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THE GREAT PRINCIPLE OF UNITY?

*Is the shifting history of philosophy and theology
in the Jesuit curriculum?*

By Gerald McKevitt, S.J.

Did you study logic as an undergraduate? If the answer is yes, chances are you attended a Jesuit college or university sometime before the 1960s. For most of the twentieth century, four years of philosophy, beginning with a class in logic, was at the heart of the core curriculum in American institutions established by the Society of Jesus. In addition, undergraduates enrolled in a prescribed series of theology courses. Together, theology and philosophy shined for decades as the identifying hallmarks of Jesuit education. However, it may come as a surprise to learn that this was not always the case. During the two-hundred-year history of Jesuit higher education, the function of these two disciplines has undergone several significant transformations in response to the shifting educational needs of the American Catholic population.

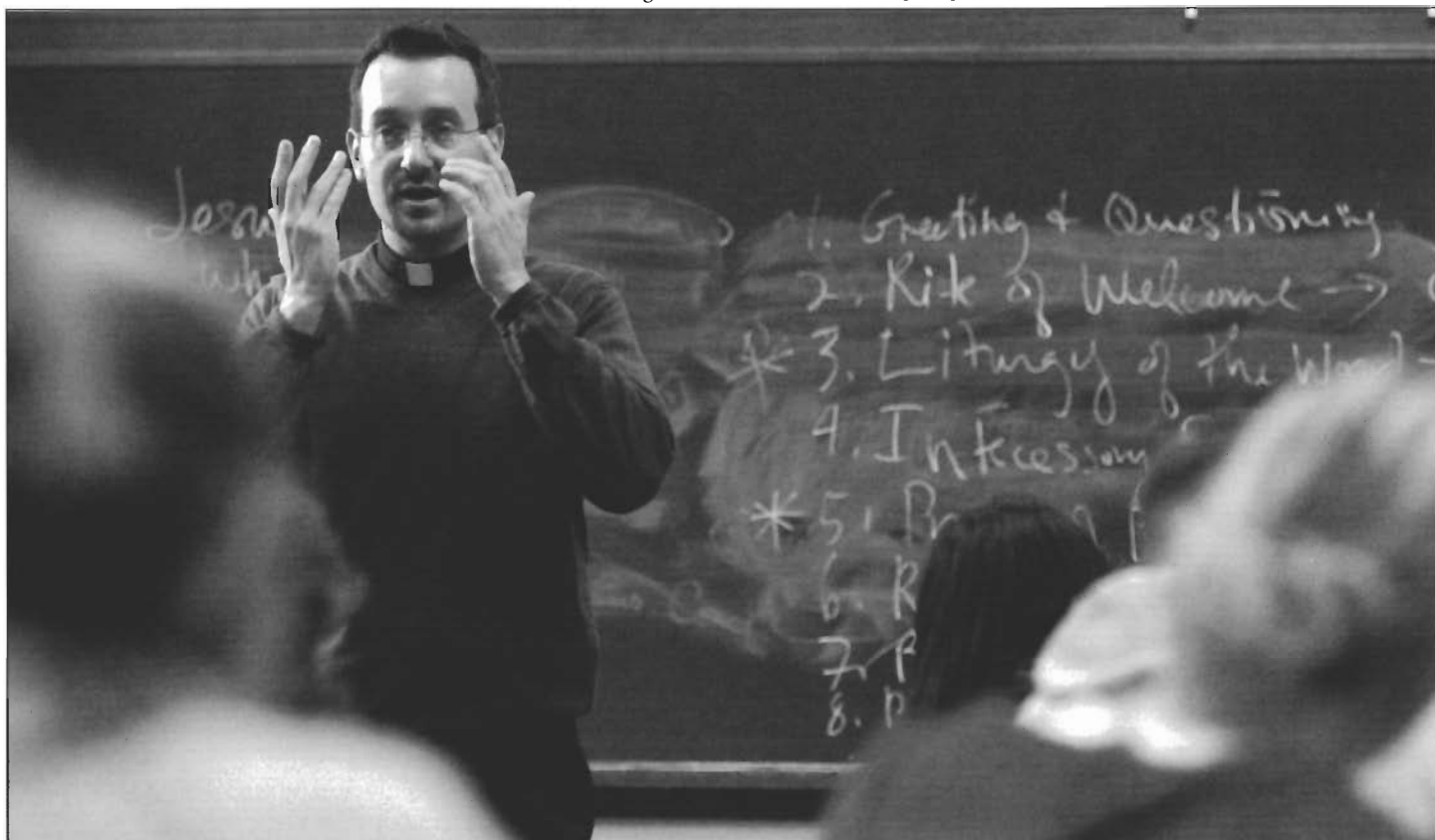
During the nineteenth century, when most of the schools were founded, philosophy occupied a central position in Jesuit undergraduate schooling as did Latin and Greek. Classical literature was viewed as an optimum vehicle for imparting a humanistic education that was both formative and informative and that honed the student's mental powers. Philosophy aided in that process. Philosophy is the greatest strength of the Catholic colleges, Joseph Havens Richards, S.J., the president of Georgetown, reported in 1897. "It knits together all the various threads of learning and makes of them one consistent and harmonious fabric. Thus it becomes the great principle of unity in education." The full course of studies at a Jesuit school took about seven years to complete, and it embraced both secondary and collegiate studies. But it was not until the seventh and final year of college that students focused on philosophy, the capstone of the baccalaureate program.

