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## The Curriculum Carries the Mission

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# THE CURRICULUM CARRIES THE MISSION

## *Why We Still Need the Ratio Studiorum, Especially Today*

By Claude N. Pavur, S.J.

### ***An Editor's Introduction. RAS***

In his March 26, 2008 Edmund F. Miller, S.J., Lecture at John Carroll University, Claude Pavur, S.J. develops the history of and argues for the continued relevance of the 400 -year-old foundation document of Jesuit education called the *Ratio Studiorum*, the “official plan of education” which guided the curriculums of Jesuit high schools and colleges to some degree until recently. It had rules for almost everything — how to conduct exams, the daily schedule, and what to read. Its vestiges are in the continued presence of philosophy and theology in core requirements and the teaching of Greek and Latin, and in the emphasis on *elocutio perfecta*, the principle that students of Jesuit institutions should be able to speak and write well.

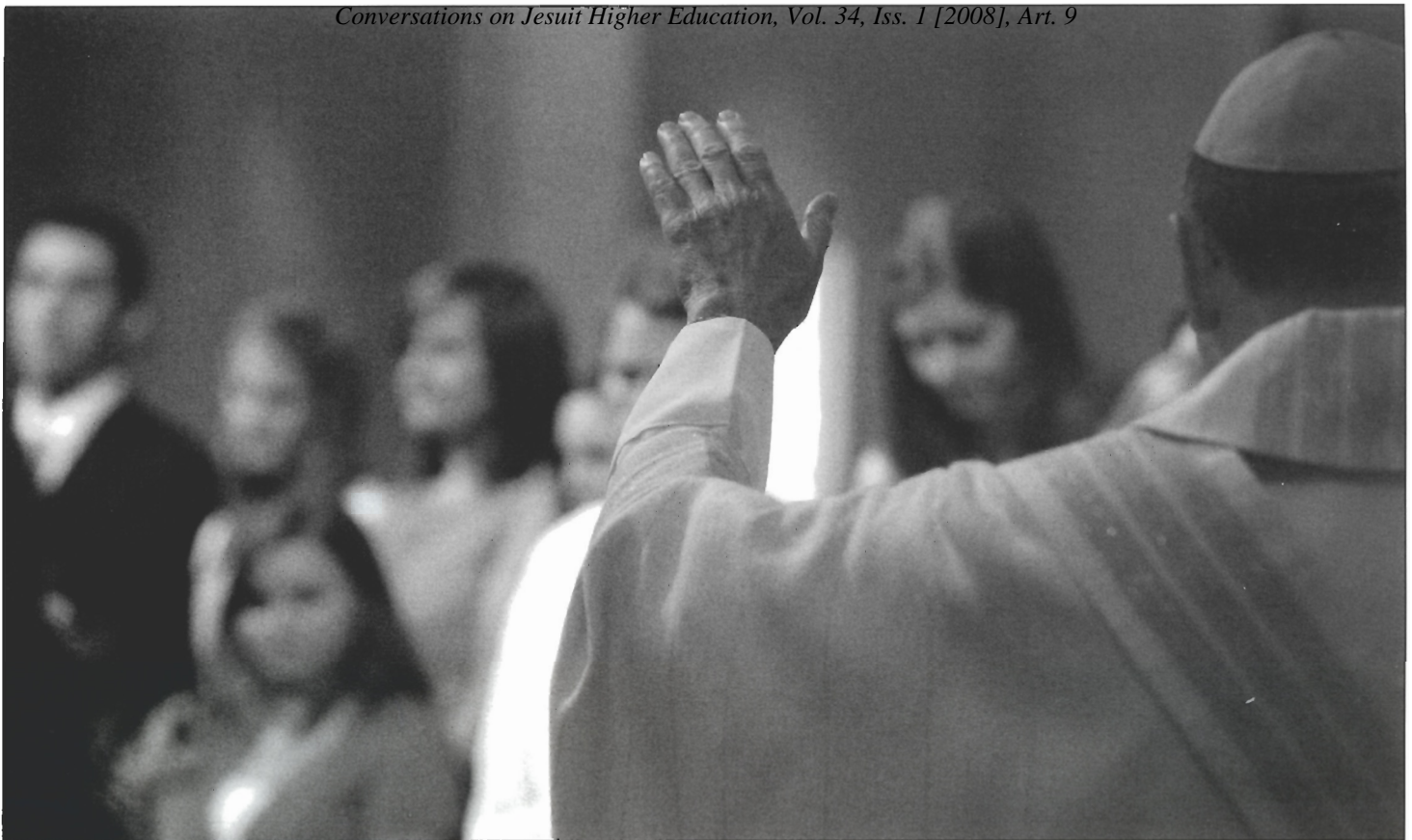
Father Pavur writes that Saint Ignatius’ educational theory evolved from two key moments: when he saw that education was necessary for him to save souls and when he decided that this required an ordered approach. This led to the *Ratio*, which took over 50 years to develop; it was not issued until 1599, and it has been revised several times after that. The *Ratio* is also like the Spiritual Exercises in that both employ repetitive activity, progress in stages, combine structure and freedom, focus on details, require personal activity and promote a specific result — a knowledge and love of God. In the last third of his address, Father Pavur makes the case that —

