

JESUIT HISTORY IN BRIEF: A PERSONAL VIEW

Jesuit history falls into two parts separated by the period of suppression (1773-1814): the “old Society,” (1540-1773), and the “New Society,” (1814-present).

Prologue: Religious Life before the 16th Century

In the second half of the first century, “virgins” countered the absolutist claims of Rome by refusing to marry and produce offspring (they said they were spouses of Christ).

- In the 4th century, in the East, a significant minority of Christians fled the worldliness of the cities and of the church itself for the desert, where they lived as hermits instead of in community.
- With Benedict of Nursia in Italy (c 480- c 547) this venture moved West and achieved a balanced life of manual labor, study, prayer in common (“the divine office”) and private prayer—a stable force in a crumbling Roman Empire.
- By the high Middle Ages in response to major social, economic, and cultural changes, the mendicant orders emerged: the Franciscans (Francis of Assisi [1181 or 82 – 1226]), noted for simplicity of life, and the Dominicans (Dominic [c 1170-1221]) with their scholarship, preaching, and teaching. These “friars” retained the communal recitation of the divine office throughout the day, but that did not fit well with the increasing call to ministry outside the priory walls.

The Jesuit Way and Its Development through History

- In the 16th century once again, a new form of religious life appeared—the “clerks regular”—priests who were members of a religious order, the Jesuits being the most famous of these. Ignatius of Loyola was adamant about serving God, not principally in solitude or with communal prayer, but in “helping souls,” in meeting the human and spiritual needs of people. And in this age of the dawn of printing, the Jesuits had a book of their own, the *Spiritual Exercises*, a rich and highly adaptable resource for a broad range of ministries.

Cross-cultural Missions

- From its earlier days, the Society of Jesus was marked by men going out to non-European cultures to bring the “good news.” Francis Xavier (1506-1552), missionary to India and the Far East, is the best known of these, but a little later others like Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) in China and Roberto di Nobili (1577-1656) in South India pioneered a new way of evangelization that we now call “inculturation”—a presentation of the gospel in terms of the language and culture being approached.
- Some claim that the principles of inculturation were compromised with the South American Guarani, a nomadic people and as such vulnerable to being captured by white raiders and sold into slavery. To protect them, the Jesuits gathered them into community compounds (“Reductions”), taught them agriculture and fine arts and through these Christian religion. They had their own government. It was a work of genius—recognized even by European intellectuals of the day otherwise hostile. Still, it did away with the natives’ original culture, and, ultimately, it

couldn't save them. With the expulsion of the Jesuits from Portuguese and Spanish territories (mid-18th century), the Reductions were destroyed.

Schools

- The other major ministry of the Society was not foreseen by Ignatius and his early companions. In 1547 a request came from the city of Messina in Sicily to open a “college” for lay students. Ignatius must have sensed great apostolic possibilities here; he sent some of his best men to start the school.
- By the time the order was suppressed in 1773, the number of schools had grown to more than 800—all part of a system of integrated humanistic education that was international and brought together in common enterprise men from various languages and cultures. Among these Jesuits were some of the most distinguished scholars and teachers in every known discipline of the time.

The Suppression and Its Effects

- The suppression of the Jesuit order by the pope in 1773 and the imprisonment for life of superior general Lorenzo Ricci (1703-1775) were tragic events. The suppression meant the loss of all the schools and the other ministries connected with them. It also meant the loss of mission endeavors like the Reductions in South America, where European powers held sway.
- Perhaps the greatest loss in the long run was the Jesuits' own loss of continuity with their roots. When the order was restored in 1814, many who had been Jesuits had died, and those still living were often aged and infirm. The living tradition of Ignatian/Jesuit spirituality had been sorely interrupted.
- Jesuits, schools, and scholars in Europe never regained the prominence they previously had. Besides, they were largely involved in the resistance to modern thought and culture that characterized Catholic intellectual life through the 19th century and beyond.

The Nineteenth Century

In the century after the French Revolution (1787-1799), Europe and Latin America swung back and forth between monarchy and anticlerical republicanism. When the latter prevailed, the Jesuits were often expelled from the country. The British Isles and the U.S. offered a more hospitable climate. It is there we turn and look at two remarkable Jesuits and their ministries.

- Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889) was a convert from the Anglican Church to Roman Catholicism at Oxford. As a Jesuit he taught classical language and literature in Jesuit schools. He worked hard at his teaching and gained little satisfaction from it. He also spent a good number of years in parish ministry with similar results. All his lifelong he suffered from depression. Indeed, in the last years of his life, in Dublin, he wrote the “Terrible Sonnets” about his sense of futility in his life and work, turning his frustration into high verbal art. For these and for his earlier poems, he must be considered one of the great lyric poets of the English language. His judgment about the society—“brilliance does not suit us” shows his ignorance about the “Old

Society “ and belies his own stature, only recognized with the publication of his poetry 30 years after his death.

- Peter De Smet (1801-1873), Belgian-born, came to the U.S. as a young man and entered the Society of Jesus here. He was in St. Louis when Flathead Indians from beyond the Rockies came looking for Blackrobes to instruct them in Christianity. De Smet responded; he journeyed to the tribe and then proceeded to establish mission stations not only for them, but for most of the tribes in the vast Oregon Territory.

Meanwhile Jesuit confreres of De Smet established colleges all over the U.S. These schools experienced a new and demanding challenge: none of them were endowed. They had to charge tuition, and their leaders were forever struggling to raise the needed funds that tuition didn't cover.

De Smet himself led a “double life”—in the U.S. establishing missions all over the Northwest and sixteen times crossing the Atlantic to raise money to support them. But perhaps his supreme achievement was the relationship of trust he built with Native Americans.

