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Mission Matters:

What Do Jesuits Mean By *Cura Personalis*?

By Anthony McGinn, S.J.

When the Jesuits try to explain the background of their mission in education, they frequently point to the experience of their founder, Ignatius of Loyola, and his early companions. Their spiritual experiences provided the ground work for the educational system that quickly developed after the founding of the Society of Jesus in 1540.

Today the term *Ignatian* is used to describe all sorts of praiseworthy educational and formational developments; some, however, are only tangentially related to the experience of Ignatius and his companions.

Sometimes the use of Ignatian terms devolves into jargon. One of the most commonly misapplied Ignatian term is the Latin *cura personalis*, which means care for the individual person.

The personal care for students is hardly a unique Jesuit value. Claiming that *cura personalis* is distinctively Jesuit is tantamount to trying to copyright the alphabet. Perhaps there have been some cultures and schools where teachers were not expected to care about the stu-

dents as persons. They are certainly the exception. The Jesuits have no monopoly on *cura personalis*, a quality one expects every teacher to have.

The first documented use of the term *cura personalis* in a Jesuit context appeared in a 1951 letter to provincial superiors by Jean-Baptiste Janssens, S.J., Superior General of the Jesuits. He urged the provincials to balance their concern for the welfare of Jesuit schools and other institutions with a care for individual Jesuits. Assignments of Jesuits should not be made solely for the benefit of the works; the provincial must also exercise *cura personalis* and consider the personal needs of the Jesuits.

Misunderstandings develop when one removes the Ignatian term from its original context. The term *cura personalis* was not widely used in Jesuit educational circles until about 30 years ago. For centuries, the Jesuits certainly practiced personal care for their students, but they did not write about it as if it were a constitutive part of the Society's charism. Perhaps the contemporary concern for *cura personalis* reflects our own historically conditioned context rather than a value deeply rooted in the spiritual experience of Ignatius and the other the early Jesuits. ■

Anthony McGinn, S.J., former special assistant to the Missouri-New Orleans Province, is currently president of Jesuit High School, New Orleans. This article appeared under "Mission Matters" at the St. Louis University website, Oct. 29, 2013.