

How the First Jesuits Became Involved in Education **BY JOHN W. O'MALLEY, S.J.**

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In 1548, just a little over 450 years ago, ten members of the recently founded Society of Jesus opened the first Jesuit school in Messina in Sicily. That event would have immense repercussions on the character of the Society of Jesus, giving it a new and quite special relationship to culture; but it was also a crucial event in the history of schooling within the Catholic church and in western civilization.¹ Within a few years the Jesuits had opened some thirty more primary / secondary schools, but also the so-called Roman College, which would soon develop into the first real Jesuit university (Gregorian University). In 1585 they opened in East Asia a school in Macau that also soon developed into a university; and about the same time they founded in Japan a remarkable art school and workshop in which local painters were introduced to Western techniques. In Rome they hired Palestrina as the music teacher and chapel master for their students, and later in Paris they did the same for Chapentrier. They were the teachers of Descartes, Moliere, and, yes, Voltaire. In Latin America they had constructed magnificent schools of stone and brick, with huge libraries, before any serious school of any kind had been founded in the British colonies.

By 1773, the year the Society of Jesus was suppressed by papal edict, the Jesuits were in charge of some 800 educational institutions around the globe. The system was almost wiped out by the stroke of a pen, but after the Society was restored in the early nineteenth century, the Jesuits with considerable success, especially in North America, revived their tradition.

Just as important as the work the Jesuits themselves accomplished in education has been their role, as the first teaching order within the Catholic church, in inspiring other religious orders to do the same. The seventeenth century saw an outburst of such foundations, as did the nineteenth. Most spectacular within the panorama, perhaps, is the model the Jesuits provided for women's Orders, beginning in seventeenth-century France. The Ursulines are only the best known among the many such institutions that had such an impressive impact upon Catholicism and upon women's roles in society--an impact about which we were almost without clue until the recent outpouring of writings on it from a feminist perspective. I refer you especially to Elizabeth Rapley's book on the subject.²

A word of explanation may be in order. What is meant by the expression "the first teaching order within the Catholic church"? What about the monasteries of the Benedictines in the Middle Ages, and what about the great Dominican and

Franciscan teachers at the medieval universities? The Jesuits differed from these and similar prototypes in three significant ways. First, after a certain point; they formally and professedly designated the staffing and management of schools a true ministry of the order, indeed its primary ministry, whereas in the prototypes it never achieved such a status. Second, they actually set about to create such institutions and assumed responsibility for their continuance. Third, these institutions were not primarily intended for the training of the clergy but for boys and young men who envisaged a worldly career. No group in the church, or in society at large, had ever undertaken an enterprise on such a grand scale in which these three factors coalesced.

But here I want to deal more directly with how the Jesuit involvement in formal schooling originated, not about its impact. I do so because I believe there is something stabilizing, even invigorating, about being part of a long-standing tradition, if of course one understands both its achievements and its limitations and is therefore free to take from it what is life-giving and helpful and leave the rest.

Like all traditions, the Jesuit tradition has, to be sure, its dark side. Its embodiment up to 1773 has been criticized for being elitist, paternalistic, backward-looking, religiously bigoted. In its restored form from the nineteenth century forward, it has been criticized for being reactionary and repressive, ghetto-enclosed.³ Such criticisms are too persistent not to deserve attention. I merely call attention to them here so that you know I am keenly aware of them. But this afternoon I do not stand before you to criticize the Jesuit tradition or to praise it. I am here to sketch with very broad strokes how it began, what it was trying to accomplish, and how it developed especially in the foundational years. There will perforce be a certain amount of overlap with my two presentations because there is no way of talking about how the Jesuits got involved in education without dealing with the humanistic tradition, the subject of my other contribution.

I begin by describing for you two contexts for the founding of the school at Messina in 1548--the state of formal schooling in Europe at that moment, which I will develop more fully tomorrow, and the state of the nascent Society of Jesus. First of all, the state of formal schooling. Two institutions were confronting and trying to accommodate each other--the university, a medieval foundation, and the humanistic primary and secondary schools, which began to take shape in fifteenth-century Italy with great Renaissance educators like Vittorino da Feltre and Guarino da Verona.⁴ These two institutions were based on fundamentally different, almost opposed, philosophies of education.

