

The Jesuit Intellectual Tradition

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Books are the Alpha and Omega of the Jesuit intellectual tradition. Recuperating from a crippling leg wound suffered in the battle of Pamplona between the Spanish and French in May 1521, Inigo of Loyola wanted to read the stories of knights and ladies that he and readers of his day found so popular. Instead, in the castle of his brother and pious sister-in-law, all Inigo could find were a life of Christ and a collection of saints' lives. The recovering soldier settled down to his summer reading, and it changed his life and the lives of many others after him.

The Life of Jesus Christ by the Carthusian Ludolph of Saxony is a massive tome in four folio volumes that not only gathers gospel and apocryphal legends into a chronological account of Christ's life but also includes meditations and commentaries from the fathers of the church and medieval mystics. A former Dominican, the scholarly Ludolph in 181 full chapters traces the story of redemption from the Incarnation of the Eternal Word to the Last Judgment. In his own Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius (as he called himself after his conversion) used the same outline but condensed the whole Christian experience of Jesus into a personal encounter of recreating the events of Christ's life in one's own imagination with a personal response. In four condensed weeks the retreatant meditates on the birth, miracles, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus to a final "Contemplation for Obtaining Love." An encyclopedia has become a compendium. The original response of the reader is passed on to the next person for a chain reaction of reflection and reformation of one's life. The book Ignatius read and made his own he handed on to others in a new form.

One's life after Christ's becomes another story, summed up in the Golden Legend by the Dominican Jacobus de Voragine, a book of multiple biographies still in print. Immensely popular, with 74 editions in Latin before 1500 (Inigo read a Castilian translation), the work follows the liturgical year and presents an account of the saint for each day in devotional detail. These knights and ladies of God carry out the call of the Eternal Prince, Jesus Christ, by heroic deeds and sacrifices, even in death as martyrs. In his Autobiography, Ignatius mentions two saints whose example especially inspired him, both founders of religious orders long before any such idea had occurred to him: "St. Dominic did this, therefore, I have to do it. St. Francis did this, therefore, I have to do it." Reading leads to action, so that reading itself is the source and spring of activity. Books matter because they make things happen.

Ignatius now set out to imitate his Lord and the saints by a life of prayer and penance. In a cave at Manresa for almost a year he lived the life of a hermit with moments of high illumination followed by diabolical depressions and doubts. He saw he had to discern these conflicting spirits and trace them to his own inner intentions and desires. One book, The Imitation of Christ, he found particularly helpful in its commonsense approach to God as a friend and guide and its otherworldly devotion to virtuous living. The convert was still groping and searching for God in his mind and heart, remaining open to day to day inspirations and at the same time facing fresh temptations of false images and fantasies.

In the fall of 1522 Ignatius had a mystical experience that would set the direction of his whole life. At Manresa he was growing in spiritual insight into his own ever-changing condition, from initial ardent

fervor of copying saintly behavior to a desperate longing to find God in himself and in others and in the world around him. He tells us in his Autobiography: (He writes about himself in the third person.)

“Once he was going out of devotion to a church situated a little more than a mile from Manresa, I believe it is called St. Paul’s, and the road goes by the river. As he went along occupied with his devotions, he sat down for a little while with his face toward the river, which ran down below. While he was seated there, the eyes of his understanding began to be opened, not that he saw any vision, but he understood and learned many things, both spiritual matters and matters of faith and of scholarship, and this with so great an enlightenment that everything seemed new to him.

“The details that he understood then, though they were many, cannot be stated, but only that he experienced a great clarity in his understanding. This was such that in the whole course of his life, after completing sixty-two years, even if he gathered up all the various helps he may have had from God and all the various things he has known, even adding them all together, he does not think he had got as much as at that one time.”

The emphasis that the saint places here on understanding and insight is the cornerstone of the Jesuit intellectual life. There on the banks of the Cardoner River, “he learned many things, both spiritual matters and matters of faith and of scholarship.” However, this overwhelming illumination did not make Ignatius complacent or simply content with his moment of enlightenment. Rather, he saw that the direction of his life must now take a new intellectual direction, so that for the next ten years he went back to school, starting as a 33 year old student in a classroom of teenagers beginning rudimentary Latin, and continuing at the University of Paris in its program of languages, arts and sciences, culminating in the study of philosophy, scripture and theology. This year by year systematic course of studies at Paris would become the model of Jesuit education when the time came to establish the first Jesuit college at Gandia in Spain in 1545. Demands for schools multiplied, all supported by the public, state or nobility, and all free for the students who qualified. By the time of Ignatius’ death in 1556, 33 colleges had opened and six more had been approved.

This system of studies, or Ratio Studiorum as it was later formulated, is really a crystallization of the Renaissance ideal of education. It begins with Latin grammar, moves on to literature, the speeches of Cicero and accounts of Caesar’s conquests of Gaul, the poetry of Virgil, Horace and Ovid, and, at the same time, employing the same methods for Greek from grammar to Homer, Sophocles and Xenophon. Hebrew may be also reviewed for those who want to prepare for serious studies of Scripture. Even Arabic, Chaldaic, Turkish or Indian should be taught to those who may need it as missionaries or ambassadors. Logic, physics, mathematics, moral ethics and music are part of the curriculum, as well as medicine and law, all leading to the study of God’s word, theology, as presented in the writings of Thomas Aquinas, the Dominican Ignatius had studied in Paris and who profoundly influenced his worldview of the individual and the divine plan of “finding God in all things.”

