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"A masterpiece that closes the gap in our understanding ..."

Gerald McKevitt, Brokers of Culture: Italian Jesuits in the American West, 1848-1919

Stanford University Press, 2007. 448 pp. \$60.00

By Anthony J. Kuzniewski, S.J.

n his prayer for scholars, Thomas Aquinas asks for "sharpness in understanding, sagacity in interpretation, facility in learning, and abundant grace in expression." *Brokers of Culture*, Jesuit historian Gerald McKevitt's ground breaking study of the Italian Jesuits in the United States in the second half of the nineteenth century, reads like an answer to that prayer.

The product of long and careful research in twenty-eight American and European archives, the book traces the interaction between religion, culture and migration by studying the 400 Jesuits who came to America after being forced out of Italy in the course of the Resorgimento. Steeled to conservatism by their training and experience, these exiles profoundly influenced Jesuit and Catholic life in America as cultural brokers between Europe and America, and between the emerging American culture of the rapidly developing West and the Indians and Mexicans among whom they ministered.

On the East Coast, exiled Jesuit scientists, philosophers, and theologians added academic excellence and variety to the faculties of existing colleges. Twenty-one of the group eventually served as presi-



Loyola Marymount University.

dents of Jesuit colleges, many of them in the West. Critical of American exceptionalism that pervaded the Church and of the lack of discipline and intellectual rigor in the formation of young Jesuits, they founded Woodstock College in Maryland in 1869. Modeled on the temporarily closed Roman College, Woodstock offered a strong diet of Thomistic philosophy and theology in an ultramontane course of studies that raised hackles among some American Jesuits of less rigid mindset.

In the West, the Pacific Coast area became the California Mission

under the sponsorship of the Turin Province, while the New Mexico Mission of the Southwest was attached to the Naples Province. At the Rocky Mountain Mission, immigrant Jesuits proved to be intrepid pioneers, willingly sacrificing comfortable lives for the opportunity to spread the Gospel. After acquiring

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linguistic skills to instruct Native Americans in their own tongues, they undertook catechetical instruction, followed by the teaching of practical skills and, finally, the opening of schools. By 1895, there were eighteen schools in the Rocky Mountain Mission. With English being the second language for both teachers and students, Flatheads, Nez Perce, and other Native Americans sometimes learned to speak English with an Italian accent.

Jesuit higher education gained a foothold in the West in 1851, when Bishop Jose Alemany offered Giovanni Nobili the dilapidated mission at Santa Clara for a college. Soon there were budding universities in San Francisco, Denver, Seattle, Spokane, and elsewhere. Again, the Italian Jesuits served as cultural brokers, defending the practical course of studies against Roman insistence upon the classical program of the *Ratio Studiorum*, and allowing their students more off-campus freedom than Roman authorities wished.





Loyola University Chicago.

Catholicism and its practice, this remarkable group of men left a stunning legacy as bridge builders between continents, racial and ethnic groups, and popular cultures.

Along with his careful documentation and analysis, McKevitt allows the humanity of his subjects to shine through in their varied religious, intellectual, and cultural passions—non-Italian Californians storm about too much pasta; Father Joseph Joset stubbornly rejects table napkins and bed sheets after years in the missions. The text sparkles with literary grace: Woodstock College, where Jesuits were "cocooned in a protected subculture" (90); school masters who sought "to bottle the wine of a

centuries-old European education tradition and dispense its riches in America" (210); and the conflicting forces that buffeted missionaries "like a ship driven in one direction by the tide and in another way by wind." (240) Thirty-three well chosen illustrations, a handful of helpful maps, and a useful glossary of terms (oddly inserted at the back of the book) round the project out.

Brokers of Culture is a masterpiece that closes a gap in our understanding of American Catholic and Jesuit history. In these pages, Gerald McKevitt models the ideal of *eloquentia perfecta*—articulate wisdom—that his historical subjects journeyed so far to represent.