The universities, as you know well, sprang up in the late twelfth and thirteen centuries largely in response to the recovery in the West of Aristotle's works on logic and what we today would call the sciences--biology, zoology, astronomy, physics, and so forth. The universities almost overnight became highly

sophisticated institutions with structures, procedures, personnel, and offices that have persisted with strikingly little change down to the present. They professionalized learning, something the ancient world had never really known, and that professionalization was most evident in the creation of what we today call graduate or professional schools like medicine and law. Their goal, even in what we might call the "undergraduate college" (the Arts Faculty), was the pursuit of truth. Their problem was how to reconcile Christian truth, that is, the Bible, with pagan scientific (or "philosophical") truth, that is, Aristotle. Great theologians like Aquinas believed they had achieved a genuine reconciliation, which meant recognizing the limitations and errors of "philosophy" in relationship to Revelation.

The second institution was the humanistic schools first created in Renaissance Italy in the fifteenth century, created to some extent as a counter-statement to the university system. The humanistic schools took not ancient scientific texts but ancient works of literature as the basis for their curriculum, the so-called *studia humanitatis*.⁵ These works of poetry, drama, oratory, and history were assumed not only to produce eloquence in those studying them but were also assumed to inspire noble and uplifting ideals. They would, if properly taught, render the student a better human being, imbued especially with an ideal of service to the common good, in imitation of the great heroes of antiquity--an ideal certainly befitting the Christian. The purpose of this schooling was not so much the pursuit of abstract or speculative truth, which is what the universities pursued, as the character formation of the student, an ideal the humanists encapsulated in the word *pietas*--not to be translated as piety, though it included it, but as upright character.

This education, unlike that of the university that could be protracted until the student was in his thirties or forties, was concluded in one's late teens. At that point the student could enter the active life that was to be his future. By the early decades of the sixteenth century these secondary schools had begun to spread outside Italy to many other countries of Western Europe. When we think of the sixteenth century, we automatically think of the religious controversies unleashed by Luther and of the great voyages of discovery and conquest. What we also need to realize is that it was an age mad for education, when support for it and belief in its therapeutic powers for the good of society reached an almost unprecedented peak.

That is the first context that I need to set. Now let us turn to the second, the founding of the Society of Jesus. As you know well, this began with the association together of six, then ten, students at the University of Paris in the early 1530s. Ignatius Loyola, a layman, was the leader of the group, their spiritual guide, who brought them all, one by one, to deeper religious conversion through the *Spiritual Exercises* he had already composed. These ten eventually decided they wanted to be missionaries to the Holy Land; but when that plan fell through, they went to Rome to place themselves at the disposition of the Pope, and then

in 1539-40 decided on their own initiative to stay together to found a new religious Order .

The basic impulse behind the new Order was missionary. They formulated for themselves a special "fourth" vow that obliged them to travel anywhere in the world where there was hope of God's greater service and the good of souls--a vow often misunderstood as a kind of loyalty oath to the Pope, whereas it is really a vow to be a missionary. Even as the Order was receiving papal approval in 1540, St. Francis Xavier was on his way to India, thence to Japan, and almost to China before he died in 1552. The missionary impulse would continue to define the Order down to the present.

From the *Spiritual Exercises*, however, the Order had another important impulse, and that was to interiority, that is, to heartfelt acceptance of God's action in one's life through cultivation of prayer and reception of personalized forms of guidance in matters pertaining to one's progress in spiritual motivation and in purity of conscience. Derived from the *Exercises*, this impulse was a kind of recapitulation of the early religious experience of Ignatius. This call to interiority was one of many alternatives in the sixteenth century to the almost arithmetic and highly ritualized forms of religious practice that were in great vogue. It is important to note that the Jesuits did not begin because of some mandate from above or even because they wanted to deal with institutional issues besetting sixteenth-century Christianity, but because each of them sought peace of soul and a more deeply interiorized sense of purpose that they hoped to share with others.

