The Jesuits

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The Jesuits, or Society of Jesus, were founded by Ignatius of Loyola. They were approved by the papacy in 1540 as an order of Catholic priests depending solely on charity (mendicants).

In 1535, in Paris, Loyola and six remarkable disciples took vows of poverty and chastity and promised to go as missionaries to Palestine. When war between Venice and the Turks blocked their passage, they began work in the north Italian cities. They gathered new recruits and sought direction and approval from Pope Paul III. Loyola was elected their general. He devoted the rest of his life to writing the Jesuit Constitutions at Rome, and to directing the rapidly spreading order.

The new order had several distinctive features. It was highly centralized. All of its leaders were appointed by the general, who was elected for life. The Constitutions imposed no special religious uniform, no bodily penances or fasts, and no choral recitation of the daily liturgy (Divine Office). But Loyola insisted that recruits be carefully selected and ardously trained. Later fifteen years' training became quite normal. He also stressed obedience and a close link with the papacy. Above all, the Jesuit was to cultivate an inner life based on meditation and Loyola's Spiritual Exercises. Prayer was to mould him into an effective apostle to others.

Loyola wanted quality rather than numbers, but the order grew rapidly. By 1556 there were over a thousand Jesuits—mainly in Spain, Portugal and Italy, but also in France, Germany, the Low Countries, India, Brazil and Africa. By 1626 there were 15,544, and during the next 130 years the Jesuits grew slowly but steadily. Jesuits were working in almost every corner of the globe.

In 1773 the Bourbon monarchs of France and Spain forced the pope to suppress the Jesuits. A few Jesuits survived in Prussia and Russia. In 1814 the papacy restored the Jesuits throughout the world. Jesuits reached a peak of 36,038 members in 1964. In the unrest following Vatican II, membership fell to 24,924 in 1988.

Education quickly became the most important Jesuit emphasis. Within a decade of their foundation the Jesuits had a dozen colleges. By 1626 there were 400 colleges, and by 1749 about 800, including seminaries. These schools were open to all classes of people and generally charged nothing for tuition. During the seventeenth and early eighteenth century a high percentage of the educated people of Catholic Europe passed through Jesuit schools.

Jesuit education was based on the Plan of Studies of 1599. It purified and simplified Renaissance humanism. Jesuits insisted on pupils attending classes. A carefully planned curriculum took students forward step by step. The Jesuits used friendly rivalry instead of the rod to stimulate their students. Philosophy in their schools generally followed Aristotle. Theology was freely adapted from Thomas Aquinas, as in the system of Francisco Suarez (1548–1617). Jesuit schools were famous for their drama. Moral and religious values were taught through a pageantry that rivalled early opera. Today the Jesuits run about 4,000 schools, including

“\[I \text{ can find God wherever I will.}\]

IGNATIUS OF LOYOLA, founder of the Jesuits
nineteen universities in the United States.

The foreign missions were always the most highly regarded of Jesuit activities. Francis Xavier (1506–52), who worked in India, Indonesia and Japan, was the first and greatest Jesuit missionary. Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) founded modern mission work in China and adapted the gospel to Chinese traditions and thought-forms. The Jesuits used their western scientific knowledge to gain entry to court circles in Peking. But they never succeeded in converting a Chinese ruler. Robert De Nobili (1577–1656) applied Ricci’s methods of adapting the gospel to the local culture in India. Isaac Joques, Jacques Marquette and many other French Jesuits worked with mixed success among the Canadian Indians. Eusebio Kino (1644–1711) built mission stations and introduced advanced agriculture among the Indians of northern Mexico and the south-western United States. Other Jesuits organized towns (or reductions) to convert and civilize the Indians of Paraguay and Brazil.

Though Loyola did not found the Jesuits in order to combat Protestantism, but this became a Jesuit goal, increasingly, during the sixteenth century. Several Jesuits served as papal representatives (legates) in complex negotiations to link various countries more firmly to Rome—for instance Ireland, Sweden and Russia. Other Jesuits served as court preachers or confessors to the Emperor, the kings of France and Poland, and the dukes of Bavaria. Peter Canisius and Robert Bellarmine wrote catechisms and anti-Protestant works of theology which were influential for centuries. Many Jesuits lost their lives for their cause. In all the Jesuits list over 1,000 martyrs, mostly in mission countries.