

Religious Emotions in Italian *Indipetae*: The Desire for the Indies in the Restored Society

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Introduction

Recent research in the field of Jesuit studies has seen substantial interest in the *Litterae indipetae*, including increasing attention to the petitions produced in the Restored Society of Jesus in the nineteenth- and early-twentieth centuries, when a large-scale missionary revival got underway, instigated mainly from Europe.¹ In such a context, specific historiographical considerations and methodologies are necessary for investigating the religious phenomenon of Catholic missions that involved large numbers of young Jesuits across Europe. This chapter has as its backdrop Europe's many restorations (both political and religious), global evangelisation, and – at a socio-cultural level – the period's widespread re-evaluations of subjectivity and the self. In the foreground are the several hundred Jesuits in Italy, who, during the Generalate of Jan Roothaan (superior general between 1829–53), engaged with the idea and practice of missions, and who wrote the petitions that provide the documentary focus of the study.

The essay seeks to approach the nineteenth-century *Litterae indipetae* through a number of methodologies that aim to gain insight into Jesuit identity, spirituality, values, and passions (both individual and collective). It offers the results of a preliminary study focusing on a corpus of almost five hundred letters addressed to Roothaan by Italian Jesuits.² It shows how these texts contain significant information on the persistence or evolution of early modern Jesuit praxis and identity after the Suppression and Restoration; it argues that they also reflect the changing times and the new forms of expression of personal feelings and religious emotions that circulated in the period, specifically, emotions connected to the religious sphere.

A great deal of recent scholarship has focused on understanding the role of emotions in history and on the varieties of emotional expression within different cultures or periods.³ Inspired by the early twentieth-century historian Lucien Febvre,

1 The special issue of "Ricerche di Storia Sociale e Religiosa" on *Indipetae* (88, 2017) includes new studies on 19th century letters.

2 On the *Litterae indipetae* in the New Society see Colombo, Massimi, *In viaggio*; Colombo, Massimi, "Cartas de un viaje interior", 69–100; Mongini, "Missioni estere e tradizioni identitarie nella Compagnia di Gesù", 59–94; Colombo, Rochini, "Prima la missione", 45–66.

3 On the history of emotions see, for example, Stearns, Stearns, "Emotionology", 813–36; Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling*; Champion, Garrod, Haskell, Ruys, "But Were They Talking about the Emotions?", 521–543.

the field of the *history of emotions* has evolved into a discrete discipline that facilitates systematic analysis, the incorporation of new concepts, as well as the use of distinct methodologies of investigation. Religious and cultural historians have explored the Society of Jesus itself through the prism of emotions. This is no surprise, given the Society's ready use of literary, missionary, and preaching methods to elicit emotional responses, both in the early modern age and after the Restoration. *Litterae indipetae*, considered both as a genre *per se* and as personal writings, can be fruitfully explored by drawing methodologically from the history of emotions. Observing such letters through this lens prompts reflections on the petitioners' approach to the General – which changed over the centuries – and particularly on the candidates' decisions to express in writing their missionary vocation with reference to personal feelings. Furthermore, the chosen lens makes it possible to retrace patterns common to most of the analysed *Indipetae*, showing emotional (whether conscious or not) strategies shared by the authors for communicating with the General. Despite a growing interest in Jesuit emotions, *Litterae indipetae* have only very recently been considered as a manifestation of the Jesuit ability to express and work with religious emotions.⁴

The historiographical concept of *emotional community*, furthermore, developed by Barbra Rosenwein, helps to see the *Litterae indipetae* as a whole. This idea refers to a community whose members share and are driven by common emotions, themselves viewed as agents of historical change.⁵ Seen in this light, the *indipeti* might be understood as part of a 'virtual' community or a community of letters, in which common emotions are threaded through the texts and drive the members toward the same path and goal: the missions.

