Jesuit History

Ignatius Loyola and his nine companions had no intention of establishing colleges and universities when they founded the Society of Jesus in 1540. They saw themselves as itinerant preachers, lecturers on sacred subjects, hearers of confession and givers of spiritual counsel, teachers of catechism to the unlettered young, helpers of the poor and the sick. However, they were all Masters of the University of Paris and they were formed by a spirituality that led them to prefer the ministry of the word. That preference disposed them to accept the care of schools when unexpectedly the opportunity was offered. In time this was to become their characteristic work.

Ignatius's Spiritual Exercises are about prayerful reflection and decision. Those who make them are helped to be aware of how God is acting in their lives and to choose what to do in response. It is pedagogy of the heart, a pedagogy of spiritual formation and of action. But it opens one to a reverence for all God's gifts and Ignatius taught his friends and followers to have a special reverence for intelligence and for learning. The first Jesuits founded colleges to educate the young men flocking to join the new Society. When in 1547 Ignatius was asked to open a school in Sicily for young men who were not Jesuits, he seems to have seen the opportunity as a powerful means of forming the mind and the soul. To bring people to God, he sought to form those who in their turn would form or influence many others. At Saint Joseph’s the floors in the McShain Residence Hall are named for the cities where the first Jesuit schools were established.

By the death of Ignatius in 1556 there were some 35 Jesuit colleges (we would call them secondary schools today) across Europe, and 200 years later more than 800 in both the Old and New Worlds. Ignatius had stipulated that these schools should be “for everybody, poor and rich.” Endowments from civic leaders and benefactors enabled them to charge no fees, so they made education accessible to large numbers of the less well off. They succeeded because they wedded the views of the humanists, grounded in the classical conception of rhetoric as training in clear thinking and expression, to a methodical pedagogy that they had learned at Paris. Like their Catholic and Protestant counterparts in the best schools of the time, Jesuits created a system of humanistic education that was international and intercontinental, one that brought together learned men from various languages, cultures and nations in one common enterprise. Graduates of these schools played a central role in the evolution of 17th- and 18th-century thought in Europe and in the New World. Jesuit astronomers, dramatists, theologians, linguists, painters, architects, mathematicians and scholars of every stamp were immersed in the
intellectual movements of the day.

Widespread and influential as these schools were, they existed in the context of intellectual and political forces that greatly shaped their destinies. Enlightenment culture and institutional religion were increasingly hostile to one another and Jesuits made enemies on both sides. Individual Jesuits were involved in the court politics of 18th-century Europe and thus drew the criticism of powerful figures in both church and state. The influence of Jesuit schools and their successes were resented. In 1773 the Society was suppressed by order of the pope. Reborn in 1814, its schools in Europe regained something of the prominence they had had in the 200 years following Ignatius's death, but they were heavily implicated in the agenda of restoration and of resistance to modern thought that was characteristic of so much intellectual life in 19th-century Catholicism.

In other parts of the world, in Asia and Latin America and especially in the United States, Jesuit education took on new life. Wherever Catholics settled in America in any number, Jesuits founded schools. These institutions mirrored the original movement of the population westward as well as the later waves of European immigration to the urban centers of the East and Midwest. Georgetown was the first Jesuit institution in 1789 in the United States. Saint Joseph's is the 7th oldest American Jesuit school still in existence. In 1851 Father Felix J. Barbelin, three of his fellow Jesuits and three laymen incorporated the University according to laws of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to serve the growing population in Philadelphia. Most of these institutions followed the pattern of growth typical of American higher education, beginning as six-year secondary schools or colleges conceived along European lines and growing into universities as they added bachelor programs and then graduate and professional degrees. Their development accelerated significantly in the boom years after World War II, under the influence of the G.I. Bill, when most American colleges and universities raised their institutional ambitions and began to compete more vigorously for funding and distinction. Some of these institutions, like Boston College, became universities with national reputations and distinguished programs and faculties.

Even this summary sketch suggests that the history of Jesuit education is a tapestry where religious motives, the intellectual climate, local needs, entrepreneurial opportunities, and changing social and political contexts are intertwined in a complex texture. There is no Jesuit theory of a university, but there are principles in Ignatian spirituality and Jesuit practice that suggest a characteristic point of view towards education. One source is the plan of a university that Ignatius sketched out in the last two years of his life, in Part IV
of the Constitutions of the Society, modeled on his vision of the preeminent educational institution of the Society in his day, the Collegio Romano, now the Gregorian University.

Three features of this plan are especially interesting. One is the motive for establishing a university under Jesuit auspices: to educate those, especially teachers, who will have more influence in the world of civil and religious affairs. This word "more" is central in Ignatius' spirituality. He is zealous for what gives greater glory to God, what is more conducive to the spiritual good of men and women, what demands more generosity from his followers, activities that are more likely to have an influence on the world.

A second feature is the concept of the humanities that formed the central disciplines studied in a Jesuit college. The word humanitas translated the Greek word paideia, which had come to mean both the process and the studies that developed moral goodness, devotion to truth, and a disposition to act for the civic good: languages, poetry, history, rhetoric and logic, along with mathematics, the sciences, and philosophy of nature. For the humanists these were the subjects that opened the mind, sharpened wits, deepened human sympathy, developed clarity of thought and force in expressing it. They gave students an adroitness of mind in meeting new questions, a foundation from which to explore the more important questions they would come to later in their studies.

The third distinctive feature was the integration and order that Ignatius envisioned among the subjects to be studied, leading from lesser to more important ones, culminating in the study of theology. At Paris he had learned that subjects should be studied in an orderly way, languages and humanities preceding the sciences and philosophy. And he was part of that tradition that had for centuries seen theology as the enquiry that was the culmination of the intellectual enterprise and that integrated all the parts of the intellectual life. This principle flowed out of the central theme of his spirituality, that the whole world discloses God at work. All the academic disciplines, therefore, contribute to the intelligibility of the world in their own proper ways and play a key role in making theology intelligible. Theology, focusing on the questions at the center of the mystery of God's self-disclosing activity, completes and integrates the knowledge developed by all the other disciplines of the university. To these characteristics that Ignatius prescribed for the Roman College should be added a fourth one, evidenced in the history of Jesuit schools and one that is especially instructive for our own time. Jesuit education, in Rome and elsewhere, was a network that transcended boundaries of language, culture and nationhood, one that was intercultural and global in perspective. This is arguably an essential but fragile element of Jesuit education, which could be lost as institutions are
tempted to find their own way amid competing pressures to survive and achieve distinctive identities suited to their individual missions.

An idea of the university that proposes that students should study the best of human culture, relate this to their experience of God, use their knowledge for the common good, and imagine themselves as citizens of a global culture concerned about the well being of all its people, is certainly relevant to the needs of our own time.

* Taken From: "Jesuits at Boston College: Six Propositions For A Conversation" (1994)