* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004). The opposite of love, Coffin writes, is not hatred but fear.

<sup>22</sup> *Memorial*, 209r.

away able men “or to permit that any defamatory libels be made, such as have been permitted to circulate both in writing and in hushed voices throughout the current generalate”<sup>23</sup>.

The last seven words (“in tutto il tempo di questo generalato”), which were added by Possevino himself to the apograph, are crucial<sup>24</sup>. They constitute the strongest criticism of Mercurian to be found in the memorial, and reinforce the periodization of the New Christian problem within the Society that has been implicit throughout the text. Mercurian’s generalate, in Possevino’s view, is not the source of the divisions that exist within the Society, but it is the generalate in which anti-Spanish and anti-New Christian libels have been permitted to circulate widely.

It is at this point – the halfway point in the memorial – that Possevino’s concern with lineage becomes explicit, although he again stops short of using the term “New Christian.” Returning to a theme which he treated earlier in the text, Possevino provides an extensive gloss on the contributions of New Christians to the Society and gradually begins to open up the hermetic language that he has used to this point. Possevino asserts that

The greatest fruits that have been gathered in Spain and in parts of the Indies have not been extracted without the work of such men [New Christians], and there are not lacking those [New Christians] in whom today there are found greater learning and virtue than in many others. And the mere hint or suggestion in Spain that such a distinction exists within the Society would be enough to remove the means of gathering fruit in more than half of Spain<sup>25</sup>.

The references to the New Christians in this passage and in the ones that follow it are unmistakable. Here Possevino displays his characteristic concern with both pastoral ideals and practical realities. Apart from the damage to the spirit of the Society that it would cause, the attempt to distinguish between Old Christians and New Christians is, for all intents and purposes, a practical impossibility.

It is impossible to think about making this distinction in all Castile, Toledo, [and] Andalucía, in which Provinces alone (not counting the Indies and the Province of Aragon, and the Spaniards scattered in many other Provinces) there are more than a thousand men of the Society, and in the most important Colleges, such

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<sup>23</sup> *Memorial*, 209r.

<sup>24</sup> J. P. DONNELLY, “Possevino and Jesuits of Jewish Ancestry,” ed. cit.

<sup>25</sup> *Memorial*, 209r.

as Alcalá, Salamanca, Cordoba, and others where many [New Christians] are always entering the Society<sup>26</sup>.

The difficulty of determining family lineages with any accuracy was a problem with which anyone possessing even a casual knowledge of the sixteenth-century Iberian world was familiar. Beyond pointing to the absurdity of trying to verify the lineages of several hundred potential New Christians among the Spanish Jesuits, Possevino underscores the fact that the Spanish court was full of New Christians, and at the highest levels. Though these men are silent now, he argues,

they could one day seek to bring about some kind of harm or division within the Society, for there is no doubt that they would be greatly offended – if only indirectly – by such a measure [lineage-based distinctions] in a Society which, while professing to be holy, and to model itself after Jesus its leader, could ultimately be complicit in harming Jesus, and be a society of the World [societas Mundi] rather than of Jesus<sup>27</sup>.

This passage constitutes Possevino's first affirmation – in this document or anywhere else – of the fact that prejudice against New Christians will have practical consequences outside the Society as well as inside. Possevino's preoccupation with this prejudice remains in full view as he explains that opponents of the New Christians within the Society fall into three groups.

First, there are the Jesuits whom Possevino calls "villanazzi." These were men who were from poor, rural backgrounds, who were often despised by their colleagues from elite families, and who sought to make up through lineage for what they lacked in virtue and talent. In fingering these men, Possevino calls attention to the sharp socioeconomic divisions that existed within the Society during the first generations. At the same time, he calls into question the claims of the *villanazi* to purity of blood. He suggests not that they are of Jewish origin but that if their lineages were to be examined, "there would be found more than more than four things – and perhaps in their own lifetimes – which would make them turn silent and grow red"<sup>28</sup>. Possevino's tone here is consistent with the

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<sup>26</sup> *Memorial*, 209r. The question of new entries into the Society was an important one in Spain during Mercurian's generalate, for during these seven years the Spanish provinces increased their numbers by forty-four percent (to 1,440 men), despite the fact that 127 Jesuits were sent to Mexico and Peru. See Francisco de Borja Medina, "Everard Mercurian and Spain: Some Burning Issues," in Thomas McCoog, ed., *The Mercurian Project*, op. cit., 960.