Recognizing the *Ratio Studiorum* as integral both to the foundations of the Society and to the foundation of its educational institutions makes reflection on it a relevant project for today, not only for the Order, but also for the schools. We need to consider what the role the document might play in the making of Jesuit education today. This is not an easy thing to do, because the task before us is not a matter of simple restoration. *The Ratio Studiorum* was composed in and for the late Renaissance. As an early modern document, it does not fit post-modern times so easily. And yet, its importance and influence for hundreds of years point to the likelihood that it was successful not only because it fit its own times so well, but also because it carried values that transcended its own time and may therefore fit our time too. What, then, are those lasting elements of value? And how do we read the *Ratio Studiorum* in such a way as to become more authentic about what we are doing today?

### ***The Curriculum Carries the Mission***

Here I would like to begin an answer to these questions by focusing on one of the most radical consequences of taking the *Ratio Studiorum* seriously as a foundational document: The *Ratio Studiorum*’s greatest contribution to our times may well be the idea of the **importance of the curriculum as the primary vehicle for the mission**. And here I am con-

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A mass commissioning new PLACE (Partners in Los Angeles Catholic Education) Corp members. Cardinal Roger Mahoney conducts the mass, speaks to and blesses the new members. ©2007 Loyola Marymount University

ceiving of the curriculum not as a static block of contents, but rather as a structured, engaged, dynamic, content-rich process involving the personalities of the teachers and the students.

There are many great things that happen on Jesuit college campuses today: there are retreats; service projects; study-abroad programs; liturgies; social events; special lectures; workshops; meetings of student- and faculty-associations and of representative governance groups; extracurricular activities (including sports); musical and theatrical events; and the activities of fraternities, sororities, and clubs of all kinds. Even though many of these are vital to student growth and essential for the well-being and identity and life of the university, none of them, I would say in light of the *Ratio Studiorum*, is as important as the curriculum.

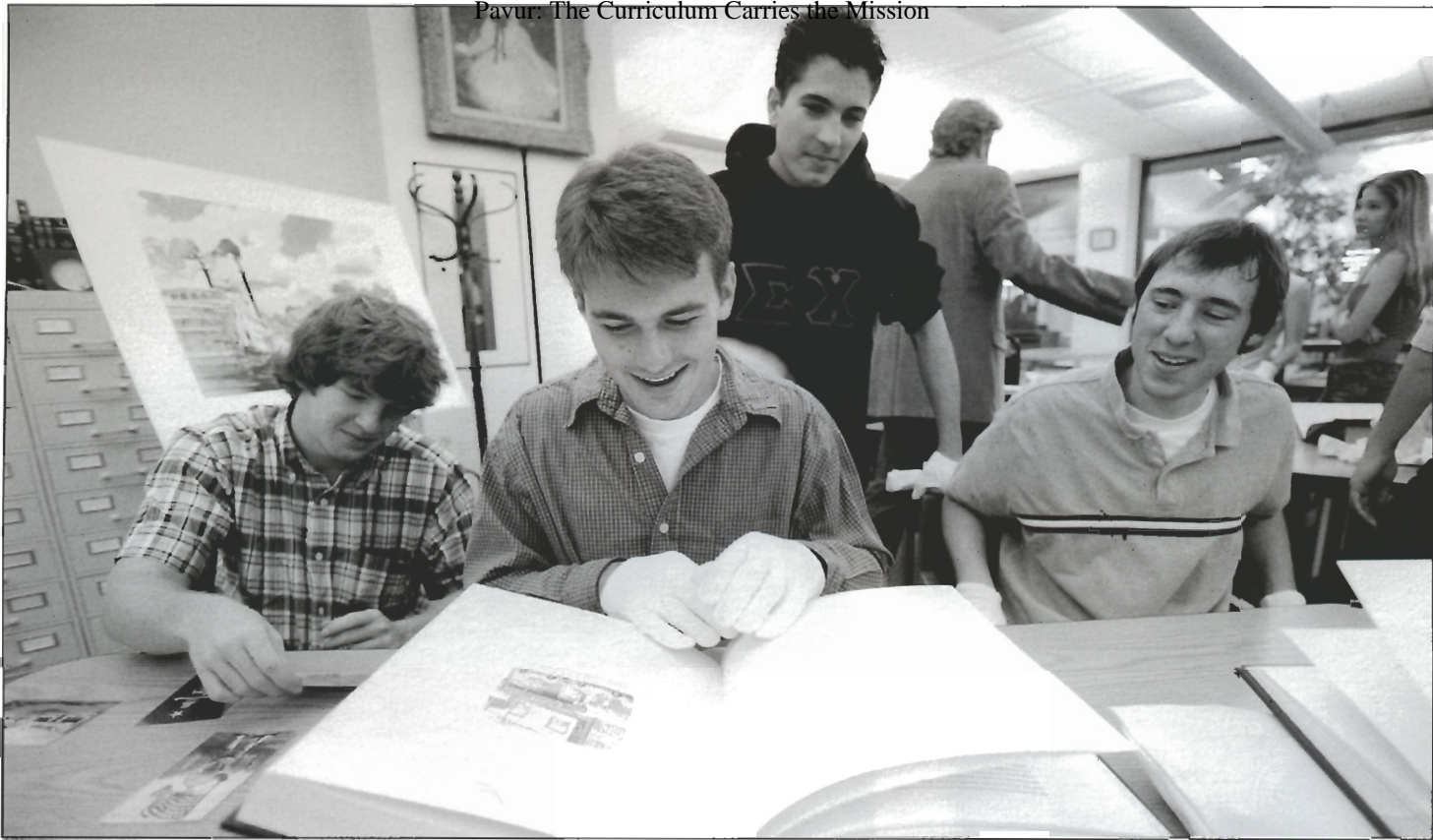
After all, the curriculum is where **all** the students must go and spend much of their time, whether or not they take part in any of these other enterprises. Without the everyday student-teacher events giving shape to a definite curricular journey, we would not even have a college or university. The *Ratio Studiorum* devotes time to the place of administration and liturgies and study-clubs and sodalities, but it puts the main accent on the curriculum: what to teach and what to learn, when and how. In the midst of an abundance of competing factors

