

Sources for the Study of Ippolito Desideri Part I: His Education and Spiritual Formation

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On August 21, 1714, Ippolito Desideri posted a letter to his friend and fellow Jesuit Francesco Piccolomini.¹ Desideri had been stranded by the monsoon in Agra for three months, but his mood was buoyant. The Visitor José da Silva had just commissioned Desideri to re-open the old mission to Tibet, and the younger Jesuit dreamt of a bountiful harvest.

Goodbye, my dearest Father Piccolomini. I salute you with the utmost affection, and I beg you to pray for me without ceasing. A thousand heartfelt greetings to Father Giovanni Battista Conti, to Father Cotti, to Father Guarini, to Father Turano, to Father Merlini, to Father Corsoni, to Father Crivelli, to Father Isola; in sum to all, for I embrace you all most affectionately and commend myself to you all with my whole heart. May the Lord in His mercy deign to fill Your Reverence and all of these other men with His holy love, with a grand and constant fervor in His holy service, in zeal for the salvation of souls, and with every consolation, that we all receive the grace of meeting again in His Holy Paradise. Farewell! Farewell! Farewell!²

It is no wonder that Desideri recalled his fellow Jesuits with such emotion. Some of these men were famous in the Society. Some were coming into their own. Some were his friends. All were products and

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² Petech 1952–1956 [=MITN], 5: 19. “Dal resto, P. Piccolomini mio carissimo, la riverisco con tutto l'affetto, e la supplico a pregar di continuo per me. Mille saluti cordialissimi al P. Gio. Batta. Conti, al P. Cotti, al P. Guarini, al P. Turano, al P. Merlini, al P. Corsoni, al P. Turano [sic], al P. Crivelli, al P. Isola; in somma a tutti, poichè tutti affettuosissimamente abbraccio e a tutti con tutto il cuore mi raccomandi. Il Signore si degni per sua misericordia di riempire V. R. e tutti gl'altri del suo santo amore, d'un grande e costante fervore nel suo santo servizio e nel zelo della salute dell'anime, e d'ogni consolazione, finchè ci dia grazie di rivederci nel Santa Paradiso. Vale, vale, vale.”

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preservers of an already storied Jesuit educational system.³ Giovanni Battista Conti, Ubertino Cotti, and Giacomo Filippo Merlini were administrators at the Society's prestigious Roman College.⁴ Conti was the Master of Studies, Cotti was the Spiritual Director, and Merlini was the Prefect of Missions. Ignazio Guarini, Domenico Maria Turano, and Giuseppe Maria Crivelli were faculty members, teaching mathematics, logic, and rhetoric, respectively. Marc'Antonio Isola was Desideri's fellow student, having been in every class that Desideri took between 1702 and 1712.⁵ Mario Corsoni—the only man mentioned by Desideri who was not associated with the Roman College—taught at the Jesuit College in Florence.⁶ These men were—as the common pun has it—company men. They shared a worldview shaped by their education and spiritual formation as members of the Society of Jesus.

Despite the tremendous progress made in studies of the Ippolito Desideri, these men remain largely unknown. The scholar who wishes to know the provenance of an argument or the meaning of a technical term in Desideri's writings has no obvious place to turn. And yet, abundant information about Desideri's education and spiritual formation can be found in the administrative records of the Roman Province in the Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu and the Archivio Storico della Pontificia Università Gregoriana. If one looks in these archives, one can find Desideri's rectors, novice masters, spiritual directors, teachers, and fellow students. One can identify the meditations Desideri made, the exhortations he heard, the lectures he endured, and the disputations in which he participated.

1. Early Life and Education

Ippolito Desideri was born in Pistoia, Italy, in 1684, the fourth child of

³ Desideri also mentions correspondence with other Jesuits in a letter to the Jesuit General Michelangelo Tamburini on September 21, 1721, including Giovanni Battista Tolomei (1653–1726) and Francesco Maria Galluzzi (1671–1731). See MITN 5: 84–85. Tolomei, a friend of Leibniz, had recently been Rector of the Roman College. Galluzzi was a confessor at the Roman College between 1709 and 1712. Desideri says that he received letters from Conti, Corsoni, and Galluzzi, but none of these has been found.

⁴ For a list of faculty and administrators at the Roman College when Desideri left Rome, see *Catalogus brevis anno 1712*, 3–6 (Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu [=ARSI], codex Romana [=Rom] 98, fols. 49–50v).

⁵ Isola had entered the previous year, but he was placed in Desideri's cohort. Compare *Catalogus brevis anno 1700*, 21 (ARSI Rom 96, fol. 59r); *Catalogus brevis anno 1701*, 19–21 (ARSI Rom 96, fols. 105r–06r).

⁶ *Catalogus brevis anno 1712*, 44 (ARSI Rom 98, fol. 69v).

the doctor Iacopo Desideri and his wife Maria Maddalena Cappellini.⁷ Desideri's early life was unremarkable. He received the sacrament of confirmation when he was nine and enrolled in the Jesuit college of Pistoia when he was ten. The college was small, having only two teachers, Ignazio Xavier Costantino and Giuseppe Maria Angeletti.⁸ The college at Pistoia had a church and a small staff of Jesuits who preached, heard confessions, and ministered to the students and townspeople.⁹ In addition to the standard Latin curriculum, Desideri would have memorized various prayers and litanies, listened to spiritual exhortations, and learned basic Christian doctrine through a catechism very much like the one he would later write in Tibetan.

A boy who hoped to become a Jesuit would have looked forward to several years of study.¹⁰ The five-year course that constituted the "lower studies" of the curriculum was divided into three years of grammar, one year of humanities, and one year of rhetoric. Such classes represented units to be mastered rather than strict periods of time, and it was not uncommon for a boy to take six or seven calendar years to complete his lower studies. Should the boy decide to become a Jesuit, he would have spent two years in the novitiate after completing his primary education before moving on to his "higher studies," which consisted of three years of philosophy and two to four years of theology. Before progressing from the philosophy course to the theology sequence, however, he would have spent three to five years teaching grammar and the humanities at another Jesuit school. The Society sometimes made exceptions: Jesuits destined for careers in academic administration or the overseas missions often took an abbreviated two-year class in theology. Sometimes they merely reviewed it in private lessons. Those destined to a career in theology, however, took two additional years of theology in addition to the long four-year course. An academically inclined Jesuit of the seventeenth or eighteenth century—not unlike a Tibetan *dge bshes* today—might have taken over twenty years to complete his education.

The humanities and philosophy curriculum consisted almost entirely of non-Christian authors. The first grammar class began with Cicero's easiest letters; the second class was dedicated to Cicero's *Ad familiares* and Ovid's easier poems; the highest grammar class studied Cicero's *Ad Atticum*, *Ad Quintum*, *De amicitia*, *De senectute*, and *Paradoxa*. Students also studied Virgil's *Eclogues*, the easier parts of the *Georgics*,

⁷ For details of Desideri's early life, see Rauty 1984: 3-31, Luca 1987, 21-39, Bargiacchi 2003: 4-8, Bargiacchi 2006: 1-8, and Sweet and Zwilling 2010: 14-18. For the larger context, see Panti 1975.

⁸ *Catalogus brevis anno 1700*, 27 (ARSI Rom 96, fol. 27v).

⁹ Grendler 2017: 9.

¹⁰ For a summary of the curriculum, see the fifth volume of Lukács 1965-1986.