<sup>27</sup> *Memorial*, 209rv.

<sup>28</sup> *Memorial*, 209v.

increasingly emotional – and at times intemperate – character of the language of the second half of the memorial.

The second group of Jesuits who oppose the New Christians are those men – for the most part Portuguese – who show signs of overweening ambition (because they feel themselves to have been deprived of offices in the Society on which their honor depends), or who reject the “eternal wisdom” of the Society concerning the unity of all men<sup>29</sup>. Possevino’s attack on these men provides another powerful example of the Pauline orientation of the memorial. Using bold strokes, Possevino declares that those among his colleagues who reject Paul’s affirmation that “there is no distinction between Jew and Greek” are questioning – “perhaps inadvertently” – the efficacy of baptism, and “are creating a new species of Cathars”<sup>30</sup>. The qualification is striking, for it leaves open the possibility that the questioning was not inadvertent. In an apparent acknowledgement of the vehemence of his own language, Possevino concludes by stating – in Latin, a language that he generally employs only for references to Scripture and the church fathers – that he had not planned to issue this warning, and that he doesn’t know how much good it will do. He seems to sense that he needs to do all he can to lend increased authority to his accusation.

The third group of opponents of the New Christians, and for Possevino’s purposes the least important, consists of men who simply lack humility. These are men whom Possevino says Mercurian has frequently criticized. Here Possevino once again singles out the Portuguese and brings his pastoral concerns to bear both on the Portuguese and on Mercurian. He believes that the blindness of the Portuguese concerning their pernicious attitude towards New Christians has specific causes, and that Mercurian is ideally suited to correcting the Portuguese on this matter.

The broad context for Possevino’s preoccupation with the Portuguese is his view of Mercurian as a man who lacks resolve and needs to be firmly prodded to stop acceding to the demands of a group of men who Possevino insists are in the minority even among the Portuguese themselves. The specific context is the abject apology of Mercurian to the Portuguese ambassador in Rome for having recently allowed the Jesuit New Christian Manuel de Sá to preach in the Chiesa di San Antonio dei Portoghesi in Rome. The apology appears

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<sup>29</sup> The Portuguese province contained a large number of Jesuits who were from noble families.

<sup>30</sup> *Memorial*, 209v.

to have been delivered at the request of Pedro Fonseca, the Portuguese Assistant, who intervened on behalf of the ambassador.

Possevino goes out of his way to explain and excuse the animus of some Portuguese towards the New Christians. The most notable example of this is his explanation of the transformation of Manuel Rodrigues, who was first an ally of the New Christians but became one of their most bitter opponents within the Society. Possevino states that the transformation was a result of Rodrigues's decision "to accommodate himself to the disposition he had discovered to exist in N," even though all the "best Fathers" reject any distinctions based on lineage and understand that those who make such distinctions are driven by "mere passion"<sup>31</sup>. Possevino then contrasts Rodrigues's actions with the principled response of Anton Wink, who told Possevino that he did not wish to serve in the position of Jesuit Visitor in Germany because of the New Christian question, and that

Perhaps Our Lord God wished that one who is righteous of heart and loves all men according to the spirit of Father Ignatius should not bring upon his soul the sin of being the instrument of any division or (to state it better) exclusion in Germany<sup>32</sup>.

