


# Puzzles and posts: Reconstructing Robert Persons' correspondence with Claudio Acquaviva, 1589–1592



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The early English Jesuit leader Robert Persons (1546–1610) was sent to Spain in 1588 by the superior general of the Society, Claudio Acquaviva. His commission was to negotiate with King Philip II over the authority structures of the Jesuits in Spain. Besides conducting these negotiations, Persons founded English seminaries in Valladolid (1589) and Seville (1592). This article examines the extant correspondence between Persons and Acquaviva during this period, reconstructing the missing letters as far as possible. In the process, we learn a great deal about the correspondence network, the use of posts, the dating and confidentiality of letters, and the choice of language.

**Keywords:** Correspondence networks; Codes and confidentiality; Linguistic diversity; Robert Persons; Claudio Acquaviva.

## Introduction

Reeling a little from the impact of the Spanish armada's failure to oust Queen Elizabeth and open the way for the restoration of the Roman Catholic faith in England, the English Jesuit leader Robert Persons (1546–1610) set off from Rome for the Spanish court in November 1588. His hopes had been heavily invested in the *impresa*, but he was nothing if not a Jesuit, and the disappointment did not hinder him from obeying the superior general of the Society of Jesus, his friend Claudio Acquaviva (1543–1615; in office 1581–1615), when Acquaviva instructed Persons to conduct delicate negotiations with King Philip II (1527–1598, reigned 1556–1598) over the future of the Society in Spain.

The Spanish Jesuits – who dominated over half the Provinces of the Society – had begun to agitate for greater autonomy from the Jesuit curia in Rome; the *memorialistas*, as the malcontents were called, looked to the Inquisition and the Spanish monarchy for support. Acquaviva, the first superior general to be neither a Spaniard, nor to originate from Spanish domains, needed skilful emissaries to try to ensure that the Spanish provinces adhered to Jesuit discipline and maintained the ideal of unity within the Society. He chose Persons along with José de Acosta (1540–1600), a senior Jesuit who had formerly been Provincial of Peru. They worked in concert, but it was Persons who was entrusted with the more confidential aspects of the diplomatic mission. He kept a close eye on the developments in Spain leading up to the calling of the Fifth General Congregation of the Society of Jesus, which opened in Rome on 03 November 1593 (Edwards 1995:136–155; McCoog 2012:95–142). During a sojourn of 8 years in Spain, while he cultivated good relations with the king and promoted the English mission by founding seminaries in Valladolid and Seville, he corresponded regularly with Acquaviva.

Of this correspondence, so important for our understanding both of the early history of the Jesuits and of Persons' own manner of proceeding as educationalist, missionary strategist, pastor and politician, far too little remains. This article describes my efforts, as lead editor of a comprehensive new edition of Persons' correspondence (Houliston, Crosignani & McCoog 2017), to reconstruct their exchanges. In so doing, I hope to illuminate aspects of the 16th-century postal system, the habits of the Jesuit network, and the implications of the languages used: in this case, Latin, Italian and Spanish.

The material we have to work with includes copies and drafts of Acquaviva's letters preserved in the General's registers in the Jesuit archives in Rome (ARSI),<sup>1</sup> a very small number of Persons' letters, chiefly holograph, in the same archive, and partial transcripts made in the 17th century by Christopher Grene (1629–1697), assisting the Italian Jesuit Daniello Bartoli (1608–1685) with his

1. Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu: for a list of the relevant codices, see Appendix 1, Table 1-A1.

researches for the history of the Society in England, *Dell'Istoria della Compagnia di Giesu: L'Inghilterra* (Rome 1667). These transcripts survive in Grene's *Collectanea P*, formerly kept at Stonyhurst College, Lancashire, the Jesuit college for boys originally founded by Persons himself in St-Omer (today in France, but then part of the Spanish Netherlands) in 1593. The *Collectanea* are now in the British Archives of the Society of Jesus in London (ABSI).<sup>2</sup> The reason why so few of Persons' letters have survived, is that his papers were dispersed at the time of the suppression of the Society in 1773. He would almost certainly have kept copies or drafts and taken them with him when he returned to Rome in 1596–1597. There he held the position of rector of the English College until his death in 1610. These were the documents which Grene used to make his transcripts, but they were carried away by the basketful (Edwards 1981:370). The few extant original letters for this period have come down to us in curious ways: one is in a collection of confidential letters received from the Spanish provinces (ARSI, Hisp. 139), although the date is uncertain, and three are in a collection called the Fondo Gesuitico (ARSI FG 651/616 and 651/640), which was returned to the Jesuit archives by Mussolini (McCoog 2013:143–144). Another letter included in this collection, cited by Albert Loomie and dated 12 August 1592, appears subsequently to have been mislaid or disappeared (Loomie 1962).

