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Today, the Jesuits have the last laugh

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At a popular level, the triumphant return of the first Latin American pope is clearly the dominant storyline surrounding Francis's July 22-28 visit to Brazil, in tandem with the church's World Youth Day festivities.

For the more historically minded, however, it's almost as striking that Francis is also the first Jesuit pope, who is returning this week to a country, and a city, that witnessed both one of the order's greatest triumphs and one of its greatest calamities.

The Jesuits were actually the first religious order to conduct missionary work in Brazil, arriving ahead of the Franciscans and Benedictines in the middle of the 16th century. The Jesuits were brought along by the Portuguese colonizers, and initially enjoyed the strong support of the imperial authorities.

The Jesuits quickly built an impressive network of schools and missions, including the famed "Jesuit reductions," where natives gathered into communities that worked to support themselves and shared their earnings equally.

Anyone who's seen the 1986 film "The Mission" knows the basic outlines of the story, and also its unhappy ending -- the Jesuits were eventually expelled, their missions largely destroyed, and their lands and properties transferred to the crown.

(The movie was actually set in Paraguay, in territory that was transferred to Portuguese control.)

Historians say one key to the success of the Jesuit missions was their ability to understand the local cultures and languages; some of the first grammars of indigenous languages were produced by Jesuit missionaries.

To be sure, the Jesuits' enterprise was not unambiguously heroic, certainly by the standards of the 21st century. The missionaries may have tried to ameliorate the conditions facing native peoples, but generally didn't object to enslaving them. They uprooted traditional ways of life, and in some cases inadvertently spread infectious diseases against which the natives had no defense.

That said, historians say the Jesuits generally aimed to soften the harsh conditions imposed on the indigenous populations by the crown.

The Jesuit imprint on Brazil is hard to miss, beginning with the fact that the Jesuits participated in the founding of the city Francis is visiting this week, Rio de Janeiro, in 1565.

Today is especially evocative in that regard, as Francis will travel to Rio's Boa Vista Park to hear confessions. The park is set in a magnificent forest that was once the property of the Jesuits, but was stripped from them when the Jesuits were expelled from Brazil in 1754, a prelude to their exile from Portugal in 1759, then France

and Spain, and finally the complete suppression of the order under Pope Clement XIV in 1773.

Throughout the early 18th century, tensions had mounted between the colonial authorities in Brazil and the Jesuits on several fronts, and came to head under the Marquês de Pombal, who governed the Portuguese-Brazilian empire in the name of José I. Pombal stacked the deck against the Jesuits and eventually secured a decree kicking them out of the country they had helped to build.

Today, however, the Jesuits definitely have the last laugh. The monarchy represented by the Marquês de Pombal is an artifact of history, but the Jesuits are still around, and one of their own is now pope.

Nobody's actually proposed returning the forest to Francis on behalf of his order this morning, but there's a real sense in which for a few hours, at least, it will once again be in Jesuit hands.

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