Tibullus, and Propertius. Less talented students were taught to compose basic sentences. Better students were expected to master Latin syntax and meter well enough to imitate the better pagan poets by the end of their third year. Greek was taught but not emphasized. Students learned the rudiments of grammar during their first year and could read simple orations by the end of the grammar sequence. As students continued through Cicero's speeches in the humanities course, they added Caesar, Sallust, Livy, Horace, and Plutarch. To my knowledge, no parent protested that boys were taught the first Latin declension with the word "muse" (*musa*), being encouraged from a young age to seek what Greeks would have called their own personal *daimon*.¹¹ Jesuits routinely—and rather nonchalantly—illustrated Christian doctrines by appealing to pagan authors and myths. Indeed, a very non-Christian antiquity provided the chief virtue to be inculcated in Jesuit education—piety—even as the Society opposed "paganism" and heterodoxy of all kinds.¹² Of course, the prevalence of non-Christian authors in the curriculum should not imply that the Jesuits tolerated their vices. Jesuit censors took care to purge smut from Ovid, Catullus, and Martial, even as these authors formed an important part of the curriculum.¹³

Students in the Jesuits' schools took four classes a day, with two in the morning and two in the afternoon. The morning classes and one of the afternoon classes were each an hour long. The last afternoon class lasted an hour and a half. Most classrooms had windows, but no heat. Students were assigned seats based on their rank in class, their social status, and their religious state. Desideri, being from a patrician family, would have been given better seating than students from common families, but he would still have shared a desk. Classes began with a simple prayer, with both the teachers and the students bowing with uncovered heads. Students were expected to remain quiet, although prohibitions against shouting, lewd behavior, and other infractions suggest that this was an elusive ideal.¹⁴ Students doodled, passed notes, wandered the classroom, and skipped classes. Students who broke rules could expect to be whipped by the disciplinarian or—if they were too large to be whipped—to be locked out of class. Bullying was a perennial problem. If Desideri had already expressed an interest in becoming a Jesuit to Costantino or Angeletti, he would have been

¹¹ Grammar classes usually followed Álvarez 1572–1575. Álvarez's textbook was published in almost 400 editions, being used in Catholic, Protestant, and secular institutions well into the late-nineteenth century.

¹² Lukács 1965–1986, 1:136.

¹³ On the use and expurgation of pagan classics in the humanities curriculum, see Codina 1934–1938 3: 119, 151.

¹⁴ For descriptions of student life, compare Fabrini 1946 and Turrini 2006.

separated from the other students and placed in a smaller, protected group.

Jesuit pedagogy was based on memorization, repetition, and competition. Students memorized the chief points of each academic exercise, meditated upon them under the direction of their teachers, repeated and reviewed lessons in a tightly choreographed series of drills, and seasoned the process with frequent—and frequently fiery—exhortations. Every student was expected to memorize something every day, so the first hour of the morning class was devoted to mnemonic exercises. As students “exercised” their memories, older students—called “decurions” because they supervised groups of ten like officers in the Roman cavalry—collected students’ homework. The teacher then graded the students’ assignments as the decurions listened to the students recite passages they had memorized. Only towards the end of the class might students translate some Cicero or solve a Latin puzzle, such as restoring the proper order of deliberately scrambled verses. For their second morning class, students reviewed the material from their first class, began another lesson on Cicero, repeated the lesson in its entirety, and finished with grammatical exercises. Students began their first afternoon class by reciting the grammatical rules they had memorized as the teacher double-checked the decurions’ marks on the morning’s exercises. For the final afternoon class, students studied syntax or poetry on alternating days, with a little Greek thrown in for good measure. On Saturdays, students recited the entire week’s lessons from memory in front of their classmates in their first morning class and corrected themselves in the second class. The two afternoon classes on Saturday were devoted to reciting Christian doctrine, which was also to be memorized.

Anxiety and *agon* in equal measure, almost every Jesuit class ended in a competition of some sort, four times a day, every day, for well over a decade. Nor were contests limited to the classroom. On Saturdays, the different classes of the Jesuit college came together to compete against one another, and students of all classes vied to be chosen to deliver the monthly oration in the great hall. As they progressed through the humanities curriculum, students were encouraged to compose descriptions of cities, ports, battles, and saints; inscriptions upon shields, tombs, statues, and gardens, or with the Rector’s permission, devise a new emblem or “hieroglyph” appropriate to the subject matter they had been studying. The most beautiful lyric, the wittiest epigram, the most ingenious emblem, a prose history in which one could hear the sounds of some ancient battle, would be posted and celebrated. Prizes were given to the best students in each class at the end of the year, great quantities of Cicero were memorized, reputations were gained and lost. We do not know how Desideri fared in these early

contests, nor what he thought of them. Presumably his teachers saw some promise. When Desideri was sixteen, Giambattista Nembrini, the Rector of the Jesuit College in Pistoia, invited Desideri to accompany him to Rome, to see if the young man was cut out to be a Jesuit.

2. *The Novitiate, 1700–1702*

Desideri became a Jesuit novice on April 27, 1700. He was one of eighteen students in his cohort, which included his friend Marc'Antonio Isola.¹⁵ The novitiate was a two-year program of prayer, meditation, and social work undertaken before one took vows as a Jesuit.¹⁶ Apart from a month dedicated to teaching catechism and two more months devoted to hospital work, the novitiate was for all intents and purposes a long meditation retreat. In fact, Desideri began the novitiate just as the Vicar General Michelangelo Tamburini (1648–1730) was reforming it.¹⁷ Tamburini sought the Society's most talented spiritual masters to direct novices in prayer and meditation. Desideri's Rector Rainiero Carsughi (1647–1709) and his Novice Master Benedetto Rogacci (1646–1719) had been handpicked for the task.¹⁸

Desideri's novitiate began with a retreat in Bernini's Sant'Andrea al Quirinale.¹⁹ In retreat, the noise of the Jesuit school gave way to a considered silence.²⁰ Novices were forbidden to talk to one another, meals were taken silently, and meditations were made in darkness. Following their founder Ignatius of Loyola's own practice, the spiritual director usually conversed with each novice only once a day unless he felt the novice was experiencing difficulties. Jesuit meditations usually followed a set form. The Jesuit began by placing himself in God's

¹⁵ *Catalogus brevis anno 1700*, 20–21 (ARSI Rom 96, fols. 11v–12r). Isola, although he entered on February 17, 1700, and listed with the novices of 1699–1700, was placed in Desideri's class of novices. Desideri's friend Ildebrando Grassi, who had entered on January 23, 1699, was a member of the previous cohort, as was Francesco Piccolomini. Since students in higher classes were often put in charge of the students just below them, it is likely that Isola and Piccolomini mentored Desideri early in their studies. Compare *Catalogus brevis anno 1701*, 20–21. (ARSI Rom 96, fols. 58v–59r); *Catalogus brevis anno 1702*, 19–21 (ARSI Rom 96, fols. 105r–06r)

¹⁶ On the program of the novitiate, see Codina 1934–1938, 3: 19–21.

¹⁷ Tamburini was especially concerned to ensure that novices made their meditations exactly as prescribed and that they attended their rectors' exhortations. See Tamburini's comments on becoming Father General, *Epistolae Praepositorum Generalium ad patres et fratres Societatis Iesu* 2: 158–64.

¹⁸ *Catalogus brevis anno 1701*, 18 (ARSI Rom 96, fol. 57v); *Catalogus brevis anno 1702*, 18 (ARSI Rom 96, fol. 104v). On Carsughi and Rogacci, see Haskell 2003: 252–65.

¹⁹ Luca 1987: 33.

²⁰ On the practice of the Exercises in Italy, see Iparraguirre 1946–1973, 3: 233–65.

presence. He set his intention by praying that his every action, mental and physical, be done for God's greater glory. He visualized the subject upon which he was about to meditate, and he prayed for success in the meditation he was about to undertake. After these preliminaries, the Jesuit meditated on three to five "points" for about ten to fifteen minutes each. Meditations ended with a colloquy, in which the meditator opened his heart to God, Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, an angel that protected him, or a saint, usually followed by practical resolutions to amend one's life based on what he experienced during the meditation session. A single meditation of this kind typically took between an hour to an hour and fifteen minutes. In the early Society, the spiritual director usually wrote down the points for each meditation, and the person making the exercises meditated on them in private. In Desideri's day, it was common for the director to preach a sermon to initiate the consideration of each point, with the Jesuits meditating as a single group.

