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# HUMBITION: Excellence in Jesuit Business Education

## Not all Jesuit business schools succeed in communicating Jesuit ideals

**By William J. Byron, S.J.**

Excellence is a relative term. Think of a Little League pitcher who will certainly not win the Cy Young award, but is nonetheless an excellent baseball player. Think of a 1000 SAT student who graduates magna cum laude. Excellence is a measure of progress from a well-defined starting point to a higher level of achievement. Excellence means top of the class wherever and whatever that class happens to be.

No Jesuit business school can be excellent without being authentically Jesuit. "Jesuit" is one of the markers that sets them apart, establishes them in a recognizable class. Most, if not all Jesuit business schools have miles to go in their respective efforts to articulate their Jesuit identity and integrate genuine principles of Ignatian leadership into education for business.

My concern in this essay is not with the rankings of Jesuit business schools (*U.S News & World Report, Business Week*, etc.). I'm concerned with the ability of Jesuit schools to educate the young for positions of leadership. I also want to see Jesuit business schools integrate the principles of Ignatian leadership into the educational experience they provide.

These Ignatian principles are unapologetically Christian and, when considered in the context of American capitalism, completely countercultural. They are directly connected to the person and life of St. Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556), founder of the Society of Jesus; they have broad applicability beyond Jesuit organizational life. They apply to leadership in any organization, including leadership in completely secular settings. This makes them relevant to what Jesuits do in educating the young for leadership in the real world of business. These principles are available to lay persons, indeed to persons who are not even Catholic or Christian.

*Ignatian principles are completely countercultural*

I'll use the terms Ignatian and Jesuit interchangeably here, not to deny a distinction between them, but to emphasize the availability of Ignatian principles to the laity. These principles are not "Jesuit" in any proprietary sense.

Ignatian principles can be relevant and practical as part of the leadership toolkit that graduates of Jesuit schools should carry with them into leadership positions in the 21st -century world of business and organizational life. This will by no means be easy. It will, however, be necessary if the business system is to deliver on its promise of enhancing human life and advancing the common good. The potential for positive influence in this regard is an important reason why Jesuit institutions take education for business so seriously.

Not all Jesuit business schools succeed in artic-



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ulating a clear understanding of *Jesuit* in their mission statements, nor do they meet with notable success in translating their understanding of the institution's Jesuit character into their curricula and programs. Unless they do, however, they will fall short of any claim to excellence.

There is no need to apologize for referring to the Jesuit brand in American higher education. *Jesuit* is a good brand name. Similarly, "product differentiation" and "comparative advantage" are congenial ideas among business educators. *Jesuit*—once they understand what that notion means and implies—can be of great practical assistance in setting Jesuit educators and their institutions apart from the rest of the pack. The Jesuit brand can attract students, faculty, and money to Jesuit schools of business that will not go to other less distinctive and less competitive brands. It is clearly in their individual and institutional self interest for Jesuit schools to articulate the meaning of the reality behind the brand.

## *Here lies an enormous challenge*

You cannot understand what Jesuit means unless you are familiar with the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius of Loyola. It is not enough simply to know about of the existence of the *Spiritual Exercises*; something of the *experience* of the Spiritual Exercises is required in order to understand Jesuit identity and to become familiar with the Ignatian way (the reality that stands behind the Jesuit brand).

Here lies an enormous challenge for the future of all Jesuit higher education at a moment in history when there are significantly fewer Jesuits in classrooms and administrative posts. It is a challenge that is now being met on some Jesuit campuses through the offices of campus ministry or mission and identity that are providing an opportunity for faculty and staff to experience what is known as the "19th Annotation Retreat." It amounts to making the Exercises "in daily life." Under the direction of a spiritual guide who knows Ignatian spirituality, the retreatant (Ignatius would call him or her the "exercitant") *experiences* the Spiritual Exercises by setting aside a half-hour a day for prayer and another half-hour a week for consultation with the director. Over the course of a year one can complete the full experience of the Spiritual Exercises in this way.

