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Jeff Guhin

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JESUITS ARE CATHOLIC?

Jeff Guhin

I entered Dominican Volunteers USA because I felt the Jesuits and I needed to see other people. Having just finished eight consecutive years of Jesuit education, I figured I knew enough about *magis* and Manresa, Arrupe and *Ad Majorem*. I lived and worked with Dominican sisters in the Bronx, and even though I learned a lot, I complained on our final retreat that I still didn't know what Dominican meant (as opposed to Catholic or, say, Jesuit). The director of the program looked at me and said, "That's because the Dominicans *are* Catholic, Jeff. The Jesuits are kind of a separate religion."

That's obviously not true, but I'm struck by how many of my friends from Loyola New Orleans have told me they're not Catholic, or they're no longer Catholic, or they're not sure why anyone would be Catholic, but, anyways, they really like Jesuits. They're attracted to the intellectual rigor, the commitment to social justice, the lack of clericalism, and, for that matter, clerics. All of this is potentially Catholic but none if it is necessarily so: hence the problems.

At Loyola, I was part of a national movement of Jesuit university students who held our schools accountable to their Jesuit ideals. As I think back on what we were demanding, it was almost entirely questions of social justice. We all kind of bristled at Ex Corde Ecclesiae and none of us saw Catholic identity as an important fight. I don't think, looking back, I would have wanted us to do anything differently. Yet it's interesting how my career since then has paralleled this particularly Jesuit influence: I worked in Catholic family-services and inner-city education for four years until I started graduate school, and I've been an editor at www.bustedhalo.com, a website for spiritual seekers, since I was 23. The justice was important, and so was the commitment to intellectual life. But what about the soul?

It's a question Jesuits get a lot, and it's a stupid one, not to mention a false dichotomy. The Jesuits who most inspired me—the heroes I read about, the men who taught me how to live—never chose between freedom and bread; for them, work for justice and work for salvation were identical, not because one was so diluted but because any reading of the Gospel would show how neither can exist alone. However, just because the Jesuits understand this, that doesn't mean

their students do, and, as one of their students, it doesn't mean I did either. I spent two years applying



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to the New Orleans province and so I knew these men were devout: I knew from the retreats, the spiritual direction, the community Masses, and the endless conversations about praising, reverencing, and serving God Our Lord. It was Jesuits who taught me that service was meaningless without sacraments. But this lesson shouldn't only be only for the advanced student.

At Loyola, students rarely talked about the Jesuits and, well, Jesus. Depending on where they stood, people either loved or hated that Loyola's Jesuit identity could be divorced from its Catholic roots: fans loved the secular translations of social justice, while critics said "the Jesuits aren't what they used to be."

Of course, the Jesuits actually are what they used to be. It's the world that isn't. Jesuits in American higher education take for granted that their students understand the principle and foundation of their lives, primarily because those same Jesuits come from a world in which their Catholicism is obvious. But that's not the world of their students. If we're Catholic, we're Catholic because we've chosen to be: it means there's fewer of us, but it also means those of us who made these commitments are passionate and resolved. And it means that most of our nominally Catholic friends aren't sure what being Catholic means or why it matters.

So what does this mean for Jesuits? It means that they impress and excite their students as much as they always have. It means they're not, in fact, a separate religion. Jesuits don't need to become more Catholic; they just need to show how Catholic they already are. ■

Jeff Guhin graduated from Creighton Prep in 1999 and Loyola University New Orleans in 2003. He is a doctoral student in sociology at Yale University.