Jesuits were especially concerned with the mechanics of meditation, discussing the relative benefits of prostration, kneeling, sitting, standing, and walking according to the type of spiritual exercise. Jesuits favored visualization techniques more than any other religious order except the Franciscans, allowing for meditation with the eyes closed or fixed upon one spot.²¹ Nor were such methods restricted to the meditation session itself. The General Everard Mercurian (1514–1580) instructed Jesuits to visualize Christ crucified in their hearts at all moments in order to preserve their awareness of God's presence even when they were not meditating.²² Alfonso Ruiz (1530–1599) and Jerónimo Domènech (1516–1592) taught Jesuits to treat their spiritual director as angels impelled by compassion to save their souls.²³ Jesuits were also expected to practice the devotions appropriate to their own guardian angels as well as the angels associated with their colleges, their nations, and the Society itself. And here we should remember that by "angels" we do not mean the sentimentalized beings of late modern Protestant Christianity. In traditional Christian theology, angels were terrifying spiritual forces much more akin to *chos skyong*.

Examples of contemporary meditation and retreat literature abound. Among them, we may include Carlo Gregorio Rosignoli's *Verità eterne esposte in lezioni ordinate principalmente per li giorni degli Esercizi spirituali*, Pietro Ansalone's *Esercizi spirituali, o vero sollievo all'esercitante*, Giovanni Pietro Pinamonti's *La religiosa in solitudine*, Carlo Ambrogio Cattaneo's *Esercizi spirituali di S. Ignazio*, and Hortensio

²¹ Calveras and Dalmases 1969: 184–87, 200–03; Iparraguirre 1955: 183.

²² Iparraguirre 1955: 260–63.

²³ Iparraguirre 1955: 170, 180.

Balestrieri's *Esercizi spirituali di Sant'Ignazio per ritiro di dieci giorni*.²⁴ We also have meditation manuals that were either known to Desideri, such as Pinamonti's *L'inferno aperto al Cristiano*, or that were written by men he knew, such as Conti's *Iter animae ad Deum*.²⁵ In all likelihood, Desideri's first meditations were guided by his Novice Master Rogacci, who was famous for the consummate perspicacity he brought to the eight-day retreat that began the novitiate.²⁶ Most spiritual directors required novices to make four meditations a day while on retreat; knowing that the Society allowed variation in the kind, number, order, and length of exercises, Rogacci had novices make only three, to which he added a single meditation on the ninth day. If Rogacci directed Desideri's first eight-day retreat, we have a reasonably accurate account of the exact twenty-five meditations he heard.²⁷

Jesuits continued to meditate twice a day for the remainder of the novitiate, with several additional daily devotions. Novices awoke around 5:00am for Eucharistic adoration and reviewed the points for their morning meditation, which began at 5:30am.²⁸ They concluded their meditation at 6:30am with another spiritual exercise called an examination of conscience, in which the novice reviewed his spiritual state from rising in the morning until finishing the first meditation. Mass started promptly at 7:00am, after which novices returned to their rooms for a short break. At 8:00am, novices either repeated their morning meditation or listened to an exhortation given by the Rector. After breakfast and chores, a Jesuit began an hour of spiritual reading at 10:00am, usually from *Ejercicio de perfección y virtudes cristianas*, a famous ascetical treatise by Alonso Rodriguez (1538–1616).²⁹ Another examination of conscience followed before the noon meal. Novices prayed the Litany of the Saints in the early afternoon, with another examination of conscience following the mid-afternoon lessons at 3:00pm. The community gathered again at 5:00pm to pray the Litanies of the Blessed Virgin and the Litanies of the Holy Name of Jesus, to be followed by a second spiritual reading at 5:15pm and a brief review of the points of a second, half-hour meditation, which began at 6:00pm. Another devotion, usually the Rosary, followed the second meditation around 6:45pm. Supper came at 7:30pm, in which a passage from the New Testament was read, followed by an edifying book of the rector's

²⁴ Rosignoli 1688; Ansalone 1701; Pinamonti 1709; Cattaneo 1711; Balestrieri 1724.

²⁵ Pinamonti 1693; Conti 1709.

²⁶ Rosan 1931: 76–77.

²⁷ Rogacci 1711; For a Latin version, see Rogacci 1716.

²⁸ On the schedule of Jesuit houses, see O'Malley 1993: 358–62. Allowing for some minor regional variations, most novitiates followed similar routines well into the twentieth century. Compare Togni 2002 and Ranum 2011.

²⁹ Rodriguez 1609.

choice, most often a treatise on ascetical and mystical virtues, like Diego Álvarez de Paz's *De inquisitione pacis*.³⁰ In large communities like the Jesuit house in Rome, supper was also accompanied by a sermon, sometimes in Latin, sometimes in the vernacular. Novices also learned of the great men who preceded them on the path, including Jesuits of recent memory, the teachers of their teachers, and local saints. After recreation in the gardens or community room, a novice finished his day with the Litanies of Our Lady at 9:00pm, a second session of Eucharistic adoration, and a fourth examination of conscience.

Several meditations written by Desideri's immediate acquaintances survive, including long cycles written by both Carsughi and Rogacci. Carsughi's *Meditazioni dell'eccellenze della Madonna Santissima* contains sixty meditations.³¹ His collections of meditations on the Gospels, Christ, Mary, and the saints are similar.³² The meditations of Rogacci's *Dell'Uno Necessario* likewise fill three volumes.³³ In contrast to the short sermons preached to guide meditations during retreats—many of which are genuine masterpieces of Italian rhetoric—these modest meditations do not make for especially scintillating reading. They are, however, the most abundant source of the spiritual vocabulary Desideri used to describe Tibetan meditation in the *Notizie istoriche*.

Desideri's circle also produced an abundant hagiographical literature. Merlini authored two important devotional works.³⁴ Gian Francesco Durazzo, the librarian of the Novice House when Desideri lived there, wrote a life of Pinamonti (1632–1703), while Annibale Marchetti, his Rector at the Roman College, wrote a hagiography of Aloysius Gonzaga (1568–1591).³⁵ Desideri's Confessor Francesco Maria Galluzzi wrote of the saintly virtues of Antonio Baldinucci (1665–1719), and Galluzzi's own life was celebrated in turn by Giovanni Battista Memmi (1695–1740).³⁶ Such hagiographies were standard fare, recited at supper in Jesuit houses, and recommended by spiritual directors. Especially saintly Jesuits would be placed on the Society's liturgical calendar so that their deaths might be remembered in the liturgy.³⁷ Unlike the meditations of Carsughi and Rogacci, these last sources are indirect: we do not know which of these Desideri might have known or read, nor can we estimate the probability that he knew or read them with

³⁰ Álvarez de la Paz 1611.

³¹ Carsughi 1705a.

³² Carsughi 1705b; Carsughi 1709a; Carsughi 1709b; Carsughi 1709c.

³³ Rogacci 1704-07. For a Latin edition, see Rogacci 1721.

³⁴ Merlin 1711; Merlini 1715.

³⁵ Durazzo 1709; Marchetti 1687; Galluzzi 1720.

³⁶ Galluzzi 1720; Memmi 1734.

³⁷ Rogacci, Tolomei, and Conti appeared in the menologium shortly after their deaths. Patrignani 1730, 1:95 (1); 1:186 (1); 2:190(1).

any accuracy. They are, however, ample witness to the fervent spirituality and “style” of Desideri’s immediate circle in Rome, and it would be rather difficult to imagine that at least some of these sources would not have influenced him, especially when he describes the “apostolic spirit” of *bodhicitta* and other aspects of Buddhist spirituality in Tsong kha pa’s *Lam rim chen mo*.³⁸

3. *Rhetoric and Oratory, 1702–1703*

Desideri became a scholastic at the Roman College on April 28, 1702. The Roman College was the crown of the Jesuits’ educational empire. Its chief building, which housed a library, classrooms, and rooms for several Jesuits, was the largest building in Rome devoted solely to education.³⁹ When Desideri matriculated, the College’s “lower school” taught grammar, humanities, and rhetoric to approximately 1500 students from all classes of Roman society. Its “upper school” taught philosophy and theology to approximately one thousand, bringing the total enrollment—according to Paul Grendler’s conservative estimate—to about 2500.⁴⁰ The Roman College counted among its professors several of the most famous theologians of the early modern era, not least among them Francisco Toledo (1532–1596), Robert Bellarmine (1542–1621), Francisco Suárez (1548–1617), Gabriel Vásquez (1549–1604), Gregorio de Valencia (1550–1603), and Juan de Lugo (1583–1660).⁴¹ The highest theology classes remained exclusive affairs, but the philosophy classes, which were required to pursue advanced degrees in law and medicine, could contain as many as two hundred students.

