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"A masterpiece that closes the gap in our understanding..."

Gerald McKevitt, *Brothers of Culture: Italian Jesuits in the American West, 1848-1919*

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By Anthony J. Kuzniewski, S.J.

In his prayer for scholars, Thomas Aquinas asks for "sharpeness in understanding, sagacity in interpretation, facility in learning, and abundant grace in expression," *Brothers of Culture*, Jesuit historian Gerald McKevitt's ground breaking study of the Italian Jesuits in the United States in the second half of the nineteenth century, reads like an answer to that prayer.

The product of long and careful research in twenty-eight American and European archives, the book traces the interaction between religion, culture and migration by studying the 460 Jesuits who came to America after being forced out of Italy in the course of the Risorgimento. Stuck to conversion by their training and experience, these Jesuits profoundly influenced Jesuit and Catholic life in America as cultural brokers between Europe and America, and between the emerging American culture of the rapidly developing West and the Indians and Mexicans among whom they ministered.

On the East Coast, exiled Jesuit scientists, philosophers, and theologians added academic excellence and variety to the faculties of existing colleges. Twenty-one of the group eventually served as presidents of Jesuit colleges, many of them in the West. Critical of American exceptionalism that pervaded the Church and of the lack of discipline and intellectual vigor in the formation of young Jesuits, they founded Woodstock College in Maryland in 1869. Modeled on the temporarily closed Romani College, Woodstock offered a strong dose of Thomistic philosophy and theology in an ultramontane course of studies that raised hackles among some American Jesuits of less rigid mindset.

In the West, the Pacific Coast area became the California Mission under the sponsorship of the Turin Province, while the New Mexico Mission of the Southwest was attached to the Naples Province. At the Rocky Mountain Mission, immigrant Jesuits proved to be intrepid pioneers, willingly sacrificing comfortable lives for the opportunity to spread the Gospel. After acquiring...
linguistic skills to instruct Native Americans in their own tongues, they undertook catechetical instruction, followed by the teaching of practical skills and, finally, the opening of schools. By 1895, there were eighteen schools in the Rocky Mountain Mission. With English being the second language for both teachers and students, Flatheads, Nez Perce, and other Native American sometimes learned to speak English with an Italian accent.

Jesuit higher education gained a foothold in the West in 1851, when Bishop John Aloysius offered Giovanni Nobili the enlivened mission at Santa Clara for a college. Soon there were building universities in San Francisco, Denver, Seattle, Spokane, and elsewhere. Again, the Italian Jesuits served as cultural brokers, defending the practical courses of study against Rome’s insistence upon the classical program of the Ratio Studiorum, and allowing their students more off-campus freedom than Rome authorities wished.

By 1910, when circumstances in Italy again became favorable for Jesuits, the influence of Italian Jesuits in America was waning. In 1899, the California Province formally separated from Turin and in 1919, the New Mexico Mission was divided between the provinces of Missouri and New Orleans. Proponents of a supranational approach to Catholicism and its practice, this remarkable group of men left a stunning legacy as bridge builders between continents, racial and ethnic groups, and popular cultures.

Along with his careful documentation and analysis, McKevitt allows the humanity of his subjects to shine through in their varied religious, intellectual, and cultural pursuits—non-Italian Californians storm about too much paste. Father Joseph Josset stubbornly rejects table napkins and bed sheets after years in the missions. The text sparkles with literary grace: Woodstock College, where Jesuits were “coined in a protect-ed subculture” (99); school masters who sought “to bottle the wine of a centuries-old European education tradition and dispense its riches in America” (210); and the conflicting forces that buffeted missionaries “like a ship driven in one direction by the ride and in another way by wind.” (240). Thirty-three well chosen illustrations, a handful of helpful maps, and a useful glossary of terms (nervously inserted at the back of the book) round the project out.

Brokers of Culture is a masterpiece that closes a gap in our understanding of American Catholic and Jesuit history. In these pages, Gerald McKevitt models the ideal of elia perfezita—articulate wisdom—that his historical subjects journeyed so far to represent.

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