Despite its preeminence in the nineteenth-century

curriculum, collegians did not flock to philosophy. The majority of the enrollees in Jesuit institutions were the equivalent of high school pupils; collegians were usually a distinct minority. Moreover, among those pursuing collegiate studies, few stayed long enough to receive a degree. The offspring of working class immigrant families, many pupils did not seek a college diploma but merely sufficient learning to give them a start in life. "Students are not disposed to receive that education which we are ready and desirous to give," a priest wrote in the Jesuit journal, *Woodstock Letters*, in 1884. They are too anxious to finish their college course when it ought to be only beginning. As a consequence, only a handful of collegians studied philosophy. In fact, according to research done by James A. Reinert, S.J. for a master's thesis at Saint Louis University in 1950, only 3.4 percent of all the students who attended Jesuit colleges and universities in the United States between 1816 and 1912 actually finished the philosophy sequence.

On the other hand, everyone received religious instruction throughout the course of studies. As an article in the *Boston Pilot* explained in 1864, "The chief aim of Boston College was to educate the pupils in the principles and practices of the Catholic faith." The faculty at Santa Clara College expressed the same conviction at a teachers meeting in 1869: "The great end and purpose of our teaching is the catechism." Thus the very centerpiece of education was moral and religious training, but not in an academic sense. The typical Jesuit college offered no courses in theology. Instead,

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Loyola University Chicago.

instruction was imparted by the school's daily regimen and by a galaxy of activities defining every detail of campus life. Attendance at Mass and at weekly catechetical instruction was obligatory. Marian sodalities promoted piety and good example; religious holidays filled the academic year. Personal formation was further shaped by the daily encounter between pupil and professor.

No teacher was to be content with merely teaching. Even in conversation with students, tutors were encouraged to promote piety as well as study and to improve the students' conduct by their own example. Moral values were also conveyed in lectures by the president to the assembled student body on a general religious topic. Students joined in debates about ethical issues of the day, and they made an annual three-day retreat in which, as one Santa Clara student put it, "a reckoning is made in matters spiritual. Catholics were expected to approach the Sacrament of Penance at least once a month, and endeavor to be worthy to receive Holy Communion as often."