College life was relatively free and boisterous, at least when compared to the novitiate. Jesuit scholastics were still expected to examine their consciences, to confess their sins, and to do penance, but they were allowed to choose the topics of their daily meditations, and they could take part in the many pageants, performances, and disputations held at the College. Skimming the yearbook, we see that Desideri had to remain in the lower school for one year.⁴² From this we can gather that Desideri, though he had studied Greek and Latin for at least four hours a day for six academic years and practiced speaking it for two more years in the novitiate, was not among the best Latinists in his

³⁸ MITN 6: 199.

³⁹ Villoslada 1954. Compare Grendler 2017: 319–46.

⁴⁰ Grendler 2017: 320. Grendler derives these numbers for the academic years 1696–1697, 1697–1698, 1698–1699, and 1699–1700 from ARSI Rom 66, fol. 284r and ASR, Archivio dell’Università di Roma 195, fols. 23, 104, 185, 384.

⁴¹ Villoslada 1954: 215–16.

⁴² *Catalogus brevis anno 1703*, 17 (ARSI Rom 96, fol. 149r).

class. But neither was he among the worst, who would have had to repeat humanities before progressing to rhetoric. Desideri, in sum, was an average Latinist. He would have been able to compose poems, letters, and speeches of some substance, but such feats were not especially uncommon at the time. Desideri would have also continued basic Greek with Plato and become acquainted with Hesiod, Homer, Pindar, Thucydides, and Demosthenes.

Desideri's Master of Rhetoric during the academic year 1702–1703 was Marc' Antonio Ducci (d. 1711).⁴³ He probably learned the art of oratory through Cipriano Soarez's *De arte rhetorica*, which taught Cicero's *De Oratore*, *Partitiones oratoriae*, and *De inventione*, the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, and Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and *Poetics*.⁴⁴ Although Soarez (1524–1593) emphasized the importance of amplification—repetition with additional details—because he thought it the technique best suited to arouse emotion, he also highlighted links between rhetorical and scholastic forms of dialectic.⁴⁵ Soarez urged students to deploy cumulative definitions, draw logical conclusions, and present contradictories, contraries, and dissimilar cases to heighten the emotional appeal of their discourse and texts. More than anything, he encouraged them to trace consequences to their causes and to make heavy use of similes and examples.

Theatre was also an indispensable part of a Jesuit's training in rhetoric. As any young Jesuit would have learned, "poetry grows cold without theatre" (*friget enim poesis sine theatro*). History—the chief subject of the humanities class—came alive on stage, and the descriptions of ancient cities and lands that students worked so hard to master were put in motion, often with complex machinery designed by the professors of mathematics. Tragedies were staged at the beginning of each academic year, with pious comedies and shorter plays (*ludi priores*) during Carnival.⁴⁶ *Sacrae representationes*, pageants portraying Biblical events, were performed during Christmas, Lent, and Easter. Most plays and pageants included balletic interludes or other dances, and music was performed at almost every important event, including academic assemblies and public disputations.⁴⁷ Students were allowed to sing ecclesiastic music written by Catholics, but—boys being boys—compositions had to be screened for indecency, especially celebrations

⁴³ *Catalogus brevis anno 1703*, 5 (ARSI Rom 96, fol. 143r).

⁴⁴ Soarez 1568. On the use of Soarez at the Collegio Romano, see Moss 1986: 142–43.

⁴⁵ Flynn 1956; Flynn 1957. For more detailed treatment, see Flynn's dissertation, *The 'De Arte Rhetorica' (1568)*, diss. University of Florida (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms No. 16,926).

⁴⁶ Oldani and Yanitelli 1999. On the publication of plays in Jesuit colleges, see Farrell 1938: 121–26, 142–49; McCabe 1983: 1–10.

⁴⁷ For a bibliography of primary sources, see Franchi 2007.

of drunkenness or parodies of Jesuit pedagogy with dirty Latin puns.⁴⁸ Scholastics were still forbidden to attend secular comedies, sporting events, and public executions—unless the condemned man had been charged with heresy.⁴⁹

Plays with historical themes contrasted the transience of earthly kingdoms, lands, and peoples with the twin eternities of heaven and hell. The demands of allegory—to say nothing of the technical problems of presenting the exotic temporalities of heaven, hell, and purgatory—often outstripped the Aristotelian demand for unity of time, place, and action in Jesuit drama. Vincenzo Guiniggi's *Ignatius in Monte Serrato, arma mutans*, the play produced to celebrate the twin canonization of Ignatius and Francis Xavier, depicted the Church, Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas as persons who interacted with dancing centaurs and Indians who rode on the backs of dolphins.⁵⁰ The play composed by Ducci and performed for the college that year celebrated the story of Hermenegild, the first son of the Visigoth King Leovigild by the Catholic princess Theodosia.⁵¹ Its theme, typical for the era and the audience, was the relationship of piety and religion. With his wife Ingundis, Hermenegild dies a martyr after they renounce the Arian faith of his father and evil stepmother Goswintha, showing that true piety is found not in the respect due to parents and political authorities, but in religion. As it so happens, several prelates and Cavalieri were present, as well as a good number of cardinals, and both composition and performance were received "with notable applause" (*con plauso*).⁵² Sadly for us, Desideri does not appear in the program.

It is all too easy to neglect this period of Desideri's studies, but it is very hard not to see the influence of Soarez—or something very much like Soarez—on the frequent passages in Desideri's *Notizie storiche* that Luciano Petech found to be "unbearable" (*insopportabile*).⁵³ It is also important not to separate humanities and scholasticism in the Society of Jesus. Latin flourished in the colleges, and many of Desideri's teachers and friends were accomplished poets and pedagogues.⁵⁴ Rogacci's *Euthymia sive De tranquillitate animi* and Carsughi's *Ars bene scribendi* were two of the most important didactic Latin poems of the age.⁵⁵ And, once

⁴⁸ Crook 2009.

⁴⁹ Trends in Rome favored comedies, melodramas, and oratorios. For the years of Desideri's studies, see Franchi 1988–1997, 1: 750–58.

⁵⁰ Oldani and Yanitelli 1999: 22.

⁵¹ Ducci 1705. For an analysis of another Jesuit staging of the martyrdom of Hermenegildus, see Zanolghi 2002: 17–70.

⁵² Villoslada 1954: 290.

⁵³ MITN 5: xxviii. On Desideri's style, see Sweet and Zwilling 2010: 4–6.

⁵⁴ For a contemporary account, see Memmi 1730.

⁵⁵ Rogacci 1690; Carsughi 1709d.

again, several of Desideri's teachers and friends made important contributions to the field. Conti's verse "La morte di S. Francesco Saverio nell'isola di Sanciano" was performed frequently with music.⁵⁶ Marchetti wrote *De vita in terris beata*, a Latin didactic poem that begins by introducing students to the philosophical sects of Greece and Rome. Gianlorenzo Lucchesini (1663–1738), Desideri's professor of ethics, not only produced poetry, prose, and drama but also published a textbook on composition with illustrations from his own works.⁵⁷ Nor was excellence in the vernacular neglected, with Rogacci again making important contributions.⁵⁸ Indeed, several of Desideri's teachers and friends later distinguished themselves as orators. Turano and Corsoni published panegyrics, and Turano appears frequently in contemporary collections of Italian orators.⁵⁹ We also have manuscripts of Guarini's sermons.⁶⁰ Here, too, stock images and themes abound—the menace of Egyptian idolatry, the dangers of heresy, the saintly missionary, the martyr's death—and appear again in Desideri's *Notizie storiche*.