The impulse to interiority manifested itself even in the way the Jesuits went about the teaching of catechism to adults and children, one of the first ministries they undertook. Catechism meant teaching the rudiments of Christian belief and practice with a view to living a devout life. The contents of the teaching was the Apostles Creed, the Ten Commandments, and basic prayers, but also included the so-called spiritual and corporal works of mercy--feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, welcoming the stranger. These were ultimately derived from the 25th chapter of Matthew's gospel, where Jesus said that to do these things for the needy was to do them to *Him*. The motivation was powerful. In the sixteenth century the practice of these works, this art of Christian living, was called *Christianitas*--and in my opinion was what the Jesuits were fundamentally all about once they began to work together, that is, persuading and teaching others how to be Christians in the fullest sense, with a special awareness of social responsibility.[6](#)

Three aspects of the spiritual development that Ignatius Loyola himself underwent are pertinent here. The first I would call the primacy of personal spiritual experience. While Ignatius underwent his great conversion at the castle of Loyola in 1521 when recovering from his battle wounds and especially when immediately thereafter spending months in prayer and contemplation at the little

town of Manresa outside Barcelona, he became convinced that he was being taught by God alone--taught through his experience of joy and sadness, of hope and despair, of desire and revulsion, of enlightenment and confusion. Through all this God was trying to communicate with him, in a personal and direct way, so as to guide him in his life and choices. It was on this conviction that the *Spiritual Exercises* were based, for this action of God was somehow operative or wanted to be operative in every human life.

An important conclusion follows from this premise that had--or at least ought to have had--some importance for the Jesuit tradition of education. That is, it is of the utmost importance for every human being to attain personal, inward freedom, so as to be able to follow the movements toward light and life that God puts within us, or, if you prefer a less religious formulation, to allow us to live our lives in ways that satisfy the deepest yearnings of our hearts.

The second aspect, also related to Ignatius's personal evolution into spiritual maturity, we can call his "reconciliation with the world." At the beginning of his conversion at Loyola in 1521 and the early months at Manresa, he gave himself over to severe fasting and other penances, let his hair and his fingernails grow, dressed himself in rags. But as his spiritual enlightenments continued, he began to modify this behavior and then give it up altogether, as he grew to love and see as a gift of god the things he earlier feared. He changed from being a disheveled and repulsive-looking hermit to a man determined to pursue his education in the most prestigious academic institution of his day, the University of Paris. He was on the way toward developing what might be called a world-friendly spirituality.

While at the University, he, at least in some limited way, studied the theology of Aquinas, in which he would have found justification for this change, for of all Christian theologians Thomas was the most positive in his appreciation of this world--intent, as I indicated, on reconciling nature and grace, reconciling Aristotle and the Bible, reconciling human culture and religion, so that they are appreciated not in competition with each other but in cooperation, both coming from God and leading to God. Ignatius must have found in Aquinas confirmation for the last and culminating meditation in the *Exercises*, the meditation on the love of God, for it contains insights along this line. The conclusion Ignatius drew from these insights was that God could be found in all things in this world, for they were created good, found in all circumstances (except of course in one's personal sin). The Jesuit *Constitutions* would later specify Aquinas as the special theologian to be cultivated in the order.⁷

As Saint Ignatius evolved in his own life from being a hermit to being reconciled with the world, he simultaneously developed the third aspect of his spirituality that is pertinent for our topic. He ever more explicitly and fully saw the Christian life as a call to be of help to others. This desire appeared in the earliest days of his conversion at Loyola, but became ever stronger and more pervasive. No expression appears more often in his correspondence--on practically every

page--than "the help of souls." That is what he wanted the Society of Jesus to be all about.

As the years wore on, he also evolved into a believer in social institutions as especially powerful means for "the help of souls." This is exemplified most dramatically in his work in founding the Society of Jesus and in saying goodbye to what he called his "pilgrim years" to become the chief administrator in that institution from 1541 until his death in 1556. This change in Ignatius has been little emphasized by historians, but it is obvious and of paramount importance. From 1521, the year of his conversion, until practically 1540, he was either on the road or leading the rootless life of a student. That ended with the founding of the Society, and it can be taken as a symptom in him of a deeper psychological shift. This evolution prepared the way for the Jesuits undertaking formal schooling as their primary ministry.

The road to that decision, however, was not easy or straight. The original ten founding members of the Society were, "cumulatively," an extraordinarily learned group, all graduates of the University of Paris, which was still the most prestigious academic institution in Europe. As they envisaged the Society in the foundational documents of the earliest years, they not only did not foresee Jesuits as schoolteachers, but they expressly excluded it as a possibility for themselves. In fact, they decided that they would not even teach the younger members of the Order but send them to already established universities.