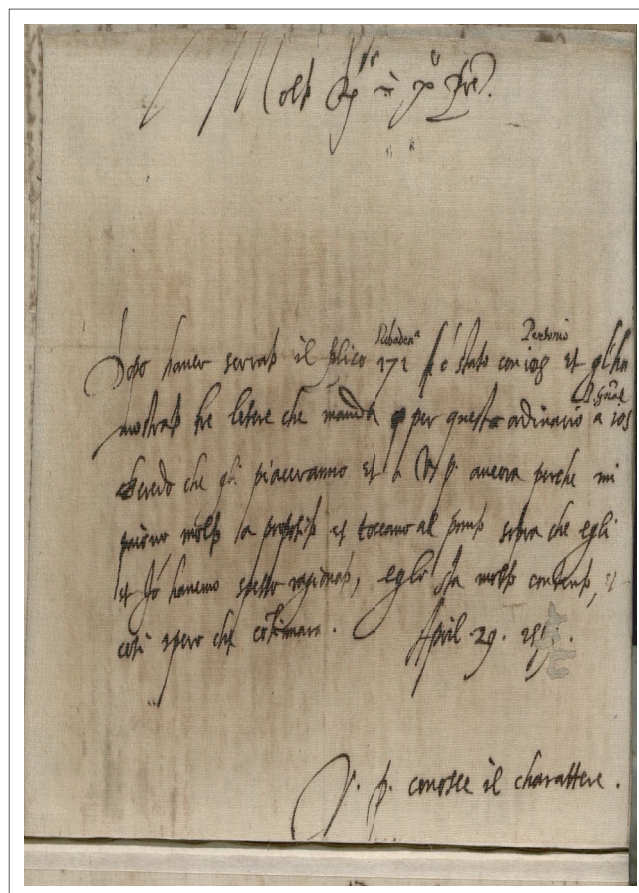
Most intriguing of all, one very short letter is interleaved in one of the registers of the General's letters and was used for the draft of the reply (ARSI, Tolet. 4, fols 53–55). On 12 June 1589, Acquaviva replied to Persons' letter of 28 April, which is now missing, and dealt in considerable detail with questions of the utmost importance for the future of the Society in Spain: the king's agreement to the appointment of visitors named by Acquaviva,<sup>3</sup> and prospects for negotiation between the Spanish monarchy and the papacy about dealing with the disaffection among Spanish Jesuits. He was clearly agitated over the draft of this reply, which begins with a great deal of ciphering and continues with many crossings-out and second thoughts.

One of the factors influencing his response, was the attitude of Pedro de Ribadeneira (1526–1611), a major intellectual figure in the Society, author of the first biography of St Ignatius (1491–1556). He was then living in the Jesuit community of Jesus del Monte at Alcalá de Henares, just outside Madrid. Persons had visited him there, found him concerned about the management of the community, and discussed with him the situation in Spain generally.

Ribadeneira wrote three letters to Rome, evidently to Acquaviva and other significant players in the negotiations, such as Cardinals Antonio Carafa (1538–1591) and William Allen (1532–1594), and entrusted them to Persons for forwarding. Persons wrote a short accompanying note,

2. Archivum Britannicum Societatis Iesu.

3. Visitors were normally appointed by the Jesuit curia in Rome to visit the provinces of the Society of Jesus to ensure the unity and discipline of the Society. The *memorialistas* hoped that the visitors would be appointed by the king in conjunction with the Inquisition.



Source: Acquaviva, n.d., *Roman archives of the Society of Jesus—Acquaviva's private register*, ARSI, Tolet. 4, fol. 55v

**FIGURE 1:** Letter from Robert Persons interleaved in Acquaviva's private register, ARSI, Tolet. 4, fol. 55v. Reproduced with kind permission of Fr Brian Mac Cuarta, director of the Roman Archives of the Society of Jesus.

dated 29 April, consisting of two leaves (see Figure 1). After the General received this batch of letters (which included Persons' regular letter of 28 April), he replied immediately. Needing extra space to complete what was for him an unusually long letter, he inserted the two leaves of Persons' note into his register, and continued drafting his letter on the verso of the address leaf. Persons' letter reads:

*Molto reverendo in Christo padre*

*Dopo haver servato il plico Ribadeneira [172] gli è stato con Personio [108] et gl'ha monstrato tre lettere che manda per questo ordinario a P. Generalis [105]. Credo che gli piaceranno et a Vostra Paternità ancora perché mi paiono molto a proposito et toccano al punto supra che egli et io havemo spesso ragionato, egli sta molto contento, et così spero che confirmara. 29 April 1589.*

*Vostra Paternità conosce il character.*

[Very Reverend Father in Christ

After having discovered the packet, Ribadeneira was with Persons and showed him three letters that he is sending to Father General by this ordinary post. I think they will be pleasing both to him [Persons] and to Your Paternity; in fact I think they are very much apposite and touch the aforementioned point that he and I have often reasoned upon. He [Persons] is very satisfied, and I hope you will confirm this. 29 April 1589.

Your Paternity knows the hand. (author's own translation)]

Persons too uses ciphers and conceals his own identity. This was not the kind of information to fall into the wrong hands.

As so often in historical documents, survival has depended as much on happenstance and the unforeseen as on deliberate record-keeping. In piecing together the correspondence, we can at least recover the dates and some sense of the content, if not the texts, of many of the missing letters, by reference to Acquaviva's replies and to Grene's transcripts. An important consideration here is the courier system, by which letters were sent in batches on particular days. Thus, even when Acquaviva's reply does not mention the exact date of Persons' letter, we can assume that it probably was dispatched by the same courier as letters to Joseph Creswell (c.1557–1623), rector of the English College, Rome, or William Cardinal Allen. This allows us to draw up a speculative table of correspondence for the years 1589–1592, when Persons was chiefly stationed in Madrid and Valladolid (see Appendix 1). This in turn prompts certain observations about the nature of the exchanges.

## Discussion

In the first place, the evidence suggests that Persons and Acquaviva wrote to each other about once a month. Since letters took anything from 4 to 6 weeks to be carried between Spain and Italy by the ordinary courier (Schobesberger et al. 2016; see Figure 2), this meant that the letters normally crossed: Acquaviva's replies are usually dated about 6 weeks after the letter to which he was responding, and Persons would have written another in between. Thus it is impossible to read the letters in a simple sequence of exchange, and this presents a challenge to the editor wishing to give an accurate representation. The record for 1591 is also particularly patchy, with far fewer letters from Acquaviva and thus less evidence of letters from Persons. During much of this year, Persons was operating near Seville, spending some time in Puerto de Santa Maria and San Lucar de Barrameda, up the

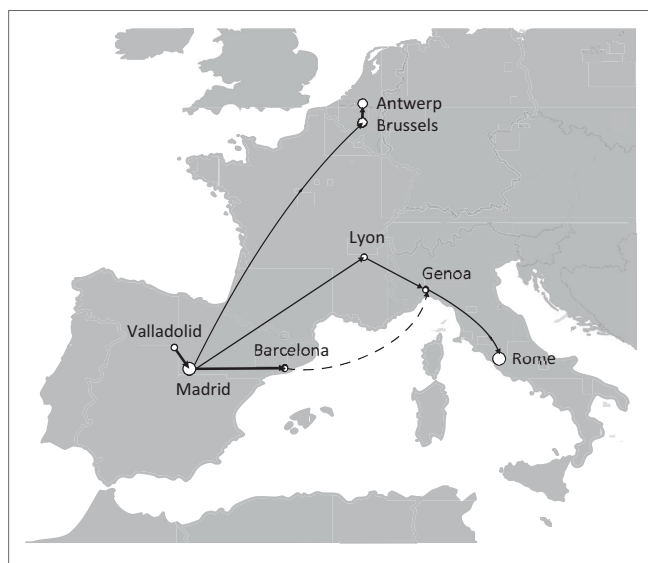


FIGURE 2: Map showing early modern postal routes from Madrid.

coast from Cadiz, further away from the main lines of communication.

A further complication of the postal system is that letters were either prepared in advance for the next post, or written in haste between the arrival and departure of the courier. The letters the General composed in advance appear to have been recorded as fair copies in his open register for the province in which the recipient was located, which would contain letters to the provincial, vice-provincial, superiors of professed houses, rectors of colleges and others: these were letters to which other Jesuits might have access. For much of this period, the copies of letters to Persons are to be found in the register for the province of Toledo (ARSI, Tolet. 5/1), often addressed to Madrid, even though for much of this time he was in fact at Valladolid; from October 1591, however, they were recorded in the register for the province of Castile, which included Valladolid (ARSI, Cast. 6). The General also kept a confidential register, for letters marked *solli* – for the personal and private attention of the recipient – and these are in draft form, with many insertions and deletions: by far the most interesting from an editorial point of view (ARSI, Tolet. 4). Here the General would also draft the *raptim* letters which would then be copied to catch the post.

