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A Good Person Speaking Well

Eloquentia Perfecta in U.S. Jesuit Colleges: A Brief Genealogy

By Steven Mailloux

The Rhetoric Class “instructs to perfect eloquence.” This *eloquentia perfecta* forms basis of a Jesuit rhetorical tradition spanning four and a half centuries, a tradition that encompasses all of the Jesuit ministries of the Word, from preaching and teaching to running foreign missions, hearing confessions and directing the Spiritual Exercises. In each of these ministries, Jesuits adjusted their words to the capacities of their hearers and readers, practicing a rhetorical sensitivity to audience needs, historical exigencies, and spiritual aims. During educational formation, Jesuits traditionally spent a year studying as “rhetoricians,” and, as they opened their schools to lay students, the rhetoric class became central to the humanist liberal arts curriculum described in their *Ratio Studiorum* of 1599.

The *Ratio*’s “Rules for Professors of Rhetoric” require teaching language arts combined with an erudition directed at both practical utility and cultural enrichment. Erudition comes from studying the history and customs of nations, scriptural authority, and church doctrine. For a rhetorical textbook, the *Ratio* recommends the Jesuit Cyprian Soares’s *De arte rhetorica*, primarily a synthesis of the classical rhetorical theory of Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian, which was reprinted in various forms over 200 times from its first publication in 1562 through the

late eighteenth century when the Society was temporarily suppressed. Describing eloquence as “wisdom speaking copiously,” Soares argues for the educational principle of combining Christian morals with secular learning and follows Cicero declaring that rhetoric must be joined “with probity and prudence. If we bequeath the power of speaking to people without these virtues, we would not be making orators but would just be giving weapons to madmen.” For Soares and later Jesuit rhetoricians, the ideal rhetor unites the language arts with wisdom and virtue. Jesuit *eloquentia perfecta* can thus be characterized as an influential form of Christian rhetoric, a pedagogical elaboration of the classical ideal of the good person writing and speaking skillfully for the common good.

Quoting Quintilian’s definition of the perfect orator as the good person speaking well, many Jesuit rhetoricians developed his thesis that virtuous character was required for true eloquence. The seventeenth-century French Jesuit Nicolas Caussin, for example, distinguished three types of eloquence: human, divine, and heroic. There is an admirable human eloquence, powerful and beautiful, like that of Cicero and Demosthenes. Greater

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Priests preparing for mass, Gonzaga University.

Photo by Rajah Bose

still is a divine eloquence, impossible to be taught but performed by such figures as Isaiah and St. Paul. To illustrate, Caussin retells the story of the Apostle's trial before Antonius Felix, the Roman procurator of Judea, when Paul was attacked by the prosecuting rhetorician Tertullus. Paul successfully defends himself and Caussin draws the lesson: "In this incident appears how weak and meager is human eloquence, compared with the divine; here the theorhetor Paul demolished the machinations of that rhetorician with a crushing blow of the spirit."

Other theorhetors exemplify the third type of eloquence, the heroic, which joins human skill and divine inspiration, a practice developed by church Fathers like John Chrysostom, who from the time of their youth strived to improve their rhetorical abilities. Consistent with this tradition of heroic eloquence, Jesuit educators advocated teaching rhetoric combined with informed thinking, moral discernment, and civic responsibility.

This *eloquentia perfecta* remained a part of the Jesuit rhetorical tradition into the nineteenth century after the official restoration of the Society in 1814. The term still appears in the *Ratio Studiorum* of 1832, a revised version that was promulgated but never officially adopted as the universal standard by the Society as a whole. Differences in national practices and institutions had led to a diversity that resisted global standardization. In the United States at midcentury, Jesuit colleges continued to be guided by the *Ratio*; however, the explicit rhetorical theory promoted differed little from

that in non-Jesuit schools. In both, the classical theory of the Greco-Roman tradition (Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian) was often combined with the belletristic eighteenth-century British tradition (especially Hugh Blair's *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belle Lettres*. After the American Civil War, as U.S. Jesuit colleges continued emphasizing a classical course of study centered on Latin and Greek, they also continued requiring English rhetoric textbooks similar to those in non-Jesuit schools.

This textbook situation changed in the last quarter of the century, as Jesuit colleges adopted new rhetorics written by members of their Society. The most popular Jesuit rhetoric textbooks in English were *A Practical Introduction to English Rhetoric* (1880) and *The Art of*

Virtuous character was required for true eloquence

Oratorical Composition (1885), written by a Belgium-born Jesuit, Charles Coppens. Father Coppens taught rhetoric at St. Louis University, St. Mary's College, and the St. Stanislaus Novitiate as well as other subjects at several American Jesuit colleges and universities, including Detroit, Creighton, and Xavier. During the 1880s and 1890s Coppens's rhetorics were required at Jesuit schools across the country. *A Practical Introduction to English Rhetoric* became the standard textbook for

Rules for Professors of Rhetoric

(*Ratio Studiorum* of 1599)

I. Grade.—The grade of this class cannot be easily assigned to certain definite ends: for it instructs to perfect eloquence, which embraces the two highest faculties, oratory and poetry (of these two, however, the preference is always given to oratory); nor does it serve only for usefulness, but also nourishes culture.

Nevertheless it can be said in general that it is confined to three great fields, the precepts of oratory, style, and erudition.

As to the precepts, Quintilian and Aristotle may be added to Cicero. Although precepts may be looked for and noted in other sources, still in the daily prelections nothing is to be explained except the rhetorical books of Cicero and the rhetoric of Aristotle, and, if he likes, the poetics of Aristotle. Style is to be learned only from Cicero (although the most approved historians and poets may be tasted); all of his books are well adapted for the study of style; but let only the orations be given as prelections, so that the principles of the art may be seen as practiced in the speeches.