4. Philosophical Formation, 1703–1706

Desideri began philosophy in Fall 1703. Of the eighteen students in his cohort, he was one of nine allowed to enter the philosophy course after one year of rhetoric.⁶¹ The philosophy course took three years, with the first year devoted to dialectics and logic, the second to natural philosophy, and the third to psychology and metaphysics. The course, as with other religious orders such as the Dominicans and Franciscans, was largely devoted to Aristotle, with dialectics based on the *Topics* and *Sophistical Refutations*; logic upon the *Categories*, *On Interpretation*, and the *Prior Analytics*; the natural sciences on Aristotle's *Physics*, *On the Heavens*, *On the Elements*, *Meteorology*, and *On Generation and Corruption*; and the final year of philosophy devoted to *On the Soul* and the *Metaphysics*. Students also took an additional forty-five-minute class during their second year, first on mathematics, then on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. Professors taught two hour-long classes each day to give students more time to memorize texts and to practice their

⁵⁶ Conti 1701: 147–64. For other examples of Conti's poetry and prose, see Conti 1696; Conti 1704–1707.

⁵⁷ Lucchesini 1708; Lucchesini 1711a; Lucchesini 1713.

⁵⁸ Rogacci 1694; Rogacci 1711.

⁵⁹ Turano 1713; Corsoni 1722; Corsoni 1723; Turano, et al. 1730–1752, 1: 1–20, 122–34, 182–201, 221–58, 280–304, 324–35; 2: 1–44, 299–324.

⁶⁰ Guarini 1708–1712.

⁶¹ *Catalogus brevis anno 1704*, 5–10 (ARSI Rom 96, fols. 189r–191v).

disputations. Professors devoted the first half of the first class to interpreting the text of Aristotle before moving on to questions to be disputed in the second half of the class. By Desideri's day, the scholasticism of the Roman College had been updated to include modern developments in philosophy and the natural sciences, following the model of the lectures for the three-year philosophy sequence given in 1692-95 by Giovanni Battista Tolomei (1653-1726), which had been a sensation in Rome.⁶² Desideri's professor of mathematics, Antonio Baldigiani (1647-1711), who had taught mathematics at the Roman College since 1666, even conspired with Leibniz in 1689 to have the ban on Copernicanism lifted in Rome.⁶³

The approach to Aristotle remained highly scholastic, however. Ignatius of Loyola found his first classes at the universities of Barcelona and Alcalá de Henares unstructured, but he blossomed with the exercises, drills, and disputations used at the University of Paris. The founder's secretary Juan Alfonso de Polanco (1517-1576) and his successor Diego Laínez (1512-1565) also favored the pedagogical practice of frequent disputation. This procedure required the professors and more talented students to be familiar with the most important commentaries on Aristotle written by Jesuit authors, especially Francisco Toledo (1532-1596), Pedro da Fonseca (1528-1599), and the Conimbricenses, a group of commentators from the Jesuit College in Coimbra.⁶⁴ The class on dialectics introduced students to forms of disputation and the most commonly used scholastic axioms. Students learned the difference between dialectic and demonstration, enthymemes, entailments, and definitions, as well as tips for arguments and the form of arguments, from Aristotle's *Topics*. They learned common fallacies from his *Sophistical Refutations*. The first two months of the logic sequence began with a digest of the whole, with passages often taken from Fonseca or Toledo, followed by a review of arguments and fallacies. The introduction focused on the status of logic as a science, its subject matter, and the general characteristics of universals. During their second year, Jesuits also learned a short history of philosophy, usually based on the outline found in Benet Perera (1536-1600), that

⁶² Tolomei 1698. For historiographical reflections and a review of literature on the alleged opposition between Aristotelianism and modern science, see Sgarbi 2017. On the development of courses in Physics at Roman College, see Baldini 1992: 3-68 and Baldini 2000: 239-79. On Tolomei's role at the Roman College, see Hellyer 2005: 190-95, 219-222.

⁶³ *Catalogus brevis anno 1705*, 6 (ARSI Rom 97, fol. 4v). On Baldigiani's role in the continued controversies over Galileo, see Finocchiaro 2005: 86-104.

⁶⁴ Toledo 1561; Toledo 1572; Toledo 1573; Toledo 1574; Toledo 1575; Fonseca 1564; Fonseca 1577; Fonseca 1589; Fonseca 1591; Fonseca 1604; Conimbricenses 1591; Conimbricenses 1593a; Conimbricenses 1593b; Conimbricenses 1593c; Conimbricenses 1593d; Conimbricenses 1597; Conimbricenses 1598; Conimbricenses 1606.

began with philosophy among the Egyptians, Indians, Hebrews, Thracians, Persians, Libyans, Scythians, Syrians, and the ancient Iberians and Gauls.⁶⁵ The class based on Aristotle's *On Generation and Corruption* emphasized its tenth book, where the Stagyrte treats bundles, mixtures, and aggregates. Not surprisingly, the Jesuits' class on Aristotle's *Metaphysics* stressed books *Zeta* and *Lambda*, which treat the many senses of *ousia* and the prime mover, respectively.

Something of the importance which the Jesuits attached to Aristotle can be seen in the fact that Jesuits taught the philosophy *triennium* on a rotating basis to ensure that everyone at the college could follow, mount, and refute arguments. Several of Desideri's friends and colleagues taught the philosophy *triennium* right along with the greatest Jesuit philosophers like Toledo and Suárez.⁶⁶ Few Jesuits were dispensed from studying Aristotle for the full three years. In fact, Jesuits usually had to complete the full philosophy course before they were allowed to teach grammar or the humanities.

The manuscript evidence of Desideri's training in philosophy is incomplete, but highly suggestive. Desideri took the philosophy *triennium* under Tommaso Silotti (fl. 1700–1730).⁶⁷ His teacher's works on logic were never printed, but several copies are extant, including the lecture notes for Desideri's class in 1703–1704.⁶⁸ If the lectures for Silotti's courses on natural philosophy, psychology, and metaphysics do not survive, we do have several contemporary examples from Desideri's professors and colleagues.⁶⁹ Starting with the works of Aristotle and the standard Jesuit commentaries—Fonseca, Toledo, Perera, and so forth—one may turn to these lectures to pinpoint the philosophical disputations in vogue when Desideri was a student. It goes without saying that these materials show special promise for anyone who would like to understand the arguments found in Desideri's Tibetan

⁶⁵ See, for example, Perera 1576: 112–64, at 116.

⁶⁶ Conti taught the triennium between 1685 and 1688, Turano taught it between 1711 and 1714, and Piccolomini taught it between 1717 to 1720, when Ippolito Desideri was in Tibet. Guarini taught physics in 1707–1708 and metaphysics in 1708–1709. Presumably he was asked to take over the course from Giovanni Amati, who taught logic in 1706–1707, but we do not know why Guarini replaced Amati.

⁶⁷ Luca 1987: 36 mistakenly identifies Desideri's professor as Giacomo Merlini. Compare, however, the list of professors to students at *Catalogus brevis anno 1704*, 6, 10 (ARSI Rom 96, fols. 189v, 191v), *Catalogus brevis anno 1705*, 6, 10 (ARSI Rom 97, fols. 4v, 6v), and *Catalogus brevis anno 1706*, 5, 9 (ARSI Rom 97, fols. 54r, 56r).

⁶⁸ Silotti 1703–1704a; Silotti 1703–1704b, Silotti 1703–1704c; Silotti 1703–1704d. In this last manuscript, there is an inserted table at 79r entitled *Coniugationes, et Exempla modorum omnium, quos Aristoteles in qualibet Figura coniugavit ad discernendos ab inutilibus utiles*.

⁶⁹ Panici 1700–1701a; Panici 1700–1701b; Briccialdi 1704–1705; Briccialdi 1705–1706; Guarani 1706.

writings and the Jesuit's remarks about Tibetan scholasticism. For example, a standard feature of Jesuit classes on logic was the distinction between *logica naturalis* and *logica artificialis*, the Aristotelian analogues to *svārthānumāna* and *parārthānumāna*, respectively.