The support of Wink was especially important for Possevino because Wink had known Ignatius. Moreover, by invoking Wink, Possevino sought to disabuse Mercurian of the notion that the New Christian problem was confined to Spain and Portugal.

The most egregious sin for which Possevino holds the Portuguese to account is their effort to prevent the election of Polanco as Father General at the third General Congregation, after the death of Borja. Here Possevino returns to the conversational tone with which he opened the memorial.

But coming closer to the particulars of the matter of Portugal. First, it is a most certain premise, that ancient enmity and disunity of souls has existed between some of these men and the Castilians, and that NNN [some unnamed Portuguese] could not abide (whether due to their honor, or some other reason) that any government be in the hands of these Spaniards<sup>33</sup>.

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<sup>31</sup> *Memorial*, 210r. Possevino specifically cites Rodrigues's previously warm relations with Fr. Alfonso Cipriano, a Jesuit New Christian who taught at Coimbra.

<sup>32</sup> *Memorial*, 210r.

<sup>33</sup> *Memorial*, 210r.

Possevino rarely makes such explicit reference to the Spanish-Portuguese rivalry. Again, aware of his strong language, he is careful to emphasize the historicity of his account by citing the letters of the Jesuits who have been in the middle of the conflict over nationality, or lineage, or both in connection with the missions in Asia. These include not only Rodrigues and Valignano but also Leão Henriques, Alessandro Reggio, and Bernardino Ferrari. The Italians are almost always found on the side of moderation and good sense, while the Portuguese are seen as fomenting divisions within the Society.

Leão Henriques was at the heart of the anti-Polanco intrigue, which Possevino links to a larger intrigue within the Society aimed at changing the Institute. Among other things, the reformers sought to accelerate the process of making the final profession of vows, and to introduce a series of far-reaching administrative reforms. As James Reites and Francisco de Borja Medina have shown, the reform group has been falsely (and, in general, maliciously) viewed both by contemporaries and by later historians as having been composed primarily of New Christians<sup>34</sup>. In fact, Possevino affirms, the group was made up of Old Christians who were driven by nationalism, by prejudice against New Christians, and by blind ambition and “passion”<sup>35</sup>.

Here Possevino turns the tables on the so-called “inquietos,” or “perturbatores” – he does not use these words, but they will soon gain wide currency within the Society to refer to the group (if not to all the specific individuals) to which he is referring – and identifies them as Portuguese Jesuits who are unified by, among other things, their opposition to the New Christians. He accuses these men of having libeled the Society in a series of memorials and personal audiences with Philip II, and thunders against the intrigues of Jesuits in Portugal and Italy “quorum nomina utinam sint scripta in libro vitae.” In contravening the Constitutions these men have incurred the risk of excommunication.

Once again Possevino demonizes his enemies and underscores the unprecedented nature of the disobedience that is at the heart of the disputes over nationality and lineage<sup>36</sup>. He states that his unnamed antagonist, “N,” had urged him to support the move against Polanco – and, by extension, against the New

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<sup>34</sup> See Reites, *op. cit.*; and Francisco de Borja Medina, “Precursores de Vieira: jesuitas andaluzes y castellanos a favor de los cristianos nuevos,” in *Actas do Terceiro centenário da morte do Padre António Vieira: Congresso Internacional* (Braga: Universidade Católica Portuguesa/Provincia Portuguesa da Companhia de Jesus, 1999) I: 491-519. Astrain’s hostility to the New Christians echoes that of the New Christians’ sixteenth-century opponents. See Astrain, *op. cit.*

<sup>35</sup> *Memorial*, 210r.

<sup>36</sup> *Memorial*, 210r.