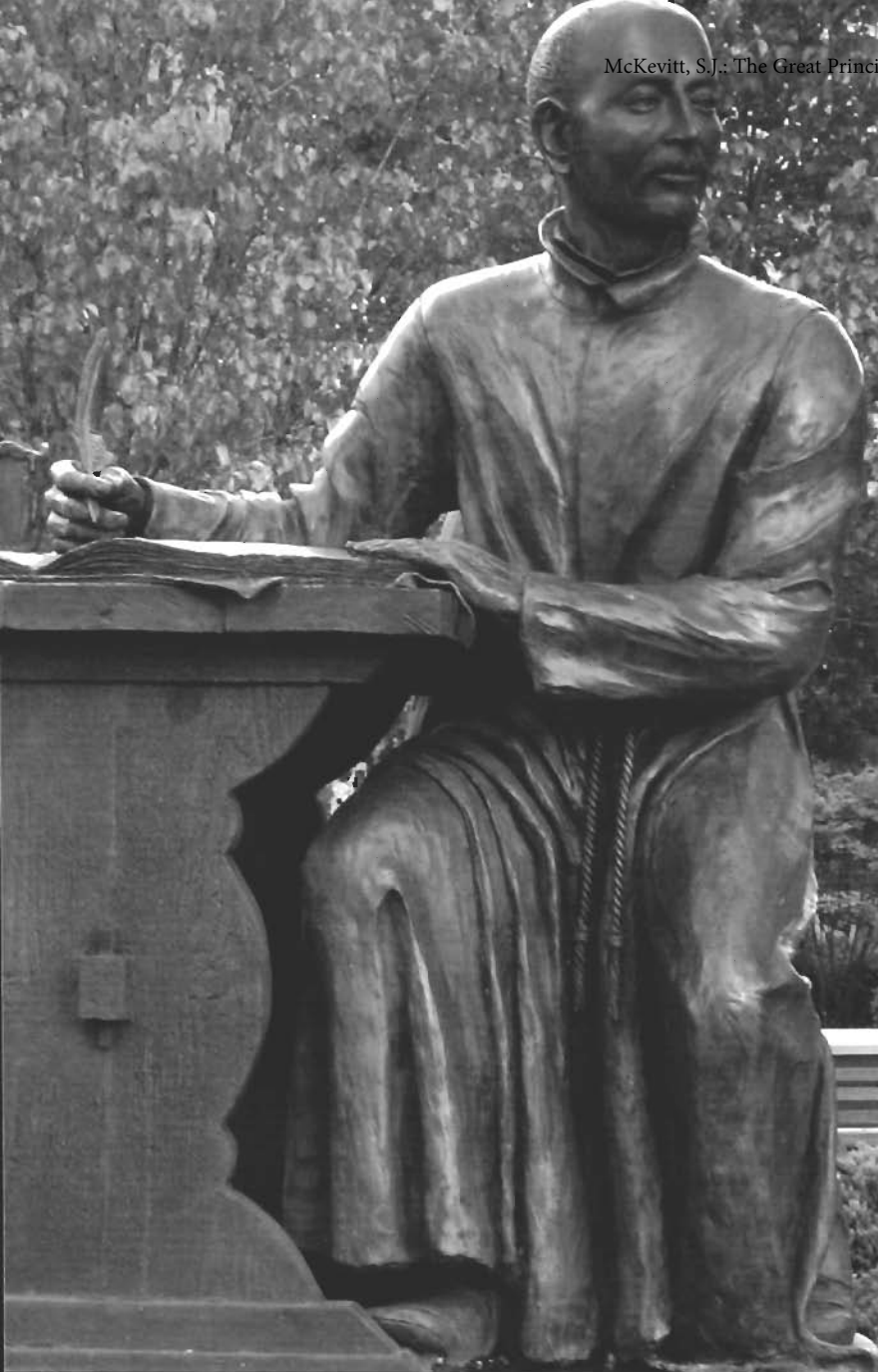
Toward the end of the nineteenth century, this mode of instruction shifted direction. For the first time, formal courses in theology replaced catechesis. "Christian doctrine" now became part of the curriculum. Thus it was that philosophy and religion uprooted ancient literature as the main medium for

imparting a holistic and integrated liberal education. Moreover, instruction in religion was upgraded by the introduction of specific textbooks in the subject, exemplified, by Boston College's adoption in 1894 of Joseph DeHarbe's *A Complete Catechism of the Catholic Religion* and of Wilhelm Wilmer's *Handbook of the Christian Religion* the following year. This new emphasis on theology represented a desire to accommodate learning to the changing needs of American students and to counter the materialism and skepticism of the modern age. "The whole world... is in ferment over biblical questions,"

Jesuits of the Midwest observed in a report on the teaching of Christian doctrine in 1918. "Educated laymen must have sufficient knowledge to meet the difficulties and objections and to deal with the principle modern difficulties urged against the Faith."

Philosophy too advanced to a more central place in the curriculum and for similar reasons. Once taken primarily during the senior year of college, it was now distributed over three years, beginning with logic in the sophomore year. The switch that occurred at Loyola College in Baltimore was typical. According the school's historian, Nicholas

The typical Jesuit college offered no courses in theology.



Statue of St. Ignatius, Loyola University Chicago.

Varga, philosophy, which had constituted only 12 percent of the curriculum hours in 1895 had by 1911 doubled its portion to 23 percent. Meanwhile, courses in religion advanced in about thirty years from 2 percent to 10.3 percent. The enhanced role given to philosophy and theology came at the expense of Latin and Greek, which had for generations occupied center stage in the promotion of mental and moral formation at Jesuit institutions. Thus, classical studies, which had constituted 37 percent of the curriculum hours at Loyola in 1895, shrank by 1911 to 26 percent. A similar reorientation occurred in the Society's other American colleges and universities although not everyone applauded this departure from past practice. "Faith in Latin and Greek and

The quality of philosophical instruction was "doctrinaire, frankly apologetic."

English has grown dim," Joseph P. Donnelly, a New England Jesuit, lamented in the 1930s, "and now only philosophy is prescribed."

Less controversial was the schools' embrace of scholasticism, which resulted from Pope Leo XIII's restoration of the tradition of St. Thomas Aquinas to a place of honor in Catholic institutions. All other schools of thought were proscribed. Competing philosophical traditions were dismissed by one Fordham Jesuit in an 1898 essay in *Woodstock Letters*, as "mere historical knowledge of exploded systems." But, according to Robert I. Gannon, later president and historian of the college, the quality of philosophical instruction was "doctrinaire, frankly apologetic." Hence the schools devoted fresh energy to the reformation of pedagogy. Philosophy is to be taught from a textbook, a directive of the Missouri Province Jesuits ordered in 1907, "and extensive dictation, so long the aversion of students, should be discarded along with other antiquated teaching methods."