Confidential letters might also include ciphering, with a fairly simple code, using numbers for persons and places (e.g. 108 for Persons, 82 for the king), or for letters of the alphabet (e.g. 29 19 13 25 22 11 16 13 37 for 'el rettore', where three different numbers are used for 'e' and two different numbers for 't'). We can work out the key for these ciphers from letters from Persons which have survived with the decoded words interlined above by the recipient (e.g. the letter tentatively assigned to June 1592, from ARSI, FG 651/616). In the drafts in the General's confidential register, some words and phrases have been underlined for encoding in the letter that was eventually posted (e.g. the confidential letter of 09 July 1590 quoted below).

Since Acquaviva's letters, which form the bulk of the text of the correspondence, have been transmitted only as copies or drafts, and because their composition was governed by the posts, we can seldom be certain either of the actual date of composition, or the wording of the letter as received. There are some curious examples of the contradiction caused by the gap between writing and dispatch. In one early instance, two letters of the same date are discrepant: they concern a lay brother, William Brakenbury (1560–1589), whom Acquaviva intended as an amanuensis for Persons whose health was inhibiting him from performing his tasks of managing day-to-day business at the college in Valladolid. Between composing the open letter intended for 17 April 1589 and the private one, Acquaviva learnt that Brakenbury had died: 'aviso come Domino il Signore lo haveva chiamato a se' ('I learnt that our Lord God had called him to Himself'). He sent William Flack (1560–1637) instead, as he notified

Persons in his next letter, dated 15 May. Were both letters of 17 April sent? Was the open letter altered? Presumably the original letter was copied into the register and then sealed, and it seems unlikely that it would later be unsealed and emended. The draft of the *solli* letter, containing the news of Brakenbury's death, would rather have been quickly copied for sending, sealed, and posted. In the absence of Persons' reply, presumably on 26 May, we cannot know for certain.

An even more curious case is that of Acquaviva's open letter of 02 October 1590 (ARSI, Tolet 5/I, fol. 153r). Here, the General expressed his hopes that the new pope, Urban VII (Giovan Battista Castagna, 1521–1590; elected 15 September) would be a support in settling some of the Society's difficulties:

... *Y con el que espero ternemos en el buen Papa que dios nos ha dado, podremos mejor poner en orden algunas cosas que con los tiempos estan muy caidas.* [... and with the hope we entertain in the good pope whom God has given us, we will be able to put in better order some things which have fallen away in recent times. (author's own translation)]

In fact, Urban, whose reign was one of the shortest in history, had already died, on 27 September.

Acquaviva could not have been referring to the next pope, Gregory XIV (Niccolò Sfondrati, 1535–1591, elected 05 December); and in any case, he specified Urban in a letter of the same date addressed to Francisco de Porres, provincial of Toledo, expressing similar sentiments (ARSI, Tolet. 5/I, fols 152v–153r). It seems highly improbable that the superior general of the Society of Jesus should not have known of the pope's demise. The record stands, and we have to treat it with due caution, but it seems clear that the letter was composed by 27 September and only posted, if at all, on 02 October.

Another consideration is the question of the language used in the letters: Latin, Italian and Spanish.

Persons had travelled to Italy first in 1574, when he fled from Oxford in disgrace, accused of irregularities in his keeping of the accounts at Balliol College. After joining the Society in 1575, he trained at the Roman College, where he eventually took charge of the second-year novices (Edwards 1995:14). As a successful tutor at Balliol he would already have been proficient in Latin, and he soon developed his skill in Italian. He was to publish two influential works in Latin: *De persecutione Anglicana* (Rouen, Rome, Ingolstadt, 1581/1582) and the so-called 'Philopater', *Elizabethae Angliae Reginae haeresim Calvinianum propugnantis, saevissimum in Catholicos sui regni edictum ... cum responsio ad singula capita* ('The most cruel edict of Queen Elizabeth of England, fighting on behalf of the Calvinist heresy, against the Catholics of her kingdom ... with a response to certain points'; Antwerp, Lyon, Cologne, Rome, Ingolstadt, 1592),

while also editing and expanding the notorious *De origine ac progressu schismatis Anglicani*, by Nicholas Sander ('Of the origin and growth of the English schism'; first published in Rheims, 1585; expanded edition Rome, Ingolstadt, 1586). Although he did not publish any works in Italian, it is most likely that he worked with Italian translations of Luis de Granada's works when preparing his own *First booke of the Christian exercise, appertayning to Resolution* (Rouen, 1582), which was frequently reprinted, revised and even reprinted for Protestant readers (Houlston 1998).