Nonetheless, they gradually began to offer some instruction to younger Jesuits, and from this humble beginning the idea began to arise in the Society and to some extent outside the Society that members might do some formal teaching--on a restricted basis and in extraordinary circumstances. This gentle but momentous shift of perspective took place within a three-or four-year period, leading up to 1547.

By that year, the Society of Jesus had several hundred members, many of them with humanistic secondary education and many of them located in Italy. Those who had been trained outside Italy, especially in Paris, realized that they had learned some pedagogical principles practically unknown in Italy and that allowed students to make fast progress. This was the so-called "Parisian method," about which Fr. Codina, the international expert on the subject, has so well informed us. Most of the elements have persisted in schools up to this day to the point we cannot imagine education without students being divided into classes, with progress from one class to a higher one in a graduated system. We also at least pay lip service to the idea that the best way to acquire skill in writing and speaking is not simply to read good authors but to be an active learner by being forced to compose speeches and deliver them in the classroom and elsewhere. Particularly important for the Jesuit system was the specification that it was not enough to read great drama; students should act in them, and such "acting" often had to include singing and dancing. This Parisian style of

pedagogy would give the Jesuits an edge in Italy that made their schools more attractive than the alternatives.

Thus the stage was set for the Jesuits to enter the world of formal education. In place was an educational theory compatible with their self-definition, that is, the *pietas* of the humanists correlated with the inculcation of *Christianitas* that was their mission. Moreover, schools were a ready-made institution in which to perform one of the works of mercy--instructing the ignorant. When St. Ignatius spoke of the schools, he in fact described them as a work of charity, a contribution to what he called the "common good" of society at large. The schools were a way of "helping." He and other Jesuits also saw that the schools gave them a special entree into the life of the city and into the lives of parents of their students. Finally, the Jesuits had techniques and pedagogical principles that would make them especially successful teachers. In other words, it was something that by talent, background, and training they were highly qualified to do.

Yes, the stage was set, but there was no guarantee the play would be performed. The Jesuits could very easily have stuck to their original resolve and not become involved in offering instruction on any regular basis. There is no indication from these early years that Ignatius was guiding the Society in this direction or that he entertained any thoughts that formal schooling might be a venture the Society might explore. Why should he? No religious Order had ever undertaken such an enterprise. The Jesuits, I think we have to admit, got into education almost by the back door.

In 1547, some citizens of the city of Messina, prompted by a Jesuit named Domenech, who had been working in Sicily for some time, asked Ignatius to send some Jesuits to open what we would call a secondary school in the humanist mode to educate their sons. Somehow, in the minds of Domenech and other influential Jesuits, this idea had been germinating. Negotiations opened, with the citizens of Messina offering to supply food, clothing, and lodging not only for the five Jesuit teachers but also for as many as five young Jesuits who might also study there. Ignatius accepted the invitation, surely in part because he saw it as an opportunity to get funding for the education of Jesuits themselves; but he must also have sensed something more profound, though we have no information as to what was passing through his mind at the time. In any case, he gathered for the venture ten of the most talented Jesuits in Rome. The school opened the next year, and, despite many tribulations, it was in the main a resounding success. A few months later, the senators of the city of Palermo petitioned for a similar institution in their city, and Ignatius acquiesced--with similarly happy results.

With that, enthusiasm for this new ministry--new to the Jesuits and new to the Catholic Church--seized Jesuit leadership, and school after school was opened, including the Roman College in 1552, which as I said would develop into the first

real Jesuit university. It seems that once they made the decision to create schools of their own, they easily accepted the idea that some of these might be universities where the so-called "higher disciplines" like theology and philosophy would be taught.

By 1560, a letter from Jesuit headquarters in Rome acknowledged that the schools had become the primary ministry of the Society, the primary base for most of the other ministries.⁸ The Order had in effect redefined itself. From a group imaging itself as a corps of itinerant preachers and missionaries it, without ever renouncing that ideal, now reframed it with a commitment to permanent educational institutions. By 1773, the Jesuit network of some 800 educational institutions had become the most immense operating under a single aegis on an international basis that the world had ever seen.

What did the Jesuits hope to accomplish by these schools? Why did they do it? It is often said that in them the Jesuits wanted to oppose Protestantism and promote the reform of the Catholic Church. Certainly these reasons came to play a role, and in certain parts of Europe the defense of Catholics against Protestantism and then a counterattack played a large role in Jesuit self-understanding and mission, especially by the end of the sixteenth century and into the seventeenth. But these reasons were not at the core of their motivation, especially when they worked in territories where Protestantism was not seen as a threat, which are the territories in fact where most Jesuits lived and worked.

