



THE VENETIAN INQUISITION: ORIGIN, ORGANISATION AND ACTIVITY IN THE EASTERN ADRIATIC

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This essay deals with the topic of the Venetian Inquisition, namely the activity of the Holy Office (Santo Uffizio). At the beginning, the origin and development of the Inquisition will be clarified, as well as its methods of action and process management. The complexity of the relations between the Republic of Venice and the Holy See will be pointed out, which are essential for understanding the independence of the activities of the Inquisition itself. Before the very conclusion, several processes that were conducted against Croats will be analysed, since these files are partly elaborated and available in the Croatian language.

Keywords: *inquisition, Holy Office (Santo Uffizio), Republic of Venice, investigation, process, heresy*

Introduction

The Venetian Inquisition was a church institution in charge of enforcing Catholic orthodoxy in the territory of the Republic of Venice. This also means that it was active in the Croatian historical area, parts of which were under the rule of the *Serenissima* in the early modern age. Lovorka Čoralić dealt the most with this topic, so in this essay we mainly rely on her works and on the works of several foreign authors. We will try to give a brief overview of the activities of the Venetian Inquisition on the eastern Adriatic coast. At the beginning, we describe how and why the Venetian Inquisition was created? Then, to what extent is the relationship of the Holy See and the Catholic Church with the Venetian Inquisition important for its operation? We believe that the context of these relationships is important for understanding the independence of the Inquisition itself. To what degree did the *Serenissima* truly control the actions of such an entity? In the text, we present several examples that confirm that the Venetian Inquisition cannot be stereotypically attributed to brutality, physical violence, cor-



poral punishment, savagery, burning at stakes, or persecution, which is often what is meant in wider circles when the word “Inquisition” is mentioned.

The Venetian Inquisition - origin, development and members

The beginnings of the Venetian Inquisition go back to the 13th century. When one thinks of the institution that conducted the Inquisition, one speaks of the Holy Office (*Santo Uffizio*). The historian of the Venetian Holy Office Fr. Paolo Sarpi, who lived in the second half of the 16th and in the first quarter of the 17th century and belonged to the Servite order, points out that the original institution, which was meant to prevent creation and dissemination of heresies and generally to exercise control over religious life, was made up of three nobles. In his opinion, the institution was founded by the Venetian government, not the Holy See. In 1289, Pope Nicholas IV gave an approval to the Venetian government that the inquisitors in its territory should be the Franciscans. Sarpi considers that document to be the fundamental evidence of the independent functioning of the Venetian Holy Office.¹ However, the name “Holy Office” is not something that we can particularly associate with the Republic of Venice. The Holy Office was also the name for the Roman Inquisition, and it was founded in 1524.² That Office in Rome still operates today, but with a different method of operation and it is called the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith.

The old institution was given new powers and features in two occasions. By the Pope Paul III through the bull *Licet ab initio* in 1542, and by the Doge of Venice Francesco Donà with the six Venetian councilors, through a decree in 1547. Three Venetian patricians were elected to the newly created Office, the which were named *Tre Savi sopra eresia* (Three Sages over Heresy). The first three nobles were Nicolò Tiepolo, Francesco Contarini and Antonio Venier. *Tre Savi sopra eresia* were mostly more respectable and older patricians who represented the interests of the Republic of Venice and often came into conflict with papal representatives.³ The magistracy established by the Re-

1 Čoralić, Lovorka. *Croats in the processes of the Venetian Inquisition*. University of Zagreb - Institute of Croatian History, Zagreb, 2001, p. 11

2 Cozzi, Gaetano, Michael Knabton and Giovanni Scarabello. *History of Venice: Volume II*. Izdanja Antibarbarus d.o.o., Zagreb, 2007, p. 59

3 Čoralić, *Croats in the processes of the Venetian Inquisition*, p. 11



public in 1537 is to be considered the predecessor of the newly created Holy Office. The name of the institution in charge of prosecuting blasphemy was *Esecutori contro la bestemmia*.⁴ The Venetian Council of Ten also made a great contribution to the fight against heresy. It was them who asked the Office to compile a list of undesirable books. The list was indeed compiled, but ultimately it was withdrawn due to the dissatisfaction of printers, booksellers and nobles. In the end, the Holy See intervened and issued the first Index of Prohibited Books in 1554-1555.⁵