The emotional dimension of the letters

Some major themes raised by these petitions include how and why such emotions arise and are catalysed through them, and how such an emotional community of letters materialises, beyond the fact that the *littera indipeta* constitutes the required document sent to the General requesting to be a missionary. In considering these questions, a number of elements may be taken into account: first, the Society of Jesus' missionary vocation and identity; second, the way in which the first missionaries' example (especially that of Francis Xavier) was circulated in the nineteenth century and the circulation of contemporary missionaries' letters from abroad among European Jesuits; finally, in the context of the Restored Society, the novel missionary policy

4 Rai, "Come le Anime del Purgatorio", 67–88.

5 Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages*.

under Roothaan's Generalate, which nourished the original spirit of the Society by promoting a new wave of global missions. The *indipeti's* emotional community drew, thus, on missionaries' accounts and traditional Jesuit models, as well as on the idea of the necessity of a new, wider evangelisation.

Nineteenth-century *Litterae indipetae* represent the written expression of such aspirations, that is, conscious continuity with the missionary past of the Society and the desire to start over with the same intent after the Restoration. The history of emotions is an excellent aid in understanding these texts, but needs to be integrated with the wider contexts within which they were produced, such as Ignatian spirituality, the Jesuit vocation to martyrdom, and the history of Jesuit piety. The starting point for understanding the emotional expression emerging from the *Indipetae* is the candidates' imagination: a seminal concept in Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises*, used to favour contemplation. It is not by chance that several *indipeti* reveal that they received the inspiration to devote themselves to mission while performing the Spiritual Exercises: as one petitioner wrote in 1841, «per misericordia, e liberalità del Signore vesto il santo abito della Compagnia, ogni anno al tempo di Santissimi Esercizi Spirituali mi sono sentito sorgere in cuore il desiderio d'andare ancor io a lavorare tra gli'Infedeli nella vigna del Signore».⁶

Such a vivid use of fantasy emerges in the analysed corpus of letters as a recurrent element in the petitions from the nineteenth- and early-twentieth centuries. Just like the early days of the first Jesuit missions, these modern *indipeti* did not have any real knowledge of the territories they were keen to evangelise and wrote about in the letters; this is particularly clear from the generic, stereotyped, emotional and moving descriptions of extremely different lands, such as Japan, China, and North- and Central-South America. All indigenous peoples are imagined as wild, and the boundary between the concepts of heretics and infidels (both terms being used) is blurred. For example, in 1835 Jesuit Giovanni Metz asked to be sent among infidels or heretics, and expressed the specific desire to go to India, implicitly stating that Indian peoples belonged to those categories.⁷ Very different lands are also depicted in Jesuits' fantasies as arduous, wild, and unwelcoming. The idea of converting godless people and possibly dying for their evangelisation is all that matters. *Indipeta* Gazzoli wrote in 1841 that he wanted to spill his blood for those living «in barbari paesi [...] a' vantaggio di quei miserabili che vivono nell'ombra delle tenebre, e della morte».⁸ Several *indipeti* tell us that in those far wild territories, missionaries fight against the Devil to

6 ARSI, *AIT* 1, f. 430 (Giovanni Meloni, 7.XII.1841).

7 ARSI, *AIT* 1, f. 165 (Giovanni Metz, 15.VIII.1835).

8 ARSI, *AIT* 1, f. 377 (Gregorio Gazzoli, 10.I.1841).

9 ARSI, *AIT* 3, f. 10 (Gregorio Mengarini, 25.XII.1839).

save souls by converting them to Catholicism.⁹ The Society of Jesus itself is described as engaged in a war against the Devil's empire.¹⁰

The traditional reading of missionary letters and reports during meals at Jesuit houses encouraged such an imaginative process, which magnified the candidates' emotions and aroused their desire for mission. Such strong desire is frequently described as a burning fire or an internal, irresistible, consuming force, inspired by God in the heart. «Abbia dunque Vostra Paternità pietà di me, non lasciandomi morire per desiderio di andare a salvare quelle anime» we read in a letter composed in 1837.¹¹ The so-called *desiderio delle Indie* is described by innumerable *indipeti* as a sentiment able to consume, when not granted or while waiting for an answer. Some *indipeti* also refer to the visible or emotional signs of their desire: tears and deep emotions in the heart.¹² The word *heart* is frequently used in the letters, referring to an organ able to catalyse the candidates' emotions and missionary desire.