Their real goals for their secondary schools were those I have already suggested, borrowed more or less from the humanists themselves. Pedro Ribadeneira, one of the important early Jesuits, explained the purpose of Jesuit schools in a letter to King Philip II of Spain by saying *institutio puerorum, reformatio mundi*--I will tone him down a little bit by translating it as "the proper education of youth will mean improvement for the whole world."⁹ Ribadeneira was simply echoing the principal article in the humanists' creed--for their faith in their style of education was ardent and their expectations high. Exaggerated though those claims might sound today, even ridiculous, like any great faith they had a certain self-fulfilling dynamism. Don't you agree: an educator who has no faith in the high potential of the enterprise, no matter how defined, is hardly an educator at all?

Other early Jesuits were more modest and down to earth than Ribadeneira in what they expected, while still believing firmly in the value of the schools for society at large. In this regard they rode the enthusiasm of their times. Juan Alfonso de Polanco, executive secretary of the Society from 1547 until 1572, at one point drew up for his fellow Jesuits a quasi-official list of fifteen reasons for the schools, in which, it is interesting to note, opposing Protestantism and reforming the Catholic Church are not even hinted at. Among Polanco's reasons are that poor boys, who could not possibly pay for teachers, much less for private tutors, will make progress in learning and that their parents will be able to satisfy

their obligation to educate their children. The final reason he gives is the most encompassing and reveals the social dimension of the whole undertaking: "Those who are now only students will grow up to be pastors, civic officials, administrators of justice, and will fill other important posts to everybody's profit and advantage."[10](#)

The schools, in other words, were, as I said earlier, undertaken as a contribution to the common good of society at large. This was true as well for the Jesuit universities, where the cultivation of the sciences would be especially noteworthy, for, we need to remind ourselves, "philosophy," that central plank in the "undergraduate" curriculum, meant for the most part "natural philosophy," that is, the sciences. Moreover, the basic design for the universities, in accordance with the tradition of the University of Paris, put theology as the preeminent "graduate school," the culmination of the system. In the religiously turbulent sixteenth century, the Jesuits realized the importance of well-trained theologians.

The Jesuits were a Roman Catholic religious order, and they of course retained their religious aims. But, especially with the schools, they began to have an altogether special relationship to culture and to have a more alert eye for what they called "the common good." In other words, the "help of souls" was not just help in getting people to heaven, but it included in a noteworthy way concern for the well-being of the earthly city. It was thus less exclusively "churchy" than we have sometimes been led to believe, partly because, I am convinced, of their spiritual vision of the world as "charged with the grandeur of God."

One of the special features of the Jesuit schools was that they were open to students from every social class. This was made possible by Ignatius's insistence that, in some fashion or other, the schools be endowed, so that tuition would not be necessary. In their ministries he wanted the Jesuits to minister to anybody in need, regardless of social status or socioeconomic class. Regarding the schools, he specifically enjoined that they be open "to rich and poor alike, without distinction."[11](#)

Jesuit schools even in the beginning are usually described as catering to the rich, and there is no doubt that over the course of the years and then of the centuries most of the schools tended to move in that direction. But this was far, far from the original intention, never actualized in the degree usually attributed to it, and insofar as it occurred was the result not so much of deliberate choices as of the special nature of the humanistic curriculum. That curriculum postulated the Latin and Greek classics as its principal subject matter, with appreciation for literature and eloquence as its primary focus. Such an education simply did not appeal to many parents and potential students, who preferred a more "practical" education in the trades or in commercial skills. The same could be said *a fortiori* for the kind of training the universities offered. In any case, while the Jesuits of course had no idea of what we today call "upward social mobility," the schools in fact acted in some instances as an opportunity for precisely that. The Jesuits

were aware of this reality and in a few instances had to defend themselves against critics who thought the prospect corrosive of the stability of society.