When Persons was on the English mission with Edmund Campion (1540–1581) in 1580–1581 (McCoog 1996:129–177; Reynolds 1980; Scully 2011), he wrote regularly in Latin both to Acquaviva, who succeeded Everard Mercurian (1514–1580; in office 1573–1580) as General in February 1581, at the age of 37, and to Alfonso Agazzari, rector of the English College in Rome. Many of his letters to Agazzari were widely copied and distributed – we have 13 witnesses to a letter of September 1584, including copies in Siena, Parma and Modena (Houlston et al. 2017:495–511) – and were thus in the nature of newsletters for the Jesuit communities. After escaping from England in the late summer of 1581, following Campion's arrest, he operated in France and the Low Countries for about 4 years and began to correspond more frequently in Italian, the mother tongue of both Agazzari and Acquaviva. It is not impossible that separate versions of letters were sent in Latin and Italian, although there is no direct evidence of this; it is at least fairly certain that letters were duplicated and sent by different routes in case of interception or loss. It may also be that Italian was regarded as a more secure language when letters were crossing France or Germany.

Once Persons reached Spain – a country he had also visited in 1582–1583 as agent of the Duke of Guise (Edwards 1995:55–82) – he quickly set about mastering the language. To begin with, however, Acquaviva wrote to him in Italian, even though these 1589 letters are found in registers which are otherwise almost exclusively in Spanish: 06 March, 21 March, 17 April, 15 May, 12 June, 07 August, 04 September, 02 October and 31 October. On 27 November 1589 he wrote to say that he believed the Englishman was ready to correspond in Spanish, probably because in his missing letter of 14 October Persons had mentioned his greater confidence. After that, Acquaviva continued for some time to use Italian in his confidential letters: 24 December 1589, 22 January 1590, 24 March, 15 May, 09 July, 07 August, 04 September, 24 December 1590 and 20 March 1591. The *solli* letter of 09 July 1591, however, is in Spanish, and this became the rule thereafter. As for Persons' letters, his first extant letter to Acquaviva in Spanish is undated, but provisionally assigned to September 1592; there is also a Spanish holograph letter to Pope Clement VIII (Ippolito Aldobrandino, 1536–1605, elected 03 February 1592) dated 01 December 1592 (ASV, Fondo Borghese III, 124 g.2, fols 3–4).

Italian and Spanish were much closer then, than they are now, and Spanish letters often contain words that are now reserved to Italian, such as *anzi*, 'in fact, indeed', as in a letter from 1594: 'no le contentava, anzi le scandalizava' ('he was not pleased; indeed, he was scandalized'; Persons to Acquaviva, Cordova, 20 March 1594; ARSI, Hisp. 136, fols 249–50). Both Acquaviva and Persons may have used Italian words inadvertently when composing letters in Spanish, and clearly the linguistic overlap assisted both men. It is instructive to compare Acquaviva's manner in the confidential and open letters, not only with regard to content but also to language. In 1590 there were four occasions when he wrote one letter in Italian and one in Spanish for the same courier: 22 January, 20 or 24 March, 09 July and 04 September. In the first two Italian letters, he mentions his haste in trying to deal immediately with matters raised in letters just received, before the departure of the same courier who had presumably brought those letters. Thus the letter dated 20 March is in Spanish, but a *raptim* letter is dated 24 March, dealing in Acquaviva's more ready language, Italian, with Persons' letters of 26 January and 03 February. Consequently, there is no absolute division between the content of the confidential and open letters, since the former might simply deal with the more urgent business. However, it is noticeable that the private letters tend to deal with delicate matters involving particular Jesuits, and with the tricky issue of the malcontents, sometimes resorting to ciphers.