The idea of mission is strongly linked with the Jesuit desire for martyrdom, considered as the highest form of *sequela Christi*; such desire constitutes a key element in understanding the *indipeti's* emotional community.¹³ Martyrdom is a noticeable element in many dozens of letters, which shows that, in the mid-nineteenth century, the major concern of Jesuit candidates to mission was spilling one's blood for Christ, the Catholic faith, and the salvation of the indigenous people's souls in the name of Jesus Christ. Such desire has its roots in the early history of the Society, and the linguistic expressions used for defining martyrdom (i.e. *spargere il sangue*, in Italian texts) have been employed since the Early Modern Age and are very common in the *Vitae* of Jesuit martyrs. A number of *indipeti* describe the desire for mission and for being martyred during evangelisation as the very reason for entering the Society of Jesus; martyrdom sometimes even becomes a vow before God. «L'anno scorso – an *Indipeta* writes in 1841 – ho fatto voto di dedicarmi alle estere missioni sino allo spargimento del sangue». Moreover, the idea of persecution, tribulation and martyrdom as vital elements of the Society of Jesus' identity was renewed during and after the Suppression, which was described by Roothaan as a martyrdom.¹⁴

10 ARSI, *AIT* 1, f. 190 (Salvatore Bartoli, 13.IV.1837).

11 ARSI, *AIT* 1, f. 208 (Giuseppe Ignazio Guagliata, 3.XII.1837).

12 ARSI, *AIT* 1, f. 371 (Luigi Accolti, 8.XII.1840). On the desire for Indies in the Society of Jesus, including the Generals' answers to the *indipeti*, see Frei's studies, such as Frei, "The Many Faces of Ignazio Maria Romeo SJ", 365–404.

13 On the idea of martyrdom in the Society of Jesus, especially the use of Paul's doctrine of the cross, and the concept of *sequela* or *imitatio Christi* according to Ignatius see Mongini, "L'apostolo gesuitico tra propaganda religiosa e autoconservazione", and the numerous references made in Mongini, *Maschere dell'identità*.

14 On this topic, see Mongini, "(1769–1839): Tribolazioni e martirio", 158–208; Rai, "A 'martyred' Society", 265–88.

A further emotional element connects all *indipeti*, namely a profound sense of sin. In this sense, external missions (considered much more dangerous than European ones) are envisioned as excellent opportunities for paying one's debts to God, especially due to the hard living conditions and the risk of being killed by the indigenous inhabitants.¹⁵ Sometimes the *mea culpa* expressed in the letters seems to be rhetoric, but it is quite significant in understanding the strategies followed by the *indipeti* to gain the General's attention. Furthermore, the persistence of many *indipeti* is indicative of their real desire to become missionaries and face the difficulties of evangelisation (including violent death). Martyrdom becomes an excellent means of atonement, as stated by many *indipeti*.¹⁶ Not only does it represent a connection between the history of the early modern Society and the piety of the Restored Society, but it also expresses a seminal aspect of the *indipeti*'s emotionality with regard to their religious, teleological, and soteriological desires and expectations. Bonifacio Soragna's *Indipeta* (1842) clarifies this peremptory willingness:

Che anzi questo stesso desiderio di spargere tutto il mio sangue per amore di Gesù Cristo e della Sua santissima religione fa sì che sembrimi ch'io più presto mi fermerei in Italia nel solo caso, che qui tra breve avesse a scoppiare una qualche crudele persecuzione non dissomigliante a quello che oggidì devasta il regno di Spagna.¹⁷

The Ignatian idea of discernment emerges, furthermore, as a significant aspect in the nineteenth-century letters. Many authors cast doubt over the authenticity of their own desire for mission, and wonder whether God or the Devil put it in their heart, in a soul-searching process that is typical of the *Spiritual Exercises*:

E già buon tempo ch'io aveva in animo di umilmente presentare alla Paternità Vostra una qualche mia inchiesta. Ma e perché mi vedeva quasi del tutto sprovvisto di quelle scienze, che a' nostri ministeri son tanto necessarie, e perché temeva non fosse il mio forte un di que' desideri, i quali, perché non mossi da Dio, siccome facilmente ci nascono in cuore, così con la stessa facilità finiscono in nulla, mi sono sin qui ritenuto dal muovere alcun passo avanti.¹⁸

Even more clearly, another *Indipeta* writes in 1841: «io non mi assicurava, che questi interni desideri fossero da Dio, ma mi ci son confermato nel vedere, che dopo aver

15 ARSI, *AIT* 1, f. 371 (Luigi Accolti, 8.XII.1840).

16 ARSI, *AIT* 1, f. 289 (Giovanni Battista Croce, 15.VI.1839).

17 ARSI, *AIT* 1, f. 446 (Bonifacio Soragna, 25.III.1842).

18 ARSI, *AIT* 1, f. 257 (Giuseppe Corrado, 1.XI.1838).

comunicato la cosa co' miei superiori Rettori, e Provinciali, tutti mi hanno approvato l'intenzione, e mi hanno confortato a fomentare l'ispirazione divina».¹⁹

The process of discernment, to be performed especially during the Spiritual Exercises, is quite emotional *per se*, and involves soul-searching and inward attention, in order to better understand one's life and purposes. Roothaan highlighted the importance of subjectivity during the Spiritual Exercises, and the *Indipetae* composed under his Generalate seem to be influenced by this particular attention to one's interiority. In the nineteenth century, moreover, subjectivity, sentiments, and the self were targeted with renewed attention both in religious and secularised contexts (e.g. psychoanalysis was born). The candidates for mission seem particularly keen to share with the General their feelings and especially the reasons for their desire for evangelisation, and the emotions felt both during the moment they realise they have such a missionary vocation and during the wait for an answer.

Distinguishing between real objectives and contingent passing desires is a natural part of the process of discernment. Moreover, it is necessary to take into consideration the nineteenth century socio-religious Italian context, a period when the discourse about evil and the presence of the Devil in the society is extraordinarily relevant. It is sufficient to mention the impact of Pius IX's *Syllabus*, and the apocalyptic idea of the penetration of the Devil in European society through novel cultural and political movements.²⁰ It is not surprising that the young Jesuits, trained in Ignatian spirituality and writing in such a religious-cultural context, struggled with the idea of the Devil's potential role in their own interior life.

The emotional community of the Italian *indipeti* in the nineteenth century is characterised by tribulations, and especially a frustration resulting from not having their requests granted. Several authors disregarded the Ignatian concept of *indifference*, which encourages a glad acceptance of God's and the superiors' decisions without struggling or having preferences, and communicated to the General their discouragement.

Son curiosi questi padri – writes an *Indipeta*, being clearly irritated – che vorrebbero essere esauditi tosto che si sono proferti. Come? sono già dieci anni che con filiale confidenza la tempesto con lettere di questo genere, e ivi fa sentire tale risposta. Piuttosto proibisca che leggansi in refettorio le lettere de' nostri Missionari che non ripetono altro che il mitte operarios; altrimenti fara verificare la favola di Tantalò, che colle labbra assetate vicine all'acqua gli e divietato il bere. E teme di spogliare

19 ARSI, AIT 1, f. 411 (Raffaele Nardi, 19.IX.1841).

20 Pio IX, *Syllabus*, Roma, 8 December 1864, online.

le province? La provincia napoletana non si spoglierebbe di una gran cosa, che d'altronde sarebbe qualche cosa altrove [...]; e poi ha osservato Vostra Paternità nel nostro catalogo? io sono segnato con un Expect. Destin. e vuol dire che sto turando i buchi. Adunque pensi una volta anche per me; a prima che si inoltri la stagione e la mia età combini con Sua Paternità Ignazio e vegga se sia cosa da appicare a questa volpetta il fuoco, e porti lo sterminio ai campi nemici.²¹

Other authors, on the contrary, looked at Ignatian *indifference* as the highest form of consolation, able to offer peace of mind and tranquillity.