Were the Jesuit schools, then, identical in every way with other schools? Did the Jesuits simply do what others were doing, but with the considerable advantage that students did not have to pay tuition? No, I think that is a simplistic reading of what happened. It is true that in their secondary schools, as well as in the few universities they ran, they in the main conformed to the consensus of their age about what constituted a good education. This is a fact often overlooked when people today ask what a "Jesuit education" is. But there were some features that were special, if not quite unique, to them that began to give a special character to what they did, so that we no longer speak of them as following the Parisian style in the education but as developing their own Jesuit style.

I will describe only one of those features. Unlike some of their contemporaries, they did not oppose humanistic education to scholastic (university or professional) education, as if these were two incompatible systems of cultures. They saw them, rather, as complementary. They esteemed the intellectual rigor of the scholastic system and the power of the detached analysis it provided, and they believed in its goal of training highly skilled graduates in the sciences and in the professions of law, medicine, and theology. They saw this graduate training as especially appropriate in theology for their own members and even for a few select students for the diocesan clergy. In this instance they saw it as a help to a more "professionally" reliable ministry, for they shared the goal of both Protestant and Catholic leaders to produce a literate, more learned clergy.

They at the same time esteemed in the humanist system (primary and secondary education) the potential of poetry, oratory, and drama to elicit and foster noble sentiments and ideals, especially in younger boys; they believed in its potential to foster *pietas*--that is, good character. Moreover, this system taught eloquence, for rhetoric was at the center of the curriculum; that is, it taught oratory, the power to move others to action--action in a *good* cause.

Furthermore, from both these systems of education they appropriated the conviction that human culture and religion were not competing but complementary values, each enriching and challenging the other. Both systems taught in fact that philosophical, ethical, and to some extent even religious truths were available outside Christianity, and that these truths had to be respected. They were both thus reconciliatory in their ultimate dynamism. In the philosopher Aristotle the scholastic Aquinas found truths about the universe and human morality. In Virgil and Cicero the humanists found truths about human nature and its destiny. I do not know of any Jesuit going so far as the humanist Erasmus did in his famous prayer, "O, St. Socrates, pray for us," but some of them came close.

I am not the only scholar to suggest that the benign attitude Jesuit missionaries like Matteo Ricci took toward Confucianism in China and Roberto De Nobili toward Hinduism in India related in some way especially to the humanist education that the Jesuits cultivated for their own members to a degree no other Order ever did--they had to, for practically every Jesuit was called upon at some point to teach "the humanities," that is, the Latin and Greek literary classics.

My impression is that the Jesuits, for all that, saw the boundaries between these two educational philosophies, unlike the blur that occurs in North America today where the undergraduate college both is the direct heir of the humanistic system and at the same time, by being part of the university, partakes of the technical or even vocational training reserved to "professionals." What is education for? It is for many things, according to one's philosophy, but it is difficult to be successful in it if it is seen to be for many things competing at the same time for the same person.

The Jesuits, I believe, wanted to preserve the best of two great educational ideals, the intellectual rigor and professionalism of the scholastic system and the more personalist, societal, and even practical goals of the humanists. I am not trying to say they were successful--or unsuccessful--in doing so. Indeed, I wonder if a final resolution of such disparate goals is possible within any educational vision and, unless we clearly opt for one of the two alternatives, if we are not perpetually condemned to some compromise rather than synthesis. Already in the sixteenth century, a certain ambivalence about the purpose even of university education was introduced by the Jesuits and others, and that ambivalence persists even today, though the terms in which it manifests itself are of course quite different.

By 1599, in any case, the Jesuits had had enough experience in education to try to codify their methods and ideals, and they did so by producing the famous *Ratio Studiorum*, or plan of studies, whose anniversary is the occasion for this conference. They had tried to produce it earlier but were not able to bring it about. The *Ratio* would serve them as a guide throughout the world, really down to the nineteenth century. Basically a codification of curricular, administrative, and pedagogical principles, it had all the advantages and the many disadvantages of any such codification. It provided a firm structure and assured a certain level of quality control. It ran the danger of dampening initiative and inhibiting needed changes as the decades and then the centuries rolled on. At a certain point it desperately needed revision, but revision was resisted. Perhaps most important, it failed to highlight the larger vision and deeper assumptions that had originally animated the Jesuit educational undertaking--partly because it took them for granted, partly because they were half-forgotten. Much scholarly commentary on Jesuit education has taken the *Ratio* as almost the only document studied, with the result that what I consider most important in Jesuit education has been slighted or even altogether missed.