As an example of the contrast, let us take the letters of 09 July 1590, and assume that the Spanish letter (ARSI, Tolet 5/I, fols 137v–138r) was written first, at greater leisure:

*P. Roberto Personio Julio 9*

*Por la de 26 de Mayo me avisa Vuestra Reverencia de la grata audiencia que le dio Su Magestad y quambien respondio a los puntos que le propuse. Graçias a Dios nuestro Señor que todo lo governa y endereza con providencia tan paternal como la que en nuestras cosas siempre ha mostrado, y a Vuestra Reverencia agradezco la charidad con que atiende a ayudarnos.*

*En lo del seminario me remito a lo que con el passado escriví, aunque veo al padre visitador tan deseoso de ayudar que no creo será necesario más que proponerle, pues el me escribe que antes de venir a la provincia de Toledo dexará acomodado el seminario de Valladolid.*

*Encargo a Vuestra Reverencia que mi re por tu salud, y si para ella fuere necesario que yo desde acá haga alguna diligencia con estos padres me lo avise, aunque fío de su charidad que acudirán a Vuestra Reverencia como saben que es razón y yo lo deseo. Del buon despacho de los Ingleses me he consolado.*

*Bien es que Vuestra Reverencia de algunos avisos y acuerdos al Padre Ricardo por que como el ama y respecta a Vuestra Reverencia creo le ayudarán, y el los aceptará, y importa mucho que él se vaya a la meno en sus cóleras por que si son con algun exceso algo impedirán para su promoción. Non otro en esta que encomendarme etc.*

[To Fr Robert Persons, 09 July

In your letter of 26 May Your Reverence told me about the welcome audience that His Majesty gave you, and what answer

he gave to the matters which you raised. Thanks be to God our Lord who governs everything and directs it with such fatherly providence, as He has always shown in our affairs, and I am grateful to Your Reverence for the charity with which you attend to our needs.

With regard to the seminary, I refer you to what I wrote in my last letter; also I see that the Father Visitor is so desirous to help that I do not think anything more will be necessary than he proposes; indeed he writes to me that before he goes to the province of Toledo he will leave the seminary of Valladolid well taken care of.

Be assured, Your Reverence, that I am praying for your good health, and if it is necessary for your health's sake that from here on I should pay close attention to those fathers, please let me know, although I trust their charity to come to the aid of Your Reverence as is only right, and I desire it. I am much consoled that the English left safely.

It would be good if Your Reverence gave some warnings and suggestions to Father Richard, because, as he loves and respects Your Reverence, I believe they will do some good, and he will accept them, and it matters a great deal that he takes his anger to extremes, because any such excess will stand in the way of his advancement. Nothing else for the moment, except to commend myself, etc. (author's own translation)]

After a fairly bland acknowledgment of the report on Persons' audience with the king, the General turns to seminary affairs: the assistance of the visitor, Gil González Dávila, the question of Persons' health, and the decision to recall another English Jesuit academic, Richard Gibbons, from Lisbon to Valladolid despite his bad temper. These comments were addressed to Persons in the normal course of business, treating him in his capacity as superior of the English mission and the founder of the English seminary in Valladolid. The letter corresponds to those written to other Jesuit superiors in the province of Toledo. Although Valladolid is actually in the province of Castile, Persons was so often in Madrid at this time that Acquaviva addressed his letters to him there. The letter ends with the standard greeting, 'I commend myself to your prayers and holy sacrifices', which is simply abbreviated in the copy in the register.

The *solí* letter (ARSI, Tolet. 4, fols 71v–72r), on the other hand, treats Persons as Acquaviva's confidential agent:

*Madrid. P. Personio, 9 di Luglio.*

*Si sono ricevute quelle di Vostra Reverentia delli 17 d'Aprile et 27 di Maggio. Ci siamo consolati molto nel Signore del buon successo delle Congregazioni qual è grand' argomento della Divina assistenza et benignità con che va preparando i cuori alla pace et unione fraterna. Il favore anco della Maestà del Rè importa molto, del quale aspetto qualche buon risoluzione per mettere rimedio con la Divina grazia alla disciplina della Compagnia perché li Visitatori quali Sua Maestà aspettava, saranno costi à quest'ora. Li punti di quella de 27 sono ottimi; ne accade che Vostra Reverentia habbi scrupolo di scrivere cose molto particolari poichè la notizia di tutte [followed by sono, probably deleted] quelle è molto necessaria. Et particolarmente m'è stato caro intendere il particolare del Padre Sebastiano Hernandez. Con che per fine di questa, &c.*

[To Robert Persons in Madrid, 09 July

Your Reverence's letters of 17 April and 27 May have been received. We are much consoled in the Lord by the good success of the congregations, which is a great argument of God's benign assistance in preparing hearts for peace and fraternal union. Also, the favour of His Majesty the king counts for a great deal, which leads me to expect of him a good resolution to find a remedy, with the grace of God, to the discipline of the Society – for the Visitors have expected no less from His Majesty, and continue to do so even now. The points you make in your letter of the 27th are excellent; please would Your Reverence have no compunction to write in great detail, as the news of all these things is very necessary. And particularly I am very concerned to hear the particulars of Fr Sebastian Hernandez. With that I will end this, etc. (author's own translation)]

Here he deals with the provincial congregations of the Society, and the political actions of the visitors. He is much more specific about the interaction with the king: the matter of restoring the discipline of the Society, that is, subordination to Rome. The reference to Sebastian Hernandez is rather cryptic – indeed, his name is underlined for encoding – and it seems that this Spanish Jesuit's attitude was suspect. Later, he was appointed assistant to Gil González Dávila, someone whom both Acquaviva and Persons trusted implicitly, when González was made provincial of Toledo.