The Jesuit Order, founded on Ignatian principles, has numbered in its own ranks many outstanding leaders. Through their educational ministries, the Jesuits have produced notable lay leaders throughout the world who, if they draw on the Ignatian foundations of their Jesuit education, have

## *"riches, honor, pride"*

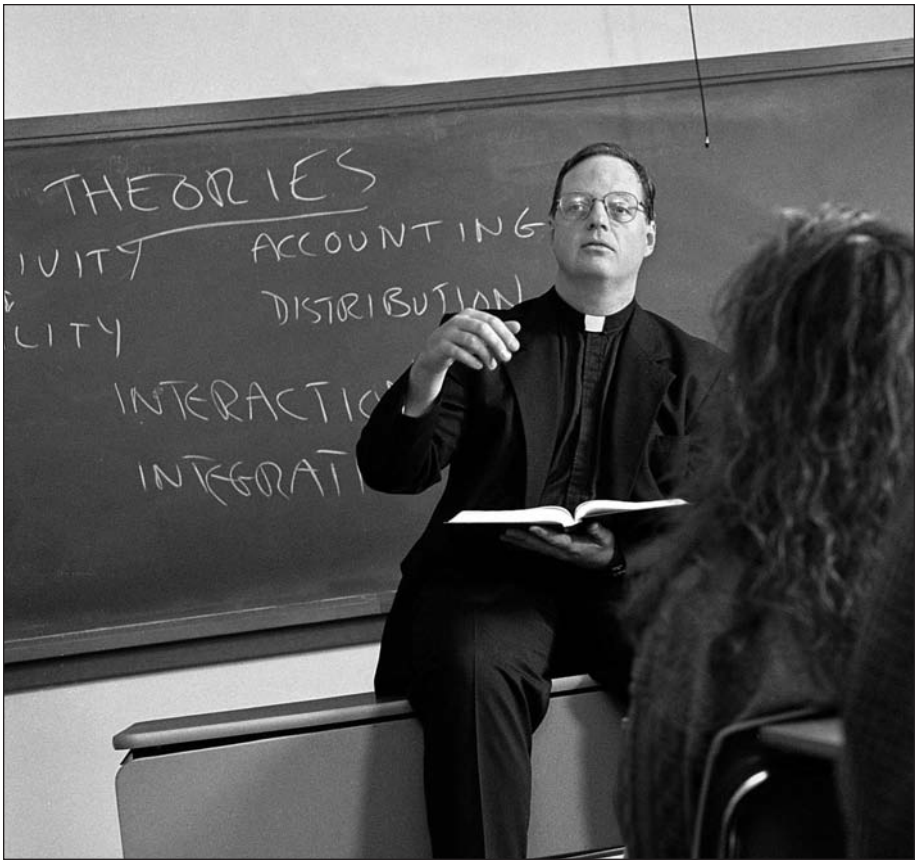
something quite special to offer. That special something strengthens their claim to excellence and can quite literally set Jesuit schools apart.

These Ignatian principles are, as I said, countercultural. They are grounded in the Gospel of Jesus Christ and stand in opposition to the dominant values that shape secular culture. Ignatius would identify those dominant secular values as "riches, honor, pride" (Spiritual Exercises No. 142). The countercultural values he recommends are "poverty, insults, humility" (Spiritual Exercises No.146). The challenge that confronts Jesuit business educators today is how to translate these countercultural values, these authentic Ignatian principles, into practical guidelines for effective leadership in contemporary secular culture.

Anyone who has been touched in any way by Ignatian influences will recall that Ignatius referred to himself in his early post-conversion years as a "pilgrim." His pilgrimage and that of those who teach and learn in Jesuit business schools might converge on the path to leadership in a world that needs principled leadership of the type Jesuit education can produce.

Ignatius worked for the "greater glory of God," understood as involving a greater, more generous, and selfless service to others. For Ignatius, the help of souls meant the help of bodies too, because he sent his men into hospitals for the care of the sick poor, into cities for the protection of prostitutes and marginalized people, as well as into classrooms for the religious instruction of unsophisticated children.