There are two further aspects of the Jesuit enterprise that the Ratio and most scholarship has missed and that I think are crucially important. I have become increasingly aware of these in recent years, and especially during the international conference that I helped organize two years ago at Boston College, entitled "The Jesuits: Cultures, Sciences, and the Arts, 1540-1773." Most of the papers from the conference--some thirty-five of them--have just been published in a volume from the University of Toronto Press.[12](#)

The first aspect of which the conference made me increasingly aware is the attention the Jesuits gave to the arts. Official Jesuit legislation and directives in this regard are generally quite deceptive, for they are few, and those few tend to be cautious and restrictive. The importance of Jesuit theater has long been recognized, but it has been little recognized in the American scholarship and generally treated as a subject in itself, not integrated into the educational enterprise as such.

In any case, the more I study the history of Jesuit education, the more integral to the program of the schools the arts seem to be, many of them consequences of the early Jesuit commitment to theater -- which of course was itself part of the Parisian style, which the Jesuits interpreted to mean that the plays of Terence should not simply be read but be performed. The plays, besides inevitably entailing music and dance, sometimes required elaborate sets and other paraphernalia of dramatic productions. The arts took the form of what we would today call extracurriculars, but they were done in many of the schools in a way that fitted them into a clear program--and often carried out with great expense. The great collegiate churches attached to Jesuit schools often employed architects, painters, and sculptors of the highest local standing for their construction and decoration--but not only of local standing, for the Jesuits employed in the early seventeenth century the most celebrated artist of the day, Rubens, and after Rubens's death, the subsequently most celebrated Gian Lorenzo Bernini. Thus, education took place outside the often narrow confines of the classroom.

Louise Rice wrote in the Toronto volume on the celebrations that took place at the Roman College in the seventeenth century on the occasion of academic disputations or degree defenses of the lay students.[13](#) These were great public affairs, with distinguished guests, who were entertained with instrumental and vocal music at various moments in the program, with the hall sometimes elaborately decorated according to the design of a local artist. An unexamined field in the history of architecture, it seems to me, is the development of formal school buildings as almost a new genre. The Jesuits sparked this development. At least in Italy before the Jesuits opened their schools, no such buildings existed for primary or secondary education, for "schools" were such informal institutions, usually meeting in the house of the schoolmaster. One of the great changes that the Jesuits helped promote was the development of teams of teachers--a real

faculty--for such schools, which might range from five or six teachers up to thirty or forty. A faculty of such size required many classrooms, and hence required a building specially constructed for that scope.

A second aspect called to my attention by the Boston conference is the working of the very network itself, that is, the working of the communication of Jesuit schools with one another; or, even more impressive, communication with Jesuits working "in the field" in newly discovered lands. Steve Harris has published, again in the Toronto volume, an article on this subject, which he calls the Jesuit "geography of knowledge." Harris is a historian of science, and his specialty is Jesuit science in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a subject now experiencing an upgraded evaluation among many such historians. Jesuits were committed to the university program in place at Paris and elsewhere, whose lower college was that of the arts, that is, of philosophy, that is, as I said, of natural philosophy or science. It is this curricular fact that accounts for the many Jesuit astronomical observatories and laboratories in their larger schools and for a certain Jesuit preeminence in this domain.

But one advantage the Jesuits had over others was the reports from the overseas fields of their brethren, who also had had good training "in philosophy" as astronomers, geographers, and naturalists. These reports often took the form of the "edifying letters" the Jesuits sent to broad audiences to will support for their work abroad. In Harris's opinion, it was not only the quantity and frequency of this correspondence that gave some Jesuit centers a privileged access to new information about the natural world. It was also the quality of the observation and the dependability of remote agents in executing requests from the Jesuit scientists back home for measurements, descriptions, and the sending back to Europe of natural objects, which could be examined and then put on display. The Jesuits shared this information with colleagues who did not share their own confessional allegiance. As Harris says, at least within the history of science, Jesuit letters can be found in the correspondence of every major figure from Tycho Brahe in the sixteenth century to Kepler, Galileo, Descartes, Newton, and Leibniz in the seventeenth, and to similarly distinguished figures in the eighteenth.