In addition to three secular members, the Holy Office also had three representatives of the Catholic Church. The papal authority was represented by a nuncio. It was with him that the representatives of the Venetian authorities came into conflict most often. Papal legates ignored the opinion of government representatives and were known to interfere in secular matters. In the beginning, an inquisitor, who belonged to the Order of Conventual Franciscans, oversaw the inquisition procedures, which include the evaluation of the degree of heresy, the conduct of procedures, the censorship of books and manuscripts for printing, and since 1560 the inquisitor has been a member of the Dominican order. The inquisitor's deputy was called a vice-inquisitor or vicar, and in the inquisitor's absence, he had all the rights and powers. The Venetian government strove for the inquisitor to be from the Venetian area, believing that he was acquainted better with the conditions in the Republic. The diocesan authority was represented by the Venetian patriarch or his general vicar (deputy). It is important to mention that the patriarch was not directly selected by the pope, but was only confirmed at the proposal of the Venetian government.⁶

Violation, investigation and sanctions

The offenses that brought individuals and groups to the court of the Venetian Inquisition were deviation from the rules of the Catholic Church, denying and questioning dogmas and church authorities and their provisions, mocking what the Church considered to be sa-

4 Povoło, Claudio. "Liturgies of violence: social control and power relationships in the Republic of Venice between the 16th and 18th centuries" In *A companion to Venetian history, 1400-1797*, ed. Eric R. Dursteler, Lieden-Boston: Brill, 2013, pp. 521-522

5 Cozzi et al., *History of Venice: Volume II*, p. 60

6 Čoralíć, *Croats in the processes of the Venetian Inquisition*, p. 12



cred, and writing, reading, giving and publishing forbidden books. Accusations were made against those who did not go to mass, as well as against those who performed religious ceremonies illegally. Those who were said to practice magic, or summoning and worship of demons, were also subject to the court of the Inquisition.⁷

It was possible to report heretics anonymously, as the persons who reported were meant to be protected. After the report and the arrest, the process of questioning the accused by the members of the Office began. Family, friends and acquaintances of the accused were being heard and questioned. The accused were seen as a threat to the government, to the state and to the society, so the Office had the full support of the *Serenissima*. Many people ended up on the dock without even knowing that they had committed heresy, for example by participating in some forms of popular devotions that were not allowed. The heresies of the younger defendants were being treated in a milder way, by imposing preventive measures, because it was considered that they committed their heresies because they were understanding worldly ease and entertainment more liberally.⁸

The Venetian Inquisition was much milder than the Spanish Inquisition, for example. In the Venetian area, torture was used in rare cases, to be exact, in about 2-3% of the documented processes.⁹ The Holy Office rarely imposed death sentences, and the culprit would not be burned but drowned in the waters of the lagoon. The last death sentence was imposed in 1724.¹⁰ The culprit could be penalized by being sent to the galleys or by imprisonment, confiscation of property, expulsion from Venice or even from the territory of the entire Republic, by loss of honour, rights, privileges and the like. However, most often spiritual punishments were imposed, which entailed renunciation (*abiurazione*) from heresy, first of all. The offender would have to utter a formula to prove that he renounces heresy and that he returns to the fold of the Church without coercion. During the following period, he would have to attend mass, confess, give alms and pray regularly.¹¹ The example of Adam Del Fabro from 1603 testifies to the fact that taking an oath “on

7 Ibid., p. 13

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid., p. 14

10 Cristellon, Cecilia and Silvana Seidel Menchi. “Religious Life” In *A companion to Venetian history, 1400-1797*, ed. Eric R. Dursteler. Lieden-Boston: Brill, 2013, p. 418

11 Čoralčić, *Croats in the processes of the Venetian Inquisition*, p. 14



the altar” was one of the forms of obtaining liberation or absolution. Del Fabro killed a man and was banished from Carnia, but by taking an oath to obey the laws of the community he was exonerated and allowed to return.¹² Thus, by pronouncing the formula, one could be exonerated, even in cases that were not related to blasphemy, and in this case, from a serious crime. It is interesting to mention that from the beginning of the Venetian Inquisition until its abolition in 1794, 3592 people were investigated. The figure was derived from preserved documentation, it should be considered that not all documentation has been preserved and that several processes may have been conducted.¹³

The Venetians - from the Reformation through the Counter-Reformation to coexistence