Ignatius had a tendency to see life as a struggle between the forces of good and the forces of evil. He was a mystic who saw the world from God's point of view. He founded his religious order for like-minded men called, as he was, to be contemplatives in action. Ignatius and his first companions committed themselves "to travel anywhere in the




Boston College.

world where there is hope of God's greater glory and the good of souls." The initials "A.M.D.G." and the phrase, "God's greater glory," appear on the logo or "coat of arms," of many Jesuit institutions and organizations. The Jesuit motto, "Ad Maiorem Dei Gloriam" suggests that Ignatian leadership keeps looking higher—to the greater good of others and to the greater glory of God. "*More*" — not "the most" in any acquisitive sense —but "more," "the *magis*," means that Jesuits always want to meet any challenge with a fuller stretch of effort and talent, in other words, to excel.

In the book of the Spiritual Exercises, there is a special Meditation on Two Standards (SpEx, No.136ff.), *"the one of Christ, our Supreme Commander and Lord, the other of Lucifer, the mortal enemy of our human nature."* (A "standard," as used here, is a military banner or "guide on" employed to lead forces in battle.) The following paragraphs, excerpted from that meditation, pertain to the Standard of Christ (SpEx 145-146). Ignatius states that "Christ calls and desires all persons to come under his standard," and then invites the retreatant, in an exercise of the imagination, to place him- or herself in the presence of Christ and listen.

> Consider the address which Christ our Lord makes to all his servants and friends whom he is sending on this expedition. He recommends that they endeavor to aid all persons, by attracting them, first, to the most perfect spiritual poverty and also, if the Divine Majesty should be served and should wish to choose them for it, even to no less a degree of actual poverty; and second, by attracting them to a desire for reproaches and contempt, since from these results humility.
>
> In this way there will be three steps: the first, poverty in opposition to riches; the second, reproaches or contempt in opposition to honor from the world; and the third, humility in opposition to pride. Then from these three steps they should induce people to all the other virtues.

The Standard of Christ offers this counter-cultural Ignatian principle of leadership: *The three steps to genuine success are poverty as opposed to riches; insults or contempt as opposed to the honor of this world; humility as opposed to pride. "From these three steps let them lead men to all other virtues."* (SpEx 146).

It was remarked in 2008 by Jesuit Cardinal Carlos Martini that delivery of the Spiritual Exercises, particularly the proclamation of the Standard of Christ, is "the service that the Society of Jesus is called to perform for the Church today." To the completely secular eye, that will be seen as no service at all. To the eye of faith, acceptance of the genuine Ignatian vision and values will be seen as a form of liberation that frees a person to become an effective leader.

There are, according to St. Ignatius, three levels of alignment of one's will with the will of God. The first is necessary for salvation. "I so subject and humble myself as to obey the law of God our Lord in all things" (SpEx No.165). This level of humility is thus understood as obedience to God's will. The second kind or degree of humility means "that I neither desire nor am I inclined to have riches rather than poverty, to seek honor rather than dishonor, to desire a long life rather than a short life, provided only in either alternative I would promote equally the service of God our Lord and the salvation of my soul" (SpEx No.166). This is what is known as Ignatian "indifference"—humility thus understood eliminates one's personal desire as finally decisive.

## Byron's Words Reach a Young Man Getting Started

Despite how far society has advanced technologically, the tenets of true leadership have remained timeless, and Fr. William Byron, S.J. has artfully collected and presented those principles in a way that they is accessible to all.

To listen, to speak, to read, to write, to think, remember, decide, effect change and, finally, serve – yes, this is what it is to lead. Whether a young person is looking to assume a leadership role or simply become a better leader than he or she already is, Byron has something to offer.

In my early leadership roles I often used the examples set by my childhood role models, and my limited life experiences, to help guide my decisions. Now, as I make my way through the professional world (and this economy), knowing how to lead is more important than ever. A resource like Byron's offers invaluable insights to the young person, with the chapter on ethics being especially poignant. It is the one area leaders have historically found challenging.

Can one be a leader on Facebook? Can you show leadership while commenting on a controversial YouTube video? Is it possible to be a leader during this social network renaissance? These are issues faced by today's future leaders. If there is anything that you can pull from the pages of Next Generation Leadership, it is that the answer to all is a resounding, "Yes." In this age of cyber-bullying young leaders will learn more than to just take a stand for the weak, they will learn how.