in college today, the curricular aspect needs to be recognized as the essential bedrock of the mission.

This idea, if it is accepted, suggests major consequences. Consider the simple fact that in light of the *Ratio Studiorum*, the mission and ministry office in Jesuit colleges and universities should have a highly significant curricular impact. In fact, this is rarely, if ever, the case.

This idea also puts a special responsibility on the faculty to work out, manage, oversee, and constantly improve the curriculum. Of course, it obliges the students to follow their course of studies responsibly and get the most out of them; it also obliges the administration to oversee the project and keep it moving forward. But the main burden is on the faculty, which shares **as a group** a **corporate** responsibility for educating the next generation. Teachers therefore must devote quality-time to thinking about the curriculum **as a whole**. No discipline is an island. At some point, the dynamics of territoriality are self-defeating; they must yield to a commonality of purpose. The faculty is charged with engaging in a corporate effort to discover, to institute, and to refine a curricular wisdom. That entails a great ongoing labor. For example, it involves reviewing the major radical critiques of higher education that have been emerging, evaluating them, and working out any appropriate responses.





Honors Students doing research in Von der Ahe Library's Special Collections.

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Furthermore, at some level, the core has to be fashioned not so much with an eye to professional competency as to the education's larger purposes, namely to all that bears most significantly on the development of the students in their vocation to be fully humane, fully spiritual persons who are progressing toward wisdom — wisdom about God and the good, about nature, about ethics, about culture and society, about family, about relationships, about themselves, and about what it takes for them to live a truly good life.

To achieve success, it will also be necessary to descend to the details of course-contents and make judgments about what should be guaranteed in the educational core. It is not enough to say that everyone should have 1 or 2 or 3 hours of economics or philosophy. A *Ratio*-inspired consciousness asks further questions about the details: what exactly are we going to put into those hours? What texts are better, more appropriate, more productive, more successful than others? What topics are most

worth the students' time and attention. What best supports intellectual, cultural, moral, and religious conversion? It makes sense to pour energy into assessment practices if and only if we are agreed on what to assess.

How can the faculty achieve such an effect? It needs to develop a *Ratio Studiorum*-like vision, and that can-

not be done in a single year or even in a single decade. The *Ratio Studiorum* was the product of many voices over time, and we may need a similar investment. If we accept the principle that the curriculum is the carrier of the mission, some type of faculty "on-the-job" formation will be a high priority, something that makes it clear to every teacher that there is a distinctive corporate approach here. The effort supports the institution's academic freedom to be what it is supposed to be.