The philosophy *triennium* is also the source for Desideri's understanding of Tibetan virtue. Desideri's professor of ethics was Giovanni Lorenzo Lucchesini (1663–1738), a fervent enemy of Jansenism, a Catholic sect that had come under suspicion in Rome.⁷⁰ A defining feature of Jansenism was that it denied that non-Christians could be virtuous. Desideri's more radical suggestion that professed atheists might be virtuous is in all likelihood an expansion—even a critique—of his own professor's teaching on the possibility of non-Christian virtue. Be that as it may, Desideri's first Tibetan work, the *Tho rangs*, adopts Lucchesini's method of identifying the signs by which to distinguish true religion from the false religion of pagans, Muslims, and heretics.⁷¹

5. Teaching Assignments, 1706–1710

After completing his philosophy triennium, every Jesuit taught grammar and the humanities in a Jesuit school for three to five years.⁷² Desideri was sent to teach humanities at the Jesuit College in Orvieto for the academic years 1706–1707 and 1707–1708.⁷³ The college at Orvieto was a small affair with two teachers of humanities, one teacher of philosophy, and one teacher of moral theology. Desideri supervised the younger students during his first year but supervised the philosophy students his second year.⁷⁴ In the next academic year, we find Desideri teaching humanities at the Jesuit College in Arezzo.⁷⁵ Desideri returned to the Roman College for the academic year 1709–1710, where

⁷⁰ *Catalogus brevis anno 1705*, 5 (ARSI Rom 97, fol. 54r). The works that are important for Desideri's conception of his mission are Lucchesini 1687; Lucchesini 1705; Lucchesini 1711b.

⁷¹ Lucchesini 1687: 119–20, 551–87, 630–43.

⁷² O'Malley 1993: 200–01.

⁷³ *Catalogus brevis anno 1707*, 71 (ARSI Rom 97, fol. 134v); *Catalogus brevis anno 1708*, 70 (ARSI Rom 97, fol. 184r).

⁷⁴ Desideri is thus listed as the “Pref[ectus] Congr[egationis] Discip[ulos]” and Pref[ectus] Congr[egationis] Scholasticorum,” respectively. Luca 1987: 36, remarks that Desideri “svolgendo anche compiti di assistenza disciplinare.” This might give the impression that Desideri served as the classroom disciplinarian (*corrector*). As *praefectus*, Desideri would have been expected to ensure that the courtyard remained conducive to study, but the *corrector* was usually another student or someone hired for the task.

⁷⁵ *Catalogus brevis anno 1709*, 33 (ARSI Rom 97, fol. 214v). Luca 1987: 36, mistakenly identifies Desideri's second college teaching assignment as Ancona.

he joined the faculty of the Lower School to teach humanities.⁷⁶

6. Theological Formation, 1710–1712

Desideri began his first year of theology in 1710.⁷⁷ Although members of other religious orders took the Society's theology classes, especially during the first year when they were offered at the Roman Seminary, students were winnowed quickly, especially in Desideri's day, when other religious orders had established their own colleges and universities in Rome. The theology curriculum was also changing. When Tolomei became rector of the Roman College in 1698, he encouraged professors to welcome the latest research in Biblical exegesis and ecclesiastic history.⁷⁸ He reinstated the chair in controversial theology and created a special chair in positive theology that would later be held by Desideri's friend Francesco Piccolomini. The theology course normally consisted of four years of classes based on Thomas Aquinas's *Summa theologiae* with supplementary classes on Scripture and moral theology. In the normal four-year course of study, the first professor of theology taught the sections of the *Summa theologiae* on God and theology (I, qq. 1-43), action (I-II, qq. 1-21), grace and the virtues in general (I-II, qq. 55-114), and the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love (II-II, qq. 1-46), while the second professor covered the virtues of justice and religion (II-II, qq. 61-122), Christology and sacraments in general (III, qq. 1-65), baptism and the Eucharist (III, qq. 68-83), and penance and marriage (III, qq. 84-90), with supplementary material.

Professors were encouraged to take time to explain the distinctions necessary to understand Aquinas's more challenging theses but hasten through easier material. The discussion of Aquinas's questions was also streamlined so that little of its Aristotelian foundation was repeated from the philosophy sequence. Much of Aquinas's account of creation, for example, was treated in the classes on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, just as the virtues of fortitude, temperance, and prudence were taught in the Ethics class. The theology sequence required students to have copies of the Bible, the *Summa theologiae*, and the acts of the Council of Trent. Theology students were also expected to master various ecclesiastical matters necessary for their priesthood; to this end, an additional hour of study was set aside each day to read important points

⁷⁶ *Catalogus brevis anno 1710*, 6 (ARSI Rom 97, fol. 249v).

⁷⁷ *Catalogus brevis anno 1711*, 9 (ARSI Rom 98, fol. 6r). Desideri also served as the "master of the sleeping quarters" (*praefectus cubiculorum*) in the dormitory of the Society's Roman Seminary, a boarding school for boys from noble families ran by the Society.

⁷⁸ Villoslada 1954: 236-37.

of controversial theology and the important rules related to ecclesiastical discipline. In doing so, the students were enjoined to take detailed notes, a practice Desideri maintained as a missionary in Tibet.

Here, too, the method was highly scholastic. Jesuits studied Aquinas through the Society's most important commentators, with further guidance from the sub-commentaries and disputations of their own professors. The *Ratio studiorum*, the Jesuits' official plan of studies, acknowledged that there might be topics that Aquinas only touched upon, or that he did not touch upon at all, or that his teaching might even be ambiguous. If the Society allowed theologians some latitude in their interpretation of Aquinas, it made haste slowly. Nothing was to be taught that contradicted the consensus of the church fathers or the teachings shared by the major schools of scholastic theology. Nor was anyone to introduce new questions in theology without consulting the Master of Studies. Speculation was encouraged but only within the confines of a well-established set of theological positions or "conclusions."

Desideri only took two years of theology. It was not uncommon for Jesuits who had shown talents for preaching or administration to be dispensed from the normal four-year course so that the Society might be able to make use of their services to greater effect. We may gather from this that he was probably not among the most talented theologians in his cohort; had he been, he would never have been chosen for the missions. Although now largely forgotten, the primary chair in theology for much of Desideri's time at the college was Juan de Ulloa (1639–1723), the author of one of the last major courses in both philosophy and theology in the Society, and one of the more creative scholastic theologians of the eighteenth century.⁷⁹ Apart from Ulloa, who taught Desideri's class on Biblical hermeneutics, none of his theology professors was especially distinguished. His professors of scholastic theology were Giovanni Giacomo Panici (1657–1716) and José Mateo Leris (1661–1733), and his professor of controversial theology was Domenico Antonio Briccialdi (1664–1733).⁸⁰

Because there were two professors of scholastic theology at the Roman College, we may gather that during the academic year 1710–1711, Desideri took the class on God and the nature of theology and the class on Christology and general sacramental theology. In 1711–1712, he would have thus taken the class on virtue, law, and grace and the class on special topics in sacramental theology, that is, baptism, Eucharist,

⁷⁹ Ulloa did not teach the philosophy triennium at the Collegio Romano, but he wrote textbooks on major and minor dialectics, natural philosophy, and psychology. See Ulloa 1771a; Ulloa 1711b; Ulloa 1712a; Ulloa 1712b; Ulloa 1713; and Ulloa 1715.

⁸⁰ *Catalogus brevis anno 1711*, 5 (ARSI Rom 98, fol. 4r); *Catalogus brevis anno 1712*, 5 (ARSI Rom 98, fol. 50r).

penance, and marriage. Desideri would not have taken classes on Thomistic theories of action, the theological virtues, or the virtues of justice and religion, but he would have been required to know these topics nonetheless. He would have learned much from watching the advanced theologians debate these subjects in public disputations, but he would have also reviewed the material and been examined privately.