Christians – in the name of their shared homeland. Possevino’s account of his response to this request (a request which lends increased weight to the theory that “N” was Possevino’s fellow Italian, Benedetto Palmio) is narrated in the first person, a style of discourse that is rarely found in the memorial. Possevino recalls that he was so shocked by the appeal from “N” that, “as a Christian, and one faithful to the Society,” and one who had received a proposal that had been “neither heard nor imagined by me,” he went directly to Polanco to report it<sup>37</sup>. He then provides a dramatic account of the confrontation between the Jesuits gathered for the third General Congregation and the small group of Portuguese dissidents headed by Henriques, who had convinced Pope Gregory XIII to issue the order prohibiting the Society from electing a Spanish successor to Borja.

As the whole congregation was astonished, and everyone fixed their eyes on the Portuguese as the perpetrators of this deed, the aforementioned Father [Henriques], having now been touched in his conscience, knelt down publicly and asked for pardon, and said, “I am the cause of this.”...But both in his own judgment and that of the congregation, he very clearly declared himself condemned. May it please God that he be absolved, and that there not follow from that occurrence some sad consequence<sup>38</sup>.

For Possevino, then, the extent of the damage that the intrigues of the Portuguese have inflicted on the Society is known only by God. What can be known by men, Possevino affirms, is that the Society need not fear Henriques, and that Henriques instead should fear incurring the anger of his superiors.

The pope’s intervention at the Congregation represents a key point in Possevino’s analysis of the stages of development of the New Christian problem within the Society. First, there existed an incipient anti-New Christian movement under Borja, but it was censured by the hierarchy; then came the Portuguese-led intervention in the 1573 election, which will continue to have the potential to create a schism within the Society if Mercurian does not write the letter of unity that Possevino is requesting or take some other comparably decisive action. Central to Possevino’s argument concerning the New Christians is that the Society must not adopt a policy of appeasing the Portuguese either concerning nationality or concerning lineage. Spain brings the same love and obedience to the Society as any other province. As for the New Christians, we have seen that Possevino believes that, in terms of their virtue and dedication, they represent an elite within the Society.

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<sup>37</sup> *Memorial*, 210v.

<sup>38</sup> *Memorial*, 210v.



As has been noted, the memorial is written in code. Possevino's references to specific people and events are in most cases obscure, and in some cases indecipherable. At the end of the memorial, however, Possevino's references become more explicit, especially when he writes about the New Christian problem. He asserts that since the adjournment of the third General Congregation, the pope, the college of cardinals, and the European monarchies have come to understand the Society in a different way than they had understood it before. As evidence of this change he cites Valignano's experience bringing to India a group of Spanish missionaries, most of whom were New Christians, over the objections of Leão Henriques and other unnamed Jesuits. "Aided by nothing more than the true spirit of the Society," Possevino writes, Valignano "overcame all those vane shadows, and showed...that the ruin of the Society would most certainly follow if it is allowed to live with these fears"<sup>39</sup>.

Possevino concludes his extended analysis of the machinations of the Portuguese with an exhortation to Mercurian that could not have failed to offend any Portuguese reader of his memorial. The problem with the Portuguese, Possevino asserts, is not that they are bad men, but that they are provincial and ignorant.

There is no doubt that the natural inclination [of the Portuguese], and the problems that they have not considered because they have never been outside that little country, would be greatly aided by the light that Your Paternity can direct towards them. In this matter may the medicine not be administered too late: and let others not make [the same errors] without the remedy of the unity that Your Paternity, by virtue of your office and authority, can most easily bring about not only by writing a letter but also by means of trusted people who are charged with this task<sup>40</sup>.

This passage conveys better than any other the mixture of pastoral concern and disdain for his opponents that characterizes Possevino's memorial as a whole. Mercurian has a pastoral responsibility to instruct the Portuguese concerning the consequences – spiritual and practical – of their prejudices. This is an important message in the context of Possevino's warning about obedience, and of the complaints about the lack of regional autonomy within the Society that would later be voiced by Jesuit critics from many nations. Possevino sees a fundamental pastoral purpose in the immense authority that is vested in the Father General of the Society by the Constitutions. In the case at hand, Pos-

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<sup>39</sup> *Memorial*, 210v.