Both letters contain formulaic expressions of trust in God's providential care for the Society's welfare, but the Italian contains the more specifically Ignatian notion of consolation: 'Ci siamo consolati molto'. In both letters Acquaviva warmly commends and encourages his English colleague, but again the Italian is a little more fervent: 'ne accade che Vostra Reverentia habbi scrupulo di scrivere cose molto particolari'. This assurance is all the more telling when we consider that generally Acquaviva's letters to Persons were much shorter, and so Persons may have felt reluctant to open his heart fully.

Our sense of the close alliance between the two can be reinforced by the text of Acquaviva's formal instructions to Persons (ARSI, Tolet. 4, fols 41r–42r), which ends on a note of earnest solicitation:

*Informarà ancora Sua Maestà del grave danno che la Compagna in quei regni ha sentito sin' adesso, et sentirà maggiore, se egli non ni mette la mano; non potendo li superiori governare liberamente, ne procurare l'osservanza della disciplina Regolare, perché ogni suddito ardisce di minacciare, etc. Le significherà ancora il mio sentimento che non si sia degnata Sua Maestà farmi dire; come più volte l'ho supplicata, quel che desidera da me è dalla Compagna. Della quale si vede per gl'effetti che à Sua Maestà è fatta sinistra informatione, et se le cose si sapessero, se le potrebbe è dare sodisfattione con la verità, è emendarse, se ci sono cose che ricerchino emendatione, et che di questo la supplico instantemente per l'avenire; perchè altrimenti ogn'uno sarà libero à dire in memoriali delle falsità, etc. essendo sicuro che prima faranno colpo, che la Compagna si possa difendere è scolpare. [Moreover, please inform His Majesty of the great harm the Society has been suffering until now, which will be even greater if he does not intervene, as Superiors cannot govern freely, neither impose the discipline of the Rule, if any subject is entitled to threaten, etc. ... Please would you once again express my feeling about the fact that His Majesty has not condescended to let me know – although*

I have often pleaded with him – what he wants either from me or the Society. The situation appears to have arisen from inaccurate information given to His Majesty, and if things were brought into the open they could either be set right by the truth, or by amendment, if there are things that need to be changed, and this is what I utterly beseech for the future; otherwise everyone will be free to speak lies in memorials, etc. ... being sure that they will cause damage before the Society can defend or exculpate herself. (author's own translation)]

Acquaviva knew that Persons would understand just how he felt about the way the king was handling the situation, and that he would know just how to broach the matter with His Catholic Majesty. In some of his letters, indeed, Acquaviva leaves it to Persons' judgement when and how to raise certain subjects in his audiences with the king (see for instance Acquaviva's private letter of 22 January 1590).

## Conclusion

The editor of Persons' correspondence is left in the unenviable position of delivering a record in which the chief subject's voice is only intermittently heard. We are given hints of what he actually thought and wrote, but he remains elusive. Nevertheless, the letters bring us as close as we can come to a man who remains something of an enigma in early modern religious and political history: an energetic and effective leader, a skilful strategist, a fine pastor and teacher, a diplomatist and writer of note, but deeply complicit in subversive plots and schemes, hardly to be reconciled with the express injunctions of the Fifth General Congregation to keep out of politics. John Bossy ruminated on the unquiet 'heart of Robert Persons' (Bossy 1996); A.L. Rowse, mischievously counting 'Father Parsons the Jesuit' among his clutch of 'Eminent Elizabethans', wrote: 'I find him fascinating – infinitely more so than ordinary conventional people, even when they make some figure in history' (Rowse 1983:43). In these years, 1589–1592, as the couriers posted from Madrid to Rome and back, he left tantalising clues for us to puzzle over.

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## Competing interests

The author declares that no competing interest exists.

## Author's contributions

I declare that I am the sole author of this research article.

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## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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## Appendix 1

TABLE 1-A1: Table of letters.