Byron's book captures the essence of leadership in such a matter-of-fact manner that anyone can take something away from its pages. You would be hard-pressed to find better. Great leaders may still be hard to come by, but perhaps now they will be a little easier to find.

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The third or highest degree of humility implies the desire to be like Christ who is poor, despised, and deemed foolish.

This third is a high level or degree of sanctity—a goal to be sought, a condition to be valued. Ignatius says that the one making the Exercises "should beg our Lord to deign to choose him [or her] for this kind of humility...provided equal praise and service be given to the Divine Majesty" (SpEx No.168).

The leadership lesson to be derived from a consideration of the Third Degree of Humility can be explained by reference to a secular setting completely unrelated to the context of Ignatian spirituality, namely, a back-office service company SEI Investments in Oak, Pennsylvania, where the

## *Think Humbition*

word "humbition" is held up for praise and imitation. "At SEI, the most effective leaders exude a blend of humility and ambition—humbition—that relies on the power of persuasion rather than formal authority" (See William C. Taylor and Polly LaBarre, *Mavericks at Work*)).

The Ignatian leadership principle that is relevant here is that humility, as demonstrated in the life of Christ, is a highly desirable leadership characteristic. Think of it as "humbition," an amalgam of humility and the *magis*, and you have a clue to what Jesuit business schools should be doing in their quest for excellence.

The Standard of Satan, according to Ignatius, represents a three-step strategy intended to trap the unwary and lead them away from Christ and into perdition. To ignore this warning is sheer folly. And for Jesuit business schools not to forewarn their students about this three-fold threat is a tragic failure comparable to permitting them to sleepwalk into an unknown future.

In order to enable the retreatant to consider the Standard of Satan, Ignatius would have him or her "see the chief of all the enemy in the vast plain about Babylon, seated on a great throne of fire and smoke, his appearance inspiring horror and terror" (SpEx, 140). Then Ignatius would have the retreatant "consider how [Satan] summons innumerable demons, and scatters them, some to one city and some to another, throughout the whole world, so that no province, no place, no state of life, no individual is overlooked."

And finally, Ignatius would ask those who put themselves in prayer in this way to "consider the address [Satan] makes to them [the demons], how he goads them on to lay snares for men, to seek to chain them. First they are to tempt them to covet riches (as Satan himself is accustomed to do in most cases) that they may the more easily attain the empty honors of this world, and then come to overweening pride.

The first step, then, will be riches, the second honor, the third pride. From these three steps the evil one leads to all other vices" (SpEx 142).

Obviously, there is a Jesuit viewpoint that is shaped by the Spiritual Exercises and it is clearly countercultural. When John Kenneth Galbraith's landmark book *The Affluent Society* was making the rounds in the late 1950s, the author's comments about the "basic benefits" of having wealth reflected the values of the dominant culture, but they also struck an unintended echo of the Standard of Satan. Here is what Galbraith wrote: "Broadly speaking, there are three basic benefits from wealth. First, is the satisfaction in the power with which it endows the individual. Second is the physical possession of the things which money can buy. Third is the distinction or esteem that accrues to the rich man as a result of his wealth"

The power-possession-esteem triad echoes the strategy Ignatius saw as the trap set by the enemy of our human nature. Graduates of Jesuit schools should have antennae that are attuned to these cultural currents. A Jesuit I know likes to suggest to students, who are barraged daily with televised, Internet or print advertisements that are the infrastructure of our culture of consumerism, that they should ask, "not what this ad invites you to buy; ask what this ad presumes you to be!"

Jesuit business school educators should think humbition. They should think of the importance Jesuit spirituality attaches to not being possessed by your possessions. They should also think of how far they have to go in persuading their students of the validity and practical worth of the countercultural values that underlie the Jesuit brand.

Assuming instructional and research excellence on all disciplinary fronts, Jesuit business schools will be excellent only if they succeed in making humbition part of the brand. ■

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A statue of Pere Jacques by the chapel at Marquette University.