When the Jesuits opened their first school in Messina, Europe was not only in the throes of the great religious turmoil in the wake of the Reformation but also at one of the great turning points in the history of formal schooling. The fifteenth-century humanists in Italy had set in motion a movement that bit by bit was creating a brand-new institution--the primary/secondary school pretty much as we know it today. This new institution was of course derived from principles enunciated in ancient Greece and Rome, but it was being put into a systematic form that Cicero and Quintilian did not know. The Jesuits arrived on the scene at just the right moment to capitalize on what was happening, and they play an important role in the development of the new system. They were far from being alone in such development, but because of the way they were organized,

because of the special backgrounds they came from and then devised for themselves, their role was special. I have tried to indicate a few ways in which this was true.

These schools must of course be placed in the context of what we can call the confessionalization of Europe, for they became confessional schools, intent on establishing for their students clear Roman Catholic identity. But they had other aspects to them that were broader in their scope, as I hope I have suggested, that helped lift them out of the special context of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The Jesuits also appropriated the older institution of learning--the university. This too gave them a special role in European culture, of which science was a particularly important and perhaps somewhat surprising manifestation. By the seventeenth century, the universities began to undergo important changes, as science moved away from the text of Aristotle to more experimental modes, in which individual Jesuits took part even as the Jesuit educational institutions tended to remain fixed in the more text-bound mode.

I exaggerate when I say that the Jesuits got into formal schooling almost by a series of historical accidents, but there is at least a grain of truth in it. I find that they were not always clear in explaining to themselves or others why they remained in it or what they hoped to accomplish--sometimes repeating what sound suspiciously like bromides. But let me put words in their mouths.

First, they were convinced that formal schooling was a good thing for society at large. They were content through their schools to contribute to the common good. Second, they believed that ethical and religious formation should not be confined to the pulpit, for it was a concern much too broad for such a boundary. Third, they were not fundamentalists, for, though not uncritical, they saw culture and education not as enemies but as friends. They derived this last conviction from the basically reconciliatory dynamics of the Thomistic system of scholasticism and from the reconciliatory dynamics of the humanists' attitude toward good literature. They derived it as well from the founder of their Order who, a few years after his conversion, decided that he needed a university education in order, as he said, "better to help souls."

Notes

- 1.[\[back\]](#) For general background, see Paul F. Grendler, *Schooling in Renaissance Italy: Literacy and Learning, 1300-1600* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989). For specific background, see John W. O'Malley, *The First Jesuits* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), esp. 200-42.
- 2.[\[back\]](#) Elizabeth Rapley, *The Devotees: Women and Church in Seventeenth-Century France* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990).
- 3.[\[back\]](#) See John W. O'Malley, "The Historiography of the Society of Jesus: Where Does It Stand Today?" in *The Jesuits: Cultures, Sciences, and the Arts, 1540-1773*, eds. John W. O'Malley et al. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 3-37.
- 4.[\[back\]](#) Besides Grendler's *Schooling*, mentioned above, the best entrance into this world is

still William Harrison Woodward, *Vittorino da Feltre and Other Humanist Educators* (1897; reprint, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1963) .

5.[\[back\]](#) See the insightful article by Craig R. Thompson, "Better Teachers than Scotus or Aquinas," in *Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, ed. John L. Lievsay (Durham: Duke University Press, 1968), 114-45.

6.[\[back\]](#) For a description of *Christianitas* and its importance in the Middle Ages, see the brilliant article by John Van Engen, "The Christian Middle Ages as an Historiographical Problem," *The American Historical Review*, 91 (1996): 519-52.

7.[\[back\]](#) See John W. O'Malley, "Early Jesuit Spirituality: Spain and Italy," in *Christian Spirituality: Post-Reformation and Modern*, eds. Louis Dupre and Don E. Saliers, vol. 18 of *World Spirituality: An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 3-27.

8.[\[back\]](#) See O'Malley, *First Jesuits*, 200

9.[\[back\]](#) *Ibid.*, 209.

10.[\[back\]](#) *Ibid.*, 212-13.

11.[\[back\]](#) *Ibid.*, 211.

12.[\[back\]](#) O'Malley, *The Jesuits* (see note 3 above). See also Gauvin Alexander Bailey, *Art on the Jesuit Missions in Asia and Latin American, 1542-1773* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999).

13.[\[back\]](#) Louise Rice, "Jesuit Thesis Prints and the Festive Academic Defence at the Collegio Romano," in *The Jesuits*, ed. O'Malley et al., 148-69.