The territory of the Republic of Venice was leading the reformation movement in Italy, but not for the big number of Protestants in that area, but because of the possibility of spreading the Protestant thought. Venice faced Protestantism precisely because of its geographical position and intensive cultural and trade exchange with Central Europe.¹⁴ The centres of Protestant thought in the area of the *Serenissima* in the 16th century were Padua and Venice. The University of Padua was visited by various lecturers from all over Italy, from France and from German states who brought new Christian teachings with them. The works of Erasmus of Rotterdam achieved great success in Padua. In 1524, the teachings of Martin Luther already came to Venice, and the preacher of his teachings, the Venetian Bartolomeo Fonzio, had to leave the city in 1531. He sent a booklet named *Unio dissidentium* from exile to one of his noble friends. Papal legate Gerolamo Andreo demanded that the booklet should be banned immediately, but the authorities, with their indifferent attitude, allowed the booklet to circulate in the city.¹⁵ Anabaptism as well experienced success in the *Serenissima* area.¹⁶ Anabaptist councils were held in Vicenza and

12 Povolo, “Liturgies of violence”, p.514

13 Cristellon and Menchi, “Religious Life”, p. 417

14 Ibid, 407.

15 Cozzi et al., *History of Venice: Volume II*, p.48

16 Anabaptism was founded by Conrad Grebel and developed in Zurich. Anabaptists promote second baptism, that is, they believe that children cannot be baptized because they do not have faith. *Croatian Encyclopaedia – Web edition*, s. v. “Anabaptisti” <https://www.enciklopedija.hr/natuknica.aspx?ID=2388> (accessed on 2/10/2022).



Venice. The epicentres of heresy and their diffusion were stopped by the Venetian Inquisition, and Protestantism lasted the longest in Istria, because of the activity of Baldo Lupetina and Matija Vlačić Ilirik. The Jesuit order, which founded colleges in the area of the *Serenissima*, played a major role in the overall Catholic renewal, including the Republic of Venice.¹⁷

It should not be forgotten that at the end of the 16th century, Venice had about one hundred and fifty thousand inhabitants and that it was home to people of different nationalities and religions. Protestants, Orthodox Greeks, and even Turks lived in the city. After several bans, the *Serenissima* allowed the arrival of Jews in 1589.¹⁸ In early modern Europe, Venice epitomised an open city where the postulates of coexistence and tolerance were respected.¹⁹ But not everyone liked that. Papal bull from 1596, written by Pope Clement VIII, specifically referred to Venice, since it required that no heretic may live in the territory of Italy.²⁰

Relations between the Republic of Venice and the Holy See

Serenissima did not know - nor did she want to know - the boundaries between the religious and political spheres. There was a certain symbiosis between spiritual and secular authorities. The doge was considered the leader in the Church and in the state (*princeps in ecclesia, princeps in republica*) and, according to that logic, he should obey only God, not the Pope.²¹

A special shock to the Republic of Venice was when Pope Julius II took away the right to appoint bishops in 1510. The practice was that the government appointed bishops for all dioceses in the territory of the Republic, and the pope only confirmed them. The Venetian government tried on several occasions to regain the right to elect bishops, and only Julius III showed understanding in 1552. He allowed Venice to propose four candidates for the position of the patriarch of Aquileia, and he chose one of the four. But that was not the only dispute between the Holy See and Venice. In 1600 Pope Clement VIII demanded that a noble-

17 Cozzi et al., *History of Venice: Volume II*, pp. 52, 57, 59

18 *Ibid.*, p. 103

19 Čoralić, *Croats in the processes of the Venetian Inquisition*, p.13

20 Cozzi et al., *History of Venice: Volume II*, p.104

21 Cristellon and Menchi, "Religious Life", p.398



man chosen for the service of the Venetian patriarch should be sent to Rome for them to check whether he was fit for that duty. The Venetians perceived this as something humiliating because, according to the old practice, they chose their own patriarch. Nevertheless, a compromise was reached, a newly elected patriarch went to Rome to pay his respects to the Pope, but there was to be no questioning of suitability. In the end, the Pope did ask a newly elected patriarch a few questions. Since the Catholic Church renewed its power in the 16th century, as well as the pope did, and the *Serenissima* did not have its former enthusiasm and power, popes, seeing the opportunity, forbade the Republic to collect land tax from the clergy. Later, however, it was agreed that the Republic must obtain papal permission to collect such taxes.²² The issues considering the activities of the Venetian Inquisition were also a subject of dispute between the *Serenissima* and the Holy See. The Holy Office was *de iure* subject to the Roman headquarters and all documentation of more complex cases had to get to Rome. However, the Venetian authorities did not want to allow the Office to be a body independent of the state that could acquire a high level of power and control over the population, which was the case in Spain, for example.²³

The Venetian government was unwavering before the papal attacks. They had a long tradition of defending state privileges in relation to the Church. This is especially noticeable in the defence of the right to elect the Venetian patriarch, but also in the activity of the already mentioned member of the Servite order Fr. Paolo Sarpi.²⁴ It was him who was appointed a special counsellor of the government in 1606 - a theologian-canonist - to defend the rights of Venice during the dispute with the Papal Curia at the beginning of the 17th century, known as the Interdict. The dispute arose because of two prelates who were arrested due to certain accusations of the Council of Ten. Pope Paul V's request to extradite them to the church authorities was refused.²⁵ Sarpi and his way of fighting against the papacy is a great example to understand what the *Serenissima* thought about the papacy. Sarpi resisted papal absolutism and the desire of the pope to exercise a certain level of control over secular authorities through the right of jurisdiction over the clergy.