<sup>40</sup> *Memorial*, 211r.

sevino sees the General as the only Jesuit who has the authority and breadth of vision – aided by men such as Possevino himself – to lead his fellow Jesuits in rising above what Possevino calls the “insubstantial shadows” of provincialism and prejudice in order to ensure that divisions over such matters as nation and lineage are healed before they become permanent sources of disunity and perhaps even lead to a schism within the Society.

In sum, we have seen that Possevino argues that the first reason for the fear of circulating a letter of unity is the contested legacy of Ignatius concerning New Christians, and that the second reason he cites is the wish to avoid antagonizing a small but powerful group of Portuguese Jesuits and their allies in Lisbon and Rome. The third and final reason is the fear of taking any positive action that might result in an increase in the numbers of New Christians who are admitted into the Society, something that Possevino states is not being contemplated. Instead, admission should be even-handed. Any other policy will result not only in the kind of disturbances that may already be seen within the Society but also, at least potentially, in the driving away of potential allies to the side of the Protestants (something Possevino says has already occurred in certain cases that he does not specify), for it is the Protestants who have become divided into an ever greater multiplicity of sects, each one calling itself the most pure<sup>41</sup>.

Possevino concludes his appeal to Mercurian with a list of fourteen problems that writing the proposed pastoral letter would eliminate. Possevino’s preoccupation with discrimination against New Christians is central to his argument here. He notes that the proposed letter would eliminate the possibility

that one day they [unidentified Jesuits] might in a General Congregation suggest, through the king or through other people, that...they do not wish that a General be elected who is descended from heretics...or who has relatives of this kind, or some other undesirable characteristic<sup>42</sup>.

The letter would also foreclose the possibility of a schism caused by those who might wish to broach the possibility of creating

distinct orders out of the single one that we now have, as has happened with other Orders in which are found those who are observants, conventuals, and Capuchins...under the pretext and coloring of wishing to live according to the Institute of the Society interpreted and practiced by Father Ignatius, by whom there are many letters on this subject in Spain and in other places<sup>43</sup>.

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<sup>41</sup> *Memorial*, 211r.

<sup>42</sup> *Memorial*, 212r.

<sup>43</sup> *Memorial*, 212r.

The Society was among the few religious orders which had only one observance (the Dominicans and Carthusians had also remained unified), and Possevino believed that the Institute was under threat less than four decades after the founding of the Society.

The letter of unity would provide a much-needed corrective to those who are preoccupied with lineage and who place their faith in “the old races of the Portuguese” but who finally, as Possevino has stated earlier, are not as pure-blooded as they claim to be. Here Possevino refers not only to those Portuguese who might be of Jewish descent but also to those who may descend from slaves, from adulterous relationships, and from other such lineages. Possevino foresaw, with a clarity that few men of his generation possessed, that the effort to exclude New Christians would inevitably lead to the exclusion of other groups.

That is exactly what happened. Mercurian did not write the letter that Possevino requested, and in 1593 the Society’s fifth General Congregation decreed that

in no case is anyone...of Hebrew or Saracen stock, henceforth to be admitted to the Society. And if by error any such will have been admitted, he should be dismissed as soon as this impediment has been shown to exist<sup>44</sup>.

Although the exclusion decree was revised at the sixth General Congregation in 1608 in order to limit the investigation of lineage to five generations and to make it more discreet, the decree had a lasting effect, for it opened the door to a series of other lineage-based exclusions that would continue to cause divisions within the Society until the Suppression. The decree was not formally rescinded by the Society until the twenty-ninth General Congregation in 1946<sup>45</sup>.

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<sup>44</sup> See Congregation 5, d.52, 204.

<sup>45</sup> John W. PADBERG S.J., Martin D. O’KEEFE S.J., and John L. McCARTHY S.J., tr., eds., *For Matters of Greater Moment: The First Thirty Jesuit General Congregations* (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1994), Congregation 6, d.28, 231f.