Mi sentiva agitato da due antichi affetti, cio sono disgusto in lasciare i ministeri (specialmente se cattedre scientifiche) d'Europa, e timore di non ubbidire alla voce di Dio, che mi chiamava alle missioni [...] Dall'altra parte l'aver sempre sperimentato in me ad ogni notizia di missioni come una ferita che mi uccidesse in cuore ogni affetto contrario ad esse, m'incoraggiava a ripetere con istanze la mia domanda [...] Il risultato fu che non trovai maggior peso di ragioni per l'una che per l'altra parte: bensì sentii una grande tranquillità ed indifferenza a correre ove la Santa Obbedienza mi volesse.²²

Concluding notes

The analysed corpus of letters shows the candidates' familial approach to the superior general, and an affective dimension which does not leave room for any chivalric formulas. Such intimacy is an important clue of the evolution of relationships with the father general, who is addressed as a real paternal figure: candidates share with him their intimate feelings, doubts, and expectations. Some of them also express disappointment at not having a chance for a face-to-face colloquium, which – we understand from these *Indipetae* – was much more common in the nineteenth century than before. It is important to observe how such evolving attitudes both build on traditional Jesuit themes, and also give new, more personal dimensions to the construction of the letters. Moreover, even a merely quantitative study of the *Indipetae* produced during Roothaan's government show a remarkably positive response to the general's invitation to his new evangelisation program. The *Indipetae* represent an extraordinary reaction in the context of the Catholic Church's missionary policy in the nineteenth century.

These letters constitute, in effect, fascinating personal writings, which nonetheless present the features of a literary genre. The letters follow, in fact, the stylistic rules

21 ARSI, AIT 1, f. 447 (Pietro Zerbinatti, 4.V.1842).

22 ARSI, AIT 1, f. 320 (Gabriele Vigilante, 28.I.1840).

defined by Ignatius and Polanco in the mid-sixteenth century to regulate correspondence within the Society, and also present common features that can be easily analysed and understood in the light of Jesuit history and spirituality, as we have seen. The letters represent a powerful means for not only sharing personal feelings, but also expressing religious emotions deriving from the authors' religious affiliation and (Jesuit) spirituality. *Indipetae* are, in this sense, exceptional documents for understanding Jesuit identity over the centuries. These letters can thus be observed as the expression of Jesuit emotions, meaning religious sentiments filtered through the values promoted within the Society throughout its history: desire for evangelisation, martyrdom as the ultimate purpose and the highest form of *imitatio Christi*, and Ignatian discernment and indifference, just to name a few substantial elements. Drawing from Yasmin Haskell's work on Jesuits' literary writings, we could even look at the *Indipetae* as a form of self-therapy, through which the candidates tried to elaborate their emotions and desires, while waiting to be (potentially) sent on mission; something which, in many cases, never occurred.²³

Finally, the use of the lens provided by the history of emotions to approach the multifaceted history of the Society of Jesus, and in this specific case the *Litterae indipetae*, seems almost natural, given the fact that the Society distinguished itself over the centuries in a conscious use of emotions and their expression in various spheres: Spiritual Exercises, evangelisation methods, popular preaching and internal missions, production of devotional books and literary works, and the circulation of devotions, such as that of the Sacred Heart. Letters represent a valuable instrument for understanding Jesuit emotionology, here meaning the way in which the emotional community composed of the candidates for mission express their common feelings through the means of *Litterae indipetae*.

23 See, for example, Haskell, "Suppressed Emotions", 42–60. On the use of emotions by the Jesuits in diverse missionary contexts see also studies on music, drama, and the Jesuits in Japan by Makoto Harris Takao, for example "In what storms of blood from Christ's flock is Japan swimming?", 87–120; and on Jesuit popular missions Száraz, "Tears and Weeping on Jesuit Missions in Seventeenth-Century Italy", 7–47.