Ulloa published his textbook on Biblical hermeneutics, and Briccialdi's lectures on controversial theology are preserved in the archives, so we have a reasonably good record of Desideri's entire course of theology.⁸¹ We do not have Panici's lectures on God and the nature of theology or Leris's lectures on Christology and the sacraments, but we do have Panici's class on grace from 1710–1711 and Leris's class on penance from 1711–1712, so we know that Panici occupied the first chair of theology and Leris occupied the second.⁸² We also have Panici's classes on law and justice, on the Incarnation, on the sacraments, on the Eucharist, and on the theological virtues.⁸³ Since professors of theology often recycled the notes of their predecessors before developing their own disputations, we may presume that Panici modeled his first classes on God and theology on Ulloa's and that Leris modeled his classes on Christology and the sacraments on Panici's. We may presume that these earlier classes give us a relatively good approximation of Desideri's later ones, even if the latter were not directly modelled on the former. As with the manuscript evidence on Desideri's philosophical training, these lectures focus almost exclusively on disputations, sometimes monomaniacally. Panici's class on grace, for example, was devoted entirely to disputations that arose from a single question, *Summa theologiae* Ia-IIae, question 109, so that students were fully prepared to distinguish the Jesuit understanding of the relationship of grace and free will from the respective positions of Dominicans and Jansenists.

The abundant material we have about Desideri's theological training is especially helpful for understanding the basic terms he uses to describe Tibetan religion in the third book of the *Notizie istoriche*—faith, grace, meditation, contemplation, love, and of course the word

⁸¹ Ulloa 1717; Briccialdi 1711–1712.

⁸² Panici 1710–1711a; Leris 1711–1712. Panici 1706–1708a and Panici 1706–1708b, Panici's classes on the Incarnation and the sacraments show that he also taught the second chair sequence. I have provisionally dated these to 1706–1708, his first years teaching theology. Panici 1709–1710, his class on divine grace for that academic year, is found in the archives with Ulloa 1709–1710, so we see that Panici had taken over the first chair that year. Ulloa 1709–1710 also anticipates the fourth volume of Ulloa 1719a, which suggests that Ulloa was polishing the material he would later publish in the classroom—a fairly typical procedure among Jesuits.

⁸³ Panici 1710–1711b; Panici 1710–1711c. Compare Panici 1711–1712.

“religion” itself. This cannot be stressed enough. Desideri’s descriptions of Tibetan religion and culture and his speculations about the possible salvation of Buddhists often turn on the precise meaning of a technical scholastic term. In several cases, the meanings attached to these terms had changed considerably since their use by thirteenth- and early fourteenth-century masters like Thomas Aquinas and John Duns Scotus, having been subjected to four centuries of refinement, but also authoritative definition or clarification by church council, papal decree, or the Society of Jesus itself. One cannot neglect this later commentarial tradition, its textbooks, or its conclusions when studying Desideri’s writings, much in the same way that one could not neglect the education and training of an early eighteenth-century interpreter of Tsong kha pa.

7. Disputation in the Society of Jesus

It might surprise some Tibetanists to know that Jesuits devoted significant energies to scholastic disputation. The *Ratio studiorum* says:

From the very beginning of logic, the young are to be educated so that nothing should shame them when disputing more than to deviate from rational procedures of argumentation. The teacher should insist upon nothing more severely than that the appropriate laws of disputing be rightly, even rigidly, followed. Thus, he who responds should repeat the whole argument before responding to its individual propositions; then he should review the propositions, saying, “I deny, or I concede the major, the minor, or the consequence.” Occasionally, he should distinguish [the major or the minor]. Only rarely, however, should he impose clarifications or arguments, especially on the reluctant.⁸⁴

The Jesuits’ art of disputation was built on Aristotle’s *Topics* and buttressed by medieval logical exercises like *sophismata*, *obligationes*, and *insolubilia*. In essence, one student, the “opponent” (*opponens*), attacked a thesis or position defended by another, the “respondent” (*respondens*), with both parties obligated to express themselves according to a pre-defined set of rules and categories. Either could press his advantage by “distinguishing” the major or the minor. Rather than accepting any

⁸⁴ Lukács 1965-86, 5: 400: “Sic ab ipso Logicae initio iuvenes instituantur, nihil ut eos magis pudeat in disputando, quam a formae ratione deflexisse; nihil ab illis severius exigit praeceptor, quam disputandi leges ac statas vices. Itaque qui respondet, repetat primum totam argumentationem, nihil ad singulas propositiones respondeo; tum iterum propositiones, addatque; *nego vel concedo maiorem, minorem, consequentiam*; interdum etiam distinguat; raro autem vel declarationes vel rationes, praesertim invitis, obtrudat.”

given enthymeme, the respondent might, in other words, concede the opponent's point in one sense while denying it in another, thereby forcing his opponent to accept his own definition of the term or terms in question.

Professors chose one or two students to debate the class material every day except Saturday, when classes held formal disputations between eight or nine students. On Sundays, a Jesuit in a philosophy class might be asked to defend theses against two or more opponents for one hour; on holidays, a theology student and two philosophy students defended theses for two hours, again against multiple opponents.⁸⁵ Professors might also require the opponent take up a different line of attack, or that respondent defend a contrary position, or that the two maintain the same debate but switch roles—anything that led to more fiery (and thus more frequented) disputations. Professors urged attackers to press forward and roused defenders as objections mounted. If a disputant argued with insufficient precision and passion, the professor himself might enter the debate and argue with such force that “the controversy be brought to a boil” (*quo magis concertatio ferveret*).⁸⁶ Students, for their part, were to bring up nothing useless, obsolete, absurd, or manifestly false, nor were they to multiply arguments or objections frivolously. Students could, however, hold any position that was freely debated among the various schools of Catholic theology, as long as they took care to be “gentle and friendly” (*modeste ac benevole*) when they defended their positions.⁸⁷ (Such modesty was especially desired when students rebutted their professors.) The Society also tried to reconcile opposing positions when at all possible. Gerónimo Nadal (1507–1580) had hoped the theologians of the Society would avoid following into the existing factions of Thomists, Scotists, and nominalists, and in many respects they succeeded.

Formal disputations held outside of individual classes were led by the Master of Studies, who signaled for the disputants to begin and to cease, and for professors to enter the debates. With precise periods of forty-five minutes or an hour—the Master of Studies held the clock—the baroque disputation was, like modern football or basketball, a timed sport.⁸⁸ Professors took their parts two by two, so that the first could answer the second's questions in the traditional scholastic

⁸⁵ Leris's disputations also show us that students in the same cohort debated material they took in different classes. For four of the seven disputations in Leris's class, two of the students were asked to defend theses from Briccialdi's class on controversial theology. Of course, Briccialdi also led his own disputations. See Briccialdi 1716.

⁸⁶ Lukács, 1965–1986, 5: 382.

⁸⁷ Lukács, 1965–1986, 2: 499, 775.

⁸⁸ David Kittelstrom has suggested that the more appropriate comparison might be to speed chess (personal communication October 3, 2025).

manner. The Master was not to provide the solution to disputed questions, but he could stop the disputation to ask a question or on rare occasion take over for one of the disputants, even when they were fellow professors. The Master of Studies could also invite anyone present to join the disputation, including other professors, students, or members of other religious orders if they were visiting. With the permission of the Master of Studies, anyone could also take up the argument. Above all, the Master of Studies was to prevent the disputants from arguing back and forth such that the problem remained less understood than it was before the disputation began.

Monthly disputations were held in the great hall. Students who were to defend theses were selected a week in advance, and the theses were approved by the Master of Studies and posted so that everyone could review the subjects to be debated. Students who defended theses were given fifteen minutes to recall the main points of their arguments before the disputation began. In the monthly disputations, professors presented theses and the students responded. Were the entire philosophy and theology faculty present, three students might debate their professors in the morning, and three might debate their professors after noon. In such debates, the first student would usually respond to the professor's questioning for an hour, with the other students responding to other professors for about forty-five minutes. Formal disputations before lunch were arranged between the different classes: the theologians disputed the metaphysicians, the metaphysicians debated the natural philosophers, and the natural philosophers debated the logicians, with the professor of metaphysics summarizing the debate. After lunch, metaphysicians debated among themselves, as did natural philosophers and logicians, and the natural philosopher confirmed one or two of the disputed questions. The professors of philosophy also organized three or four "solemn disputations" over the course of an academic year, usually on feast days when classes were cancelled. Solemn disputations were festive occasions in which the full ceremonial apparatus of a baroque Jesuit education was called upon to generate enthusiasm for philosophical studies. Such disputations, which might involve the scholastics of other religious orders such as the Dominicans and Franciscans, were highly competitive. When the Jesuits were invited to others' disputations, they made sure only to send their best debaters.