Part of that approach involves learning to think formationally. For example, a young philosophy teacher may emerge from graduate school very impressed with Nietzsche's *Twilight of the Idols* and eager to teach it. But there is a formational question that needs to be asked: Given the mission and character of our school, and even simply given basic pedagogical considerations, is this the best text to give freshmen as their introduction to philosophy? If this text is to be taught, how does it fit into the larger rationale? Where are we trying to lead the students with it? This decision, I think, should not just be left to the individual, as it often is today. There is a corporate wisdom that should at the very least be part of the decision. *Everyone* is invested in the next generation's education. No one has a blank check.

The *Ratio Studiorum* would never have succeeded without the existence of the right type of oversight structures and the *bona fide* agreement of a faculty to cooperate. For practical reasons, Jesuit college programs

## Teach Nietzsche to freshmen?

today probably also need a kind of internal governing board that goes beyond what most curricular committees tend to do, in order to support ongoing reflection and work on the curriculum.

### Order in the Curriculum

One of the main tasks would be the question of **order in the curriculum**. How does each year of college build on and extend the work of the previous year? Ever since my own college years, I have been awed by the vast variety of the course-offerings available today. I have been equally distressed by the fragmentary jumble that any curricular program seems to be forced to be. Alasdair MacIntyre put it very well in October, 2006, in *Commonweal*: Academe has produced more and more fields and more and more specialists and therefore more and more possible courses; it has not been equally diligent about developing a habit of thinking about how the parts relate within a larger totality.

The freedom to choose from a great array of courses may feel very good to us when we are college students, but does it serve us well in the long run? Certainly when I was in college I would have preferred to have been able to assume that the faculty had worked out a very solid, coherent, well-elaborated core, delivered with a consistent and even improving quality through the years. In fact, they had not done anything like this. There were simply generic distribution requirements, and the students had to fill them out as best they could.

It is time to go back to Ignatius's radical insight that it is better not to jumble things up in the curriculum but to take them in a certain sequence, with thorough preparatory grounding, and with a sense of how they fit into a larger educational plan. One of the greatest things the *Ratio Studiorum* can give us (and all schooling) is simply the very idea of *ratio*, or plan.

Electives need not be eliminated, but they do not necessarily have to be superabundant. And certainly at minimum there should always be, at the very least, a curricular option for the more ordered, integrated, and systematic approach, one that might more clearly be in the tradition that impressed Ignatius on his journey so many years ago. This option is usually not present today. I believe we need a standing team of faculty that is explicitly commissioned to work out a program that integrates the best of what might be covered in language and letters, philosophy, theology, and spirituality. Such a program would constitute, in my view, the greatest promise of Jesuit education. It would allow us to establish a distinctive kind of university that would give students a real option in types of liberal arts curricula. Surely this kind of diversity will be a valuable thing to promote, and surely it is just the kind of diversity that we should be most expected to promote.

### Conclusion

I would like to conclude as I began, with some words of wisdom:

A disciple asked Confucius about the cultivated person.

Confucius said, "Cultivate yourself by seriousness."

The disciple asked, "Is that all?"

Confucius said, "Cultivate yourself to make others secure." The disciple asked, "Is that all?"

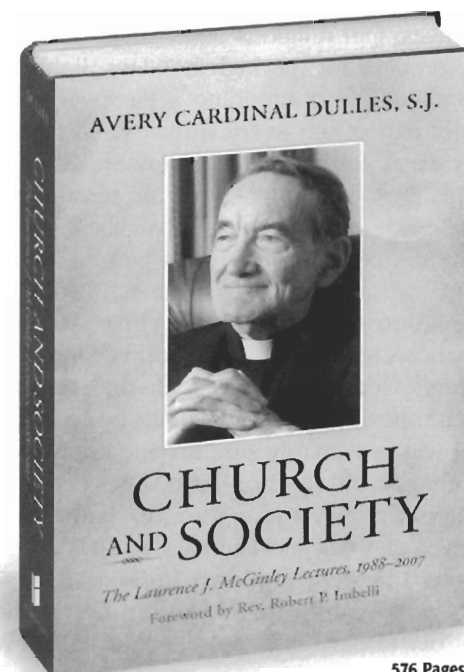
Confucius said, "Cultivate yourself to make all others secure. Even the sage kings had trouble cultivating themselves enough to make all people secure." Thomas Cleary, *The Essential Confucius*.

Just so, the *Ratio* has a very large aim. It is not just about self-cultivation for some kind of possibly narcissistic personal security; nor is it about leaping to just any kind of other-oriented action in some kind of naive activism. Rather, it looks to a certain type of energized wisdom that involves a self-cultivation, a broadened and deepened consciousness that has undergone conversion and that can act for a universal and transcendent end. That is why recovering the spirit and the genius of the *Ratio Studiorum* is one of the most important things that we can do now. ■

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