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The Jesuits

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The jester was sometimes called the court fool. Jesters earned their support with their wit and by performing antics much like those of today's clowns. Jesters usually specialized in jokes and riddles. A jester wore a checkered coat and hose (called motley) of many colors. He wore a hood, sometimes decorated with an ass's ears or the head or comb of a cock. He also wore bells attached to his skirts, the elbows of his coat, his long, pointed shoes, and the peak of his hood.

It is not known when jesters first appeared. There may have been jesters in Britain during the time of the Saxons. Licenses were issued to jesters in the 1600's. Before that, a history of William the Conqueror (who lived in the 1000's) names his court fool, Goles. Many later kings had jesters. Henry VIII's jester, Will Somers, was a gift from Cardinal Wolsey. The practice of keeping a fool began to decline in the 1600's.

The court jester enjoyed an unusual position with his employers. He was almost a member of the family, taking part in private gatherings, sharing family secrets, and playing with the children. It is easy to understand how William Shakespeare's Hamlet felt when gravediggers uncovered the skull of his father's jester, Yorick. Hamlet describes him as "a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy." Most jesters were clever. Some jesters are believed to have given their kings advice.

Don B. Wilmeth

Jesuits, /jejuhz u ihts or /jezh uh whits/ are members of a Roman Catholic religious order of men. The official name of the order, founded by Saint Ignatius Loyola in 1534, is the Society of Jesus (S). The Jesuits are especially noted for their work in education. The order operates more than 4,000 schools, colleges, and universities throughout the world. In the United States, the Jesuits direct about 45 high schools and 28 colleges and universities. Leading Jesuit universities in the United States include Boston College, Fordham University, Georgetown University, and Marquette University.

The order has produced many important explorers, missionaries, scientists, theologians, and writers. For example, Saint Francis Xavier, a Spanish Jesuit, converted thousands of people in the Far East during the 1500's. Jacques Marquette, a French Jesuit, helped explore the Mississippi River in the late 1600's. Gerard Manley Hopkins, an English Jesuit, ranks among the leading poets of the 1800's. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a French Jesuit, became a leading paleontologist (expert on prehistoric life) and theologian in the 1900's. Many Jesuits have been canonized (declared saints) by the Roman Catholic Church. The best-known Jesuit saints include Robert Bellarmine, Peter Canisius, and Isaac Jogues.

Membership and training. Immediately after entering the order, a Jesuit begins two years of spiritual training. During this period, a Jesuit is called a novice. After training, he takes vows of poverty and of obedience to his superiors. A Jesuit also vows to stay celibate (unmarried).

The Jesuits have four groups of members: (1) scholastics (younger men in training for the priesthood); (2) temporal coadjutors (brothers); (3) spiritual coadjutors; and (4) the solemnly professed. The brothers are full members of the order but are not ordained to the priesthood. Spiritual coadjutors and the professed are priests. The professed take a vow of special obedience to the pope in addition to taking vows of celibacy, obedience, and poverty.

Jesuits must study for many years before becoming spiritual coadjutors or professed. This period of study, which usually lasts about 15 years, provides both spiritual and academic training. A Jesuit's superiors determine if he is qualified for the rank of professed. They base their decision on the individual's record in his studies and on his qualities of spiritual leadership.

Organization. The Jesuits are headed by a superior general, who lives in Rome. He has broad powers to make decisions that affect the entire order. Jesuits live in about 100 countries. For administrative purposes, the order is divided into regions called provinces, vicere­provinces, and mission territories. An official called a provincial supervises each province and vice-province. Provinces that share a common language or cultural background are grouped together into assistancies. An assistant serves as an adviser to the superior general on matters involving each assistancy. A local superior appointed by a provincial or by the superior general governs individual communities of Jesuits within each province or mission territory.

The superior general is elected for life by a congregation made up of assistants, provincials, and elected delegates from the order. The congregation also elects several principal assistants to the superior general. The superior general appoints provincials. He also appoints superiors, who supervise local groups of Jesuits. Most provincials and superiors serve six-year terms.

History. Saint Ignatius and six fellow students from the University of Paris began the Society of Jesus, which Pope Paul III formally approved as an order in 1540. He originally limited the Jesuits to 60 members. But in 1544, the pope authorized the order to increase its membership without limit. Ignatius wrote the order's constitutions (sets of rules), which have become models for hundreds of other Roman Catholic religious communities.

Under the leadership of Ignatius, the Jesuits grew to almost 1,000 members. By the time he died in 1556, the order had become firmly established in Europe, primarily through its activities in education. The Jesuits also conducted widespread missionary work in Africa, Asia, and North and South America. The order played a major role in the church's self-renewal movement called the Counter Reformation (see Roman Catholic Church [The Counter Reformation]).

The Jesuits aroused opposition as their membership and influence increased. In France, for example, the Jesuits came into conflict with a powerful religious movement called Jansenism (see Jansen, Cornelius). Finally, in 1773, Pope Clement XIV banned the order. Pope Pius VII removed the ban in 1814. See Roman Catholic Church (Suppression of the Jesuits).

From 1814 until the 1960's, the Jesuits steadily increased their membership. Then membership began to decline, especially in Europe. Today, the largest concentrations of Jesuits are in the United States and India.

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Each Jesuit mentioned in this article has a biography in World Book.