Let erudition be derived from history and the customs of tribes, from Scriptural authority, and from all doctrine, but in small quantity as benefits the capacity of the students.

“The *Ratio Studiorum* of 1599,” translated by A. R. Ball, in *St. Ignatius and the Ratio Studiorum*, edited by Edward A. Fitzpatrick (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1933), pp. 208-09

writing in the poetry and humanities class years, while *The Art of Oratorical Composition* was required in the rhetoric class teaching oratory. The latter book continued the earlier nineteenth-century combination of classical and belletristic rhetorics, but it also gave the tradition a more recognizably Jesuit character as well as adding a more specifically American dimension.

Coppens often quotes Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian along with Blair, but he also cites the German Jesuit Joseph Kleuten’s *Ars dicendi* and includes Jesuit orators as examples. Americans are prominently represented in rhetorical practice with speeches by Daniel Webster and in rhetorical theory with quotations from the *Lectures on Rhetoric and Oratory* by John Quincy Adams, Harvard’s first Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory. Coppens’s use of Adams’s lectures is somewhat surprising given the particular way the Boylston Professor explicitly rejects Quintilian’s definition of the perfect orator, writing that the Roman’s arguments “in support of his favorite position, are not all worthy of his cause. They do not glow with that open, honest eloquence, which they seem to recommend; but sometimes resemble the quibbling of a pettifogger, and sometimes the fraudulent morality of a Jesuit.” Nevertheless, Adams’s argument for continuing the classical tradition no doubt appealed to Coppens in developing his version of Jesuit rhetoric.

Coppens distinguishes among the terms *rhetoric*, *oratory*, and *eloquence*. Rhetoric is “the art of inventing, arranging, and expressing thought in a manner adapted to influence or control the minds and wills of others,” whereas oratory is “that branch of rhetoric which expresses thought orally.” To define *eloquence*, Coppens simply relies on Webster’s Dictionary: eloquence is “the expression or utterance of strong emotion in a manner adapted to excite correspondent emotions in others.” Jesuit rhetorical strategies often appealed to strong emotions, beginning at least with the rhetoric of the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises. Also typical of the Jesuit rhetorical way, Coppens notes that eloquence applies to writing as well as speaking. He describes oratory as “a noble art” and, like many rhetoricians before him, quotes from the first book of Cicero’s “*De Oratore*”: “On the influence and the wisdom of a perfect orator depends not only his own dignity, but also, to a very great extent, the safety of multitudes and the welfare of the whole republic.” Coppens discusses “national variations” in rhetoric, asserting that “American eloquence aims at the perfection of the Latin,” which emphasizes “the beauty of

eloquence, without, however, ignoring its usefulness.”

The Art of Oratorical Composition includes major sections on the invention, arrangement, and development of thought as well as on memory, elocution, and different genres of oratory. Coppens precedes all of these divisions with a section, “Sources of Success in Oratory,” which gives prominence to moral virtues along with natural talent and learned knowledge. “But far more important than any physical power in the orator,” he writes, “are the moral virtues with which nature and his own efforts, with the help of God’s grace, have adorned his soul.” To be truly eloquent or persuasive the speaker must be a virtuous person. Coppens adds emphatically: “It is the chief duty of education to make men virtuous; any system of training which does not put virtue in the first place is a false system.” Among the virtues “most necessary for an orator,” he lists: probity, temperance, public spirit, compassion for the unfortunate, benevolence, modesty, confidence, self-command, and a habit of application and industry.

The intimate connection maintained between eloquence and virtue throughout the Jesuit rhetorical tradition effectively advanced the long-standing educational goals of the Society. The 1599 *Ratio* urges that “impressionable minds” be trained “in the classroom and outside... in the loving service of God and in all the virtues required for this service,” and these same ends continued to be emphasized in the course catalogues of U.S. Jesuit colleges and universities throughout the nineteenth century. One typical formulation stresses the value of a “liberal education” in the tradition of the *Ratio*, which aims “to develop the moral and mental faculties of the students, to make good Christians, good citizens, good scholars.”

“...the quibbling of a pettifogger, and sometimes the fraudulent morality of a Jesuit.”



Jerry Hess instructs law students, Gonzaga University.

Photo by Rajah Bose.

Similar rhetorical traditions continue today at several Jesuit colleges as they reform their curricula and develop their pedagogical practices. For example, Loyola Marymount University recently adopted a new core curriculum that begins with a required two-course sequence, a “freshman seminar” followed by “rhetorical arts,” which replaces the old freshman composition course and works to train students in oral and written rhetoric in various media. According to the adopted course description, rhetoric arts “teaches an integrated set of skills, competencies, and knowledge that enables students to engage in public debate with persuasive force and stylistic excellence.”

Noting that Jesuit rhetoric emerged out of the Renaissance, the description focuses on how Jesuit *eloquentia perfecta* built on “the classical ideal of the good person writing and speaking well for the public good and promotes the teaching of eloquence combined with erudition and moral discernment. Developing this tradition in light of modern composition study and communication theory, the rhetorical arts course complements the other foundation courses with topics such as ethics and communication, virtue and authority, knowledge and social obligation.” In sum, the class aims “to foster critical thinking, moral reflection, and articulate expression.” Courses like LMU’s rhetorical arts bear witness that the Jesuit tradition of *eloquentia perfecta* remains alive and well in the twenty-first century. ■