Letters from Persons	Archival source	Language	Replies from Acquaviva	Language	ARSI codex
31 January 1589	-	-	06 March	Italian	Tolet. 4, fol. 49v
	-	-	21 March	Italian	Tolet. 5/l, fol. 52r-v
17 February	-	-	17 April	Italian	Tolet. 5/l, fol. 58
	-	-	17 April	Italian	Tolet. 4, fol. 51r
20 March	-	-	15 May	Italian	Tolet. 4, fols 52r-53v
30 March	-	-	15 May	-	-
28 April	-	-	12 June	Italian	Tolet. 4, fols 53v-54v
29 April	ARSI, Tolet. 4, fols 54-55	Italian	12 June	-	-
	-	-	07 August	Italian	Tolet. 5/l, fol. 72v
22 July	-	-	04 September	Italian	Tolet. 5/l, fol. 76v
August	-	-	02 October	Italian	Tolet. 5/l, fols 85v-86r
14 September	-	-	31 October	Italian	Tolet. 5/l, fol. 88r
14 October	-	-	27 November	Spanish	Tolet. 5/l, fol. 101v
11 November	-	-	24 December	Italian	Tolet. 4, fol. 59r-v
09 December	ABSI, Coll P 498 to Creswell	-	22 January 1590	Spanish	Tolet 5/l, fol. 108r
-	-	-	22 January	Italian	Tolet. 4, fols 60v-61r
07 January 1590	ABSI, Coll P 498 to Creswell	-	19 February	Spanish	Tolet 5/l, fol. 114r-v
-	-	-	19 February	Spanish	Tolet 4, fol. 61r
-	-	-	20 March	Spanish	Tolet 5/l, fol. 118
26 January	-	-	24 March	Italian	Tolet. 4, fols 61v-62r
03 February	-	-			
24 February and/or 03 March	-	-	Mid-April	-	-
31 March	-	-	15 May	Italian	Tolet. 4, fol. 65v
17 April	-	-	09 June	Spanish	Tolet 5/l, fol. 128v
27 May	-	-	09 July	Spanish	Tolet 5/l, fols 137v-138r
-	-	-	09 July	Italian	Tolet. 4, fols 71v-72r
26 June	ARSI, FG 651/640, item 25	Italian	07 August	Italian	Tolet. 4, fols 72v-73r
22, 23, 26 July	ABSI, Coll P 477 to Creswell	-	04 September	Spanish	Tolet 5/l, fol. 150r
-	-	-	04 September	Italian	Hisp. 74, fol. 29v
20 August	ABSI, Coll P 500 to Creswell	-	02 October	Spanish	Tolet 5/l, fol. 153r
14 September	-	-	29 October	Spanish	Tolet 5/l, fol. 159v-160r
12 October	-	-	24 December	Italian	Tolet. 4, fols 78v-79r
14 October	-	-			
January 1591	-	-	20 March 1591	Italian	Tolet. 4, fols 82v-83r
February/March	-	-	13 May	Spanish	Tolet. 5/l, 188r
18 April	-	-	10 June	Spanish	Baet. 3/l, pp. 3-4
May	-	-	09 July	Spanish	Tolet. 5/l, 195r
-	-	-	09 July	Spanish	Hisp. 74, fol. 31
18 July	-	-	02 September	Spanish	Tolet. 5/l, 204v
12 September	ABSI, Coll P 477 to Creswell	-	28 October	Spanish	Cast. 6, fol. 105r-v
01 or 09 October	ABSI, Coll P 477 and 502 to Creswell	-	25 November	Spanish	Cast. 6, fol. 108r
06 November	-	-	23 December	Spanish	Cast. 6, fols 109v, 113r
06 December	-	-	20 January 1592	Spanish	Cast. 6, fol. 111v
January 1592	-	-	17 February	Spanish	Cast. 6, fol. 114r
February	-	-	13 April	Spanish	Cast. 6, fol. 119v
28 March	-	-	12 May	Spanish	Cast. 6, fol. 120r
April	-	-	08 June	Spanish	Cast. 6, fol. 124r
June	-	-	03 August	Spanish	Cast. 6, fol. 127v
June	ARSI FG 651/616, fol. 1	Spanish	-	-	-
July	-	-	31 August	Spanish	Cast. 6, fol. 130r
12 August	ARSI, FG 651/691 (misaid)	-	no extant reply	-	-
08 September	ARSI, FG 651/640, item 28	Italian	27 October	Spanish	Cast. 6, fol. 137v
09 September	-	-	24 November	Spanish	Baet. 3/l, p. 89
? 09 September	ARSI, Hisp. 139, fol. 126r	Spanish	-	-	-

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