In a letter to Antonio de Araoz, a Spanish provincial, in 1551, Ignatius summarizes his earlier ideas on the means and purposes of a Christian education. These ideas remained basic to the later development of Jesuit schools in the years after the founder’s death and are valid even today. After teachers are

found for the various subjects, for “lacking a foundation, the students make no progress,” the whole structure some ten years in building will benefit not only the students but society itself for years to come:

From among those who are at present merely students, in time some will emerge to play diverse roles – some to preach and carry on the care of souls, others to the government of the land and the administration of justice, and others to other responsible occupations. In short, since the children of today become the adults of tomorrow, their good formation of life and learning will benefit many others, with the fruit expanding more widely every day.

It is this vision of growth in learning, ever adapting to new fields of human endeavor, that remain at the roots of Ignatius’ belief in the providential power of education. Its energy and charism derive from that moment at the Cardoner River when his own mind grasped with “a great clarity of understanding” the intellectual and emotional capacity to see God in all things. The mission of teaching remained apostolic for him, for the service and greater glory of God. The purpose of life, according the “Principle and Foundation” of the Spiritual Exercises, is “to praise, reverence, and serve God.”

After four hundred years, this intellectual tradition remained faithful to its methods, means and goals into the modern age. In the 1960s, Jesuit colleges, however, found themselves in a period of religious, social and economic change that found their growth in student body not matched by their own clerical enrollment, with members leaving the order, a decline in vocations, and Jesuits themselves seeking new activities in new fields, including politics, racial issues and urban poverty. Colleges and universities in the United States were now legally incorporated as institutions independent of the Society. The president, still a Jesuit, answered to a board of trustees rather than to a religious superior who no longer had the right to make the appointment. With increasing numbers of lay faculty, many of them not Catholics, the Jesuits were eager to maintain their sense of intellectual leadership by asserting the basic principles of their educational philosophy: the unity of all truth, the sanctity of creation and human intellectual activity, and the universal reach of divine grace.

An example of the Jesuit effort to establish continuity with its apostolic roots can be seen in the founding of the Jesuit Institute at Boston College in 1988. Its purpose is “to support the Jesuit, Catholic character of Boston College precisely as a university.” Initially funded by the Jesuit community and subsequently by outside donations, the Institute works with academic disciplines in and outside the college in order “to contribute positively to the intellectual life that constitutes Boston College by promoting research and collaborative interchange upon issues that emerge at the intersection of faith and culture.” Guest speakers, visiting scholars, research fellowships, interdisciplinary seminars and a variety of programs examine such “disputed questions” as media hostility to religion, women in the church, politics and abortion, science and faith. Its mission statement begins: “The Catholic Jesuit university is founded upon the conviction that the religious and the academic are intrinsically related. The movement of the mind towards meaning or truth initiates a process of questioning that naturally reaches the ultimate questions that engage religion. Similarly, the experience of Catholic faith gives rise to disciplined inquiry as it calls for the knowledge of itself and of the relationship of every dimension of human life.”

In 1986 the National Seminar on Jesuit Higher Education was formed to discuss the problems facing the various institutions across the country. The group is made up of two dozen Jesuits and laypeople with the purpose of sharing their experiences in operating an ever-changing academic environment. They have met regularly since then, and they publish Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education which appears twice a year and includes articles like: "The Heart of the Matter: The Core Curriculum," "Catholic Intellectual Life," and "Teaching as a Vocation." For the seminar, the reasons for urgency are clear when one looks at the alarming statistics: there were 35,000 Jesuits worldwide at the Society's peak in 1965 and there are only 20,000 now. American Jesuits in the same period declined from 5000 to fewer than 2000. In this period more men left the Order than stayed. From making up nearly half the members of a high school, college or university in 1960, the Jesuits today number less than 10% of faculty and administrators. At the same time, these decades have seen enormous professional growth in the programs offered, students enrolled, and scholarship produced. As their presence faded, the Jesuits have succeeded in seeing their schools thrive in reputation and academic appeal.

A sober look at the Society is provided by Peter McDonough and Eugene C. Bianchi in Passionate Uncertainty: Inside the American Jesuits (University of California Press, 2002). A sociological study, based on interviews with more than 400 Jesuits and former Jesuits, it shows how the success in growth has come at the expense of personal confusion and conflict. Some who leave are bitter about the changes that swept the Church after the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965); others are grateful for the new freedom offered to pursue their personal goals. Those who remain also express a sense of loss of the old certitudes and regret the current lack of unity in fusing intellectual and spiritual work. Many, on the other hand, relish the new spirit and practice of independent vocations in education and pastoral fields. In Jesuit Postmodern, Francis X. Clooney, S. J., who edited and contributed to the collection, includes nine autobiographical essays by Jesuit scholars who weigh their individual careers in specialized research with their sense of community, something they feel has been missing in their lives. Clooney argues that the autonomy that the modern Jesuit American university has won for itself from ecclesiastical and Vatican control has had the side effect of isolating individual members from the true nature of their vocations as priests, teachers and scholars.

The Ratio Studiorum was alive and well when I started at Boston College High School in 1943 with four years of required Latin and Greek, and it still set my course in 1947 when I attended Holy Cross as a liberal arts major. Besides reading the classics in their original languages, attendance at daily Mass was also enjoined upon us Catholic students, as well as an annual three-day retreat based on the first week of the Spiritual Exercises. Within two decades, however, the curriculum had radically changed, opening up to new fields of studies and specialization as the Church and the Jesuits prepared to encounter the modern age after 400 years of following tradition. Certainly, the intentions were noble and the results rewarding, even if the price in manpower was unforeseen. Where do the Jesuits go from here? No one knows for sure, but their educational institutions will still exist as monuments to that tradition and the intellectual challenges that they met and continue to meet with "passionate uncertainty" and the unique charism of their founder, Ignatius of Loyola.