22 Cozzi et al., *History of Venice: Volume II*, pp. 40-41, 105-106

23 Ćoralić, *Croats in the processes of the Venetian Inquisition*, pp. 12-14

24 Cristellon and Menchi, "Religious Life," p. 405

25 Cozzi et al., *History of Venice: Volume II*, pp. 115-117, 674



Analysis and commentary of several processes

Conversions to Islam, that is, the processes conducted against people who converted to Islam, were categorized by The Holy Office as *maometismo* (Mohammedanism) or *eresia in genere* (complete heresy). Croats who were prosecuted within this category of heresy mostly came from Croatian and Bosnian areas that were under the Ottoman rule at that time. We can say that they were not accused in the full sense of the word, but they turned to the Inquisition with the aim of returning to communion with the Catholic Church. During the process, they stated the reasons why they converted to Islam, but they also emphasized that they had never truly renounced Christianity or forgotten Christian prayers. Monks played a special role in persuading people to return to Catholicism after returning from captivity. Let's take the example of Ivan Jurkov Giugich from Bosnia, who was abducted by the Ottomans at the age of four and circumcised, and at the age of twelve, having escaped from captivity, he submitted himself to the court of the Inquisition. In this example, it is clear that the *eresia in genere* happened in childhood and that the person could not have been aware of his sin. There are other similar examples of Croats accused of converting to Islam, most of which were people who had been kidnapped, some women had even been forcibly married to Muslims and their names had been changed. The Holy Office pronounced spiritual punishments in such cases with the obligatory recitation of the formula of renunciation of heresy. We should also mention those who were subjects of the process because of their double heresy (*scisma greca e turca*). Those were, of course, Orthodox Christians who had converted to Islam and wanted to be Catholics. They explained their first heresy with their origin and upbringing, and the second with the fear of death, pressure from the Ottomans, etc. Neither did they represent a threat to the Inquisition, but spiritual punishments were imposed to them and the "accused" became Catholics.²⁶

Protestant heresies were treated more rigorously than conversions to Islam or Greek schisms because those who committed such heresy were often priests or monks and generally people with better education and superior social status. The fault of all the accused is that they denied the authority of the papacy, the existence of purgatory, indulgence, etc. And in this category of heresy, we meet those who rejected

26 Čoralčić, *Croats in the processes of the Venetian Inquisition*, pp. 29-31, 35



Catholicism at an earlier age out of understandable reasons and now seek to return to communion with the Roman Church. Such is the case of the sailor from Korčula, Nalošić, who had become Anglican as a child and was given a spiritual punishment. In the cases of Protestantism, hearings were longer than those mentioned previously, which did not last more than a few days.²⁷ The topic of Protestant Croats is compulsorily associated with Marko Antun de Dominis and Matija Vlačić Ilirik, but since neither one of them were not punished by the Venetian Holy Office, they will not be dealt with in this essay. Another well-known trial is the one conducted against Baldo Lupetino from Istria, the guardian of the monastery of San Francesco della Vigna in Venice, who was accused of spreading heresy by the friars of Cres. Originally, in 1542, he was sentenced to twenty years in prison, and then to a brutal punishment - death by drowning.²⁸ Because of his convictions, Mihovil Basili from Korčula was expelled from Venice even after uttering the formula of renunciation and was also spiritually punished. However, a vast number of trials against priests and religious were ultimately dismissed for lack of evidence or spiritual punishments were imposed.²⁹

A printer named Trojan, known as Calepin, was also under investigation from 1568 to 1573, but the investigation was not completed. Trojan was accused of printing and selling prohibited books. He owned works by Pietro Aretino, Giovanni Boccaccio, and other works by Italian and Arab alchemists. The process was conducted without Trojan's presence. It is not possible to determine the last name of the defendant from the files, but there is a possibility that it was Trojan Gundulić who was active in Belgrade in the 16th century and was the owner of the printing office where *Četverojevandjelje* (the Four Gospels) was printed in Cyrillic script, which was the first book published in Belgrade. Information that Trojan Gundulić was already dead in 1554 or 1555 can be found in Dubrovnik archives, but no source directly suggests this, so there are assumptions that Gundulić moved to Venice. The records of the Venetian Holy Office claim that Trojan lived in Venice for a decade before the start of the process. As the process began, Trojan disappeared from Venice. Neighbours, booksellers, peo-