The most important disputations were the highly ritualized "acts" (*acta*) that began and ended each semester. Acts, which were classified as "special" or "general," were public disputations attended by the

Rector, the Master of Studies, and all of the professors.⁸⁹ Special acts usually involved at least one professor and about twenty students taking part in the formal disputation, with the whole event lasting about two and a half hours. Every year the Roman College devoted one special act to the examination of students who had completed the first year of logic. Other special acts were philosophical or theological as the Master of Studies saw fit. General acts, which concluded the philosophy triennium and the theology sequence, lasted four or five hours and were expanded accordingly. In general acts, Jesuits were examined by five faculty members, including the Master of Studies and the student's teacher. The series of daily, weekly, monthly, special acts and solemn disputations came to its climax in the general theological act that ended the academic year. This final act was an all-day affair to which local ecclesiastical and secular dignitaries were invited. The general theological acts included each of the acting professors, the advanced theology students who had already completed the four-year course, and the fourth-year students who would not be continuing with the two-year review.⁹⁰ The *Ratio studiorum* limited the number of theses defended during a single general act to fifty, so the early modern practice was not unlike oral examinations at the Gregorian University today, with students given exactly twelve minutes to answer the questions of their professors in oral exams.

Fewer students participated in the general acts over the seventeenth century, even as they became increasingly extravagant. It was not unusual for half a dozen cardinals to be present at the defense of a particularly well-connected student, and in exceptional instances the entire college of cardinals might turn out, along with assorted prelates, princes, and noblemen.⁹¹ In fact, Desideri probably attended one of the most extravagant acts of the early eighteenth century on August 18, 1703: the defense of the (later) Cardinal and collector Annibale Albani (1682–1751), the nephew of Pope Clement XI (1649–1721).⁹² Following the custom of medieval universities, students who defended their theses paid for the event; students of means designed thesis prints with complex emblems accompanied by poems composed for the occasion by the college's professors and set to music to be performed by its

⁸⁹ For a list and description of various acts at the college, see Villoslada 1954: 263–96. Note especially the complicated festivities in celebration of Pope Clement XI on November 23, 1703 (Villoslada 1954: 290). For another list of the *assertiones theologicae* debated at the Roman College, see Sommervogel 1890–1960, 7: 43–66 [30–41].

⁹⁰ Although Jesuits rarely offered theology degrees, students who had successfully defended their theses during the *acta* could be granted doctorates with the permission of the general. Grendler 2017: 437.

⁹¹ Rice 2004: vii.

⁹² For a description, see Villoslada 1954: 271. For the program, see Crescimbeni 1703.

musicians, and broadsheets with the theses to be defended were distributed to attendees.⁹³ The music for defenses at the beginning of the seventeenth century was usually provided by eight singers in two choirs and four instrumentalists. Albani's defense was celebrated with thirty-two singers in eight choirs and an orchestra of sixty instruments. An academic defense began with an instrumental fanfare. After the audience was seated—with cardinals and associated dignitaries in comfortable armchairs in front, and student and lesser guests on wooden benches behind—an interlude was sung as students distributed the broadsides and librettos. After the first interlude, the student ascended the pulpit to deliver an oration dedicated to his patron, a second choral interlude followed, and the formal disputation began. A third choral interlude followed the disputation before the student delivered a second oration thanking his dedicatee and the audience. Festivities concluded with a jubilant choral finale.

We have records of formal disputations conducted by three of Desideri's theology professors. On December 15, 1710, February 8, 1711, and April 29, 1711, Panici's first theology class debated ten conclusions on divine grace and two conclusions on the nature of true religion with the class on controversial theology. On May 31, 1711, the class held ten debates on predestination; on July 5, 1711, they held ten debates on the technical topic of the sufficient grace given to all human beings—a special point of contention between Jesuits, Dominicans, and Jansenists.⁹⁴ Between November 26, 1711, and May 16, 1712, Leris's second theology class held seven formal disputations on various topics in the theology of penance, not counting the theses defended in the small act celebrated on June 27, 1712.⁹⁵ Since there were only eleven Jesuits in the second theology class and each of these seven formal disputations involved nine or ten students, we may presume that Desideri participated in these debates. There is, in fact, evidence that Desideri was quite good at disputation. In 1711–1712, Desideri served as the Prefect of the Academy of Logic under the supervision of Domenico Maria

⁹³ These "thesis prints" are an art form in themselves. For several beautiful examples, see Rice 2007. As Rice has demonstrated, thesis prints for special acts, which were restricted to students who had completed the first year of logic, were more usually emblematic, whereas the thesis prints for general acts in which students who had completed the full philosophy and/or theology courses, focused on the student's dedicatee and patron. As a result, the thesis prints of logic students often depict the Roman College or Roman Seminary. Were an emblem's subject not strictly allegorical, it was often taken from ancient history; as a result, emblems are as a rule saturated with pagan personages and imagery.

⁹⁴ Panici 1710–1711a: 330–37. As we have seen, Desideri took Panici's class on grace the following year, but we may presume the disputations to have been quite similar.

⁹⁵ Leris 1711–1712: 243r–54r.

Turano, the professor who taught logic that year.⁹⁶ “Academies” were groups of chosen students who devoted an extra hour every day to review their lessons and practice formal disputations under the direction of an older Jesuit. In his capacity as Prefect, Desideri would have worked with Turano and the Master of Studies to coordinate the formal disputations held by the first-year philosophy students as they worked their way through Aristotle’s *Topics*, *Sophistical Refutations*, *Categories*, and *Prior Analytics*.⁹⁷ Given the communal nature of the Society’s acts, we may presume that Turano or Conti invited Desideri to take frequent turns in the disputations. We do not know if Desideri thought of these disputations when he lived in Tibet. He almost certainly had no inkling of the scholastic culture he would find in the Land of the Snows as he wrote to Francesco Piccolomini from Agra.

Desideri made the Spiritual Exercises in September 1711 at the Holy House of Loreto, where—at least on his later telling—he resolved to offer himself to the Jesuit General for the overseas missions.⁹⁸ In all likelihood, Cotti confirmed Desideri’s vocation, and Merlini chose him to become a missionary.⁹⁹ He was ordained as a priest on April 28, 1712, exactly ten years after he matriculated at the Roman College, and on September 12, 1712, he left Rome to embark on the voyage that would eventually bring him to Lhasa. We may presume that Conti, Guarini, Turano, and Crivelli added to the chorus of blessings as Desideri departed. The decision appears to have been made swiftly: Desideri is listed in the Catalogue of the Roman Province for 1712–1713, but the only thing next to his name is a long dash “—”.¹⁰⁰ It is tempting to see this as a cipher, either for the man himself or the emptiness he would encounter in Tsong kha pa’s *Lam rim chen mo*, but we should resist reading too much into this little mark, to say nothing of treating as an emblem of some larger mystery. After all, the scholar of Desideri has several concrete sources of his education and spiritual formation, and these would be far better suited for understanding his Tibetan and Italian writings.

⁹⁶ *Catalogus brevis anno 1711*, 28 (ARSI Rom 98, fol. 14v).

⁹⁷ *Catalogus brevis anno 1712*, 5 (ARSI Rom 98, fol. 50r).

⁹⁸ MITN 5: 122.

⁹⁹ *Catalogus brevis anno 1712*, 47 (ARSI Rom 98, fol. 25r).

¹⁰⁰ *Catalogus brevis anno 1713*, 91 (ARSI Rom 98, fol. 143v).

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