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In the "Old Society" How Important Was Theology in Jesuit Education?

A HISTORICAL NOTE

By John O'Malley S.J. and John Padberg, S.J.

The curriculum of the schools of the pre-suppression Society of Jesus (i.e., up to 1773) was governed by the *Ratio Studiorum* (1599). That normative document is badly misleading, however, regarding the place of theology in Jesuit education. It accords theology the culminating position in the curriculum, true, but theology was in fact taught in very few Jesuit schools around the world where the students were mostly between the ages of ten or eleven to sixteen or seventeen. The vast majority of the schools taught only a basically liberal arts course, in which an hour or half-hour per week of catechism was included. The schools were of course intent on the spiritual and moral formation of students, for which they provided largely through extra-curricular means.

In the relatively few schools that had a program in theology, the students were Jesuits — preparing for ordination and sometimes candidates for ordination from the diocesan clergy or other religious orders. In the Middle Ages and early modern period theology was a strictly professional ("graduate") discipline, like law and medicine. Nobody studied it except the clerical members of religious orders and those few diocesan clergy for whom it was a ticket to higher clerical status. That means that even the vast, vast majority of diocesan clergy did not study theology, a situation that only very gradually changed. The Council of Trent in its famous decree of 1563 establishing seminaries legislated for a morally safe environment where poor boys could learn the skills needed in their ministry—homiletics, singing, how to keep accounts, hear confessions, and say mass. It made no provision for the academic discipline of theology.

After the Restoration

The schools of the restored Society of Jesus in the nineteenth century were, in present day terms, basically a six or seven year combination of high schools and the first or at the very most

the second year of college. The four or five years of secondary education were overwhelmingly language and literature based, with some science and history included. Many students completed only these first four or five years. Philosophy was to be taught in the sixth and seventh years. In that time, sometimes only one year, were to be included logic, metaphysics, ethics, natural philosophy (a combination of physics and some material from other sciences) and mathematics. It was presumed that a pervading religious atmosphere of the school would provide further religious formation. At no time was theology included in the program as a formal academic discipline. Catechism, starting with a simple question-and-answer format and culminating in apologetics in the upper classes, was taught for a half-hour or at most a full hour once a week. In most of the Society, including the United States, this was the usual structure, with some local variations, in the Jesuit schools.

In the first decades of the twentieth century, the schools began clearly to differentiate and separate out on the increasingly dominant American model of high school on the one hand and college/university on the other. The latter institutions increasingly introduced the departmental model of disciplines, including philosophy and 'religion,' which again meant primarily some form of apologetics. Only in the 1960s did theology in its present form become part of the regular curriculum. ■

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