27 Ibid., pp. 61-62

28 Vrandečić, Josip and Miroslav Bertoša. *Dalmatia, Dubrovnik and Istria in the early modern age*. Leykam international, Zagreb, 2007, p. 86

29 Čoralčić, *Croats in the processes of the Venetian Inquisition*, p. 67



ple whom he left books for safekeeping, testified about Trojan, with one witness stating that Trojan was a person of bad character, while other stating the complete opposite. The Holy Office ordered for the investigation to continue, and it is not known how the process ended.³⁰

Participation of people who belonged to the same social groups as the accused person did, was common in cases related to magic and folk superstition (*magia, negromanzia, seduzione, sortilegio*). The Inquisition imposed spiritual punishments in these cases as well, but also suspended the processes after being convinced of the mental state of the accused. Thus, Helena Krušić, who was allegedly possessed and communicated with spirits, was acquitted because the Office was convinced of her mental state and the pointlessness of the case. A certain Andriana was accused because, after losing her ring, she looked at the water in a container and found out where it was. Since the whole neighbourhood was involved in the case, and there was no concrete evidence, the case was dismissed.³¹

Several priests were accused of behaviour inappropriate to their calling, namely violence, relationships with parishioners, insufficient concern for their religious lives and even paedophilia. There was such a case on the island of Krapanj in which, during confession, Fr. Narcisio from Šibenik had been kissing and persuading a fourteen-year-old to have sexual intercourse with him, as well as he did to her sisters - a fifteen-year-old and an eight-year-old. Fr. Narcisio escaped before he could have been caught. The bishop of Kotor, Pamfilije, reported his own priest Ivan Pasquali to the Inquisition because he enjoyed meat on fasting days, made drinks intended for sexual stimulation, had sexual relations with women who came to him for confession, etc. The punishment was not too severe. He was sentenced to one year in prison, was forbidden to celebrate Mass for two years, and was not allowed to confess forever. He had to recite psalms to atone for his sins.³²

30 "Printer Trojan from Dubrovnik in the process of the Venetian Inquisition (1568-1573)" In *Croatian-Italian literary relations, Book VI*, ed. Mate Zorić. Institute for Literary Sciences, Zagreb, 1997, pp. 116-122

31 Čoralić, *Croats in the processes of the Venetian Inquisition*, pp. 87, 89, 91

32 *Ibid.*, pp. 141, 144-145, 148-149



Conclusion

What can be singled out as a special feature of the Venetian Holy Office is the participation of patricians in its activities, but this does not cause surprise since the *Serenissima* wanted to have control over all aspects of life and defend the established social order. The prosecution of Baldo Lupetina could leave the impression that the Venetian Inquisition was an institution that created in people feelings of fear or discomfort just by being mentioned. However, this case should be perceived in the historical context of the fierce Counter-Reformation. For forty years after the execution of Baldo Lupetina, Venice was the target of criticism from the papacy, which protested because “heretics” also lived there. The Venetians were Catholics, but in order to achieve a higher goal, which was primarily the prosperity of the Republic, it was not a problem for Jews or Protestants to live on its territory as long as they were not a threat to order and contributed in any way to the splendour of the *Serenissima*.

The Venetian Inquisition was an instrument in the hands of the Venetian Republic. Although formally established and supervised by the Holy See, the Venetian patricians did not allow papal absolutism to spread through it and for it to gain greater power than the administrative bodies of the Republic itself had. Fierce disputes with the papacy, and especially the actions of Fr. Paolo Sarpi, testify about the attitude the oligarchic republic had towards the papacy.

The Holy Office rarely imposed severe punishments, and in addition to the role of prosecuting heretics, it also had the task of including “apostates” into the fold of the Catholic Church. It is important to point out that the prosecutions and punishments of people from more educated social classes, especially those including priests who had fallen into the Protestant heresy, was in most cases more rigorous than others.

The existence and the operations of the Inquisition are indispensable parts of the history of the Catholic Church, as well as of the countries the Inquisition affected. The Venetian Inquisition, which also had control over some areas of today’s Croatia, still cannot fully fit into the generally stereotyped and widespread opinion about the Inquisition as an institution that persecuted the innocent and imposed several death sentences on a daily basis.



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