FONDAZIONE BRUNO KESSLER
MAGAZINE

Claudio Ferlan wins a grant at Boston College

March 28, 2019

The FBK-ISIG researcher was selected with a writing project that investigates the relationship between religion and food

A four-month period during which he will deepen the study of the Society of Jesus in the United States and work on a book that tells the relationship between food and the Jesuits, focusing on the convivial role of the table and its power to create dialogue/confrontation, with a look at current events and how religious culture has contributed to creating eating habits still in use today.

This, in short, is the project of Claudio Ferlan, FBK-ISIG researcher, who will be flying to Boston in August thanks to a fellowship from the Institute for Advanced Jesuit Studies of the Boston College.

Claudio, tell us a little about how this project was born.

Since I was a PhD student, my study and research activity has focused on the Jesuits, an order that has always fascinated me as it is “multifaceted”, active in different fields of knowledge and society, not only in the religious sphere. For several years, I have also started dealing with the history of nutrition and, in my work as a scholar, I try to combine both these aspects. The Institute for Advanced Jesuit Studies at Boston College is an interdisciplinary center and each year it grants senior and junior scholarships for writing projects to be carried out on their campus. I decided to apply by presenting a project on food culture in the Society of Jesus, a subject that I consider very interesting. When studying encounters between cultures, including religious ones, the table is a privileged meeting place that is often underestimated in research compared to large sermons, big events and holidays. However, it is not less important since, if we think about it, rivalry between religious cultures often involves food customs even today: the way in which we behave at table, in which we live conviviality, social roles.

So what are you going to do in Boston?

My research will deal with understanding how eating habits evolved within the Society of Jesus from the 1500s to the end of the 1800s and how important it was in the lives of its members at the time. In particular, I would like to take a closer look at three aspects. Understanding what makes its way to the table in different parts of the world, in Italy as in the United States, and how religious culture has contributed to creating eating habits that are still in use today, such as having fish on Fridays. This is linked to another aspect of my research, namely the use of beverages. Drinking

wine, for example, was a daily practice, also favored by a number of factors such as hygiene, due to the low purity of water, or diet-related, due to its calorie intake. Finally, another aspect that I will further investigate, and which is linked to this latter aspect, is the medical one. Jesuits were indeed highly educated order and attentive to dietary culture. They even had specific menus, designed for each member according to the type of work or lifestyle he led.

The grant was awarded for a writing project.

Correct. The objective of the project, in addition to holding a public conference and participating in the activities organized by the institution that will host me, is to prepare and publish a book. I already have a good sense of what the structure might be and of a hypothetical table of contents that the final product will have to address. The months in Boston will mainly help me develop the US part of my research, which I will combine with other knowledge and sources, trying to give it a narrative structure.

A project that is part of another of your recent work, which led to the publication of Sbornie sacre, sbornie profane (Sacred Hangovers, profane hangovers), published by Il Mulino.

Yes, that's right. It will be a nice job, a good experience and a project that I was hoping to carry out and I can do so thanks also to the organization I work for which gives us these opportunities.

I wish to point out that the work was accepted thanks to the work I have carried out here at FBK. At ISIG, we have recently developed a project on the relevance of media for history. In this context, I started studying Jesuit newspapers, which from the mid-nineteenth century started to appear almost everywhere as a means of communication on religious matters. Studying American newspapers, I realized that food culture was very present, especially the concepts of fasting and drunkenness, the two extremes, vices and virtues, the moral importance of eating. The inclusion of the Society's newspapers of the 1800s among the sources was an element of strength in the evaluation of my candidacy. Just as presenting a long-term project.
Furthermore, the two mobility program stays that I carried out thanks to the Foundation, first in France in an institution focused more on the historical part of the Jesuits, then in Berkeley, California, where I focused on the history of nutrition, were critical. I believe that if I had not had these two opportunities I would not have been able to write such a complex and valid project, which unite these two souls of research.

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