

The Jesuit History Research Group presents:



Left: Unknown artist, “Renowned Jesuits”, National Portrait Gallery.

Right: Portrait of Leonard Lessius, SJ Rijksmuseum, 1623.

Unsuccessful ‘Saints’ of the Society of Jesus: Antonio Criminali & Leonard Lessius (16th-20th centuries)

In the Catholic Church’s tradition, canonizations represent the final step of trials aiming to verify the heroism of virtues and/or the martyrdom of those who died in the “odor of sanctity.” In order to be canonized, those who so die must adhere to specific imitable hagiographical models — i.e., behavioral models of Christian perfection. This joint talk focuses on two Jesuits who came close to, yet were never canonized. The first part describes the ambiguous death of the Italian missionary Antonio Criminali (1520–1549) who was beheaded by a local army on the Fishery Coast (India) in 1549, thus becoming the “protomartyr” of the Society of Jesus. We will analyze the legal reasons why, despite his violent death and the popular devotion that arose around him in India and Italy, Criminali was never canonized. The second part focuses on the Flemish theologian Leonard Lessius (1554–1623), who was considered as a living saint by his brothers of the Leuven College. Not only legal reasons, but specific strategies of sainthood eventually led the Jesuit Postulation to drop Lessius’ canonization cause. We show that the cases of Criminali and Lessius ultimately depended upon evolving views on sanctity within the Society of Jesus from the Early modern period onward.

Elisa Frei is a research fellow at the University of Macerata, with a project examining the Catholic missionaries’ perceptions of sacrifices and self-sacrifice in Asia during the early modern period. She also works as a project assistant for the Digital Indipetæ Database, hosted by Boston College, and is a research associate at the University of York. She has published several articles and is co-editor of Daniello Bartoli’s eight-volume series *Asia*.

Eleonora Rai specializes in the History of the Catholic Church and Theology (1500s-1800s). After she obtained her PhD from the University of Milan (Italy) and the École Pratique des Hautes Études (France) in 2014, she continued her research in the Italian and Australian academia. She joined the Research Unit History of Church and Theology at the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, KU Leuven, in 2019, with a project on the intra-Catholic and intra-Jesuit theological controversies on Grace, free will, and eternal predestination; on morality; and on the inspiration of the Scriptures, with particular attention paid to the Jesuit Leuven theologian Leonard Lessius (1554-1623). Further research interests include causes for canonization, hagiographical models, and the broader history of the Society of Jesus (1500s-1800s).

Friday 28 January, 2022 – 10:00 am to noon

Registration required:

<https://utoronto.zoom.us/meeting/register/tZELfuqrpj0rHNRZqy5kY1zSBRi7z2MXPOp>

After registering, you will receive a confirmation email containing information about joining the meeting.