Philosophy and theology now emerged as the distinctive constituents of Jesuit schooling, setting the latter apart from other models of American higher education. Benefiting from a nationwide upsurge in the number of college-bound students and from accelerating Catholic social mobility, the Society's colleges and universities enrolled more students than ever before. And a greater number of them exploited the Jesuit conception of higher education by taking heavy doses of philosophy and theology. Glorifying in their distinctiveness, the colleges contrasted their cohesive and integrated system of learning with the fragmented training offered by secular schools. Father Thomas J. Campbell, the president of Fordham College, expressed the conviction of many Jesuit academics when he wrote in *Woodstock Letters* in 1898, "We can safely say that we are not only not out of touch with the times, but are better equipped than most men to offer a superior collegiate education." Secular institutions did many things well, the Society's Report of the Commission on Higher Studies conceded in 1932. But for them "religion is taboo" and they "fail to give their students any abiding and satisfactory philosophy of life. They are content to give them knowledge and not wisdom."

This stance typified Jesuit institutions until the middle of the last century. After World War II, pro-

found attitudinal shifts in both church and state forced a reassessment of every aspect of university life. Catholic institutions, newly eager to engage the world and enter the academic mainstream, began to conform to the secular institutions they had once disdained. A desire for greater access to state and federal funding led the schools to downplay their Catholic character and to redefine their academic purposes. In an era of increasing specialization, accrediting agencies grew critical of the structured curriculum with its heavy emphasis on theology and philosophy. Consequently, beginning in the late 1960s, those disciplines, although never abandoned entirely, disappeared as the integrative element of Jesuit education. The extent of the transformation was revealed at a meeting of the Jesuit Educational Association assembled in Denver in 1969. When Michael P. Walsh, a former president of Boston College, asked rhetorically at the gathering, "Is there anything distinctive?" about his institution, he replied, "I myself cannot see it."

In the years that followed, the institutions continued to profess a dedication to Catholic education in the Jesuit tradition. But the accustomed modes of imparting integrated humanistic learning had changed with the times. The decline of philosophy and theology as the unifying features of education prompted soul-searching on some campuses. If these disciplines had shrunk to the point that they ceased to define institutional identity, what distinct contribution would Catholic institutions make to American higher education? What would it mean to be distinctively Catholic after American Catholics and their institutions had entered fully into the academic mainstream?

More recently, many Jesuit schools have begun to move toward a new self-definition by educating for faith and justice in accord with the religious order's reorientation. "For us, the promotion of justice is not one apostolic area among others," a General Congregation of the Society had declared in 1974, "but rather it must be a dimension of all our apostolic endeavors."

Whether this orientation will provoke significant reform and win acceptance as the new principle of unity of Jesuit education remains to be seen. Most American institutions of higher learning now readily engage in various forms of community outreach.

However, not all of them may be inclined to embrace the challenge of integrating faith with the pursuit of justice in a meaningful way. As the Jesuit theologian Michael J. Buckley has observed in *The Catholic University as Promise and Project*, critics will ask: Can the contemporary institution of higher learning, "whose very life is open question and inquiry," be realigned "so that it deals with human misery, with the wants of the vast majority of human beings, and...not betray its very nature as a university?" Nevertheless, "what is at stake is the relationship between the university itself and the exploited throughout the world."

If Jesuit institutions do succeed in forging a new humanism linking gospel and culture, they will have preserved in fresh form what Joseph Havens Richards, writing in the *Woodstock Letters* in 1897, described as "the great principle of unity in education." In the process, American higher education will be enriched by having an alternative to the homogenized concept of schooling that prevails in most secular institutions. And a new vehicle will have been discovered by Jesuit higher education to replace the integrating function once assigned to the classics, philosophy, religion and theology. ■

What would it mean to be distinctively Catholic after American Catholics and their institutions had entered fully into the academic mainstream?

RECOMMENDED READINGS AND SOURCES:

William P. Leahy, *Adapting to America: Catholics, Jesuits and Higher Education in the Twentieth Century* (Aspen Publishers, 1991).

Kathleen A. Mahoney, *Catholic Higher Education in Protestant America: The Jesuits and Harvard in the Age of the University* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

The Jesuit Educational Association Collection in the Burns Library at Boston College is a rich archival source on Jesuit education in the U. S. in the twentieth century.

Essays and reports on early Jesuit schooling are found in the *Woodstock Letters*, a national Jesuit periodical, first published in 1872.