Vatican II and Twentieth-Century Jesuits

- A new era in the making with fundamental scholarship in most areas of theology. The task was being undertaken by a good number of French and German Dominicans and Jesuits. It was first of all a “return to the sources” and later a more creative engagement of systematic theology with contemporary philosophy and culture (which led to theologians being silenced). As a result, when Pope John XXIII convoked the Second Vatican Council in 1962, the church was ripe for something beyond the standard seminary manuals of theology. Most Catholics in North America, however, had no inkling of what was about to happen.
- John's purpose in calling the Council was to bring the Catholic Church “up to date” and, in effect, this 21st Ecumenical (that is, worldwide) Council (1962-1965) signaled the Catholic Church's growth from a church of cultural confinement (largely European) to a genuine world church. The Council set its seal on the work of 20th-century theologians that earlier had often been officially considered dangerous or erroneous. Thus the biblical movement, the liturgical renewal and the lay movement were incorporated into official Catholic doctrine and practice. Of equal importance with these new perspectives is the style in which they were delivered. The documents of earlier councils always had a negative tone; they listed errors to be corrected and condemned anyone who held them. The documents of Vatican II, in contrast, were written in a positive tone in keeping with the “pastoral” approach that Pope John had called for in his initial remarks to the gathered bishops.

There were at times heated interventions from the floor and a good deal of maneuvering behind the scene. Yet in the end a huge majority of the bishops voted to approve each of the documents in turn. The conviction and determination of those in the tiny minority, however, did not go away with the closing of the Council. Indeed, because they and their successors controlled Vatican offices and the appointment of bishops, they were able to promote a return to some earlier, pre-Vatican II ways.

- One of the Jesuits who inspired many just before the Council was Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955), distinguished French paleontologist, philosopher, poet, mystic, and precursor of today's ecologists in their respect and love for the Earth. He was exiled to China for decade to keep him from expounding his positive view of evolution, but China was exactly where he needed to be in order to participate in the discovery of Peking Man, another link in the evolutionary chain. He was also forbidden to publish his writings. But when he died, his non-Jesuit literary executor could not be prevented from having his works published.
- Another 20th century Jesuit, Karl Rahner (1904-1984), from southwest Germany, was also censored for a time, but later he was brought to the Council as an "expert" by the Cardinal Archbishop of Vienna, and he taught behind the scenes there. His thought is again and again recognizable in the Council's documents. When Rahner was asked about the greatest influence of his life and writings, he answered, "The Ignatian Exercises."
- A third 20th-century Jesuit, Pedro Arrupe (1907-1991), was superior general of the Society of Jesus for nearly 20 years. Elected in 1965, he was the central figure in the renewal of the Society after the Council. Arrupe had spent 27 years in Japan (where among many other things he cared for victims of the atomic bomb in Hiroshima). He is considered the founder of the modern, post-Vatican II Society of Jesus.

In 1975, Arrupe called the 32nd General Congregation, which proved to be his crowning achievement. The Jesuit delegates came to see that the hallmark of any ministry deserving of the name Jesuit would be its "service of faith" of which the "promotion of justice" is an absolute requirement. For instance Jesuit education should be noteworthy for the way it helps students—and for that matter, faculty, staff, and administrators—to move, in freedom, towards a mature and intellectually adult faith. This includes enabling them to develop a disciplined sensitivity toward the suffering of our world and a will to act for the transformation of unjust social structures which cause that suffering. Arrupe warned his brothers, if they adopted this stance, where it would likely lead. And indeed it did—to martyrdom for all too many Jesuits.

As he grew older and infirm, Arrupe went to see the pope (John Paul II) to indicate his intention to call a general congregation and resign. But the pope was unwilling to let Arrupe proceed. Arrupe spent months trying unsuccessfully to see him again. The attempt on the pope's life prolonged his unavailability. And then, on returning from a long trip abroad, Arrupe suffered a terrible stroke, losing his gift of many languages and being reduced to virtual silence. He appointed as vicar general Vincent O'Keefe, an American Jesuit and his closest advisor through his generalate. Not very long afterward, the pope sent a message telling him that he and O'Keefe were being replaced by two other Jesuits of the pope's own choosing. It was a blow to Arrupe and to most Jesuits. But then, a year and a half later, saying he had been "misinformed," John Paul allowed the Society to return to its own governance.

Epilogue: The Cristo Rey School

As a conclusion to this story, we turn to a recent Jesuit venture that brought together mission, the international character of the Society, the poor, and education. In the early 1990s, then Chicago Jesuit Provincial Bradley Schaeffer and the team around him were looking for something new to serve the

poor and disadvantaged in keeping with the call of the church and of Jesuit General Congregation 32. Shaeffer felt a strong impulse towards serving the struggling Mexican-American community in Chicago's Pilsen neighborhood. He set up a team to investigate needs and possibilities. And he arranged to bring Chicago Province Jesuit John P. Foley back from Peru.

The mission seemed to emerge: a school to serve the people of Pilsen. Foley would be president and he was joined by Judy Murphy, a Benedictine Sister, as principal. Not knowing how to pay for the venture, they hired a consultant, Rick Murray, a lay person. He came up with the solution: the students would all work an entry-level job at a cooperating company one day a week and go to school four days. Five students would hold down one job. The school would be paid for their work. Preston Kendall was hired to direct the work-study component, an essential third member of the leadership team. The work-study idea worked. They called the school *Cristo Rey* ("Christ the King"); it began in 1996. The rest is history. Not only was the school a great success, but the Chicago *Christo Rey* became a model that spread to city after city. The "*Cristo Rey* Network" was born and in fifteen short years had grown to 24 schools around the country [Fall, 2011].

For the original full essay (8 pp.) from which this sketch was made, click [here](#).