The Curriculum Carries the Mission

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Why We Still Need the Ratio Studiorum, Especially Today

By Claude N. Pavur, S.J.

Recognizing the Ratio Studiorum as integral both to the foundations of the Society and to the foundation of its educational institutions makes reflection on it a relevant project for today, not only for the Oratory, but also for the schools. We need to consider what the role the document might play in the making of Jesuit education today. This is not an easy thing to do, because the task before us is not a matter of simple restoration. The Ratio Studiorum was composed in and for the late Renaissance. As an early modern document, it does not fit post-modern times so easily. And yet, its importance and influence for hundreds of years point to the likelihood that it was successful not only because it fit its own times so well, but also because it carried values that transcended its own time and may therefore fit our time too. What, then, are those lasting elements of value? And how do we read the Ratio Studiorum in such a way as to become more authentic about what we are doing today?

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Here I would like to begin an answer to these questions by focusing on one of the most radical consequences of taking the Ratio Studiorum seriously as a foundational document: The Ratio Studiorum’s greatest contribution to our times may well be the idea of the importance of the curriculum as the primary vehicle for the mission. And here I am con-
A mass is celebrated by Father David Smith at Loyola Marymount University. The students and faculty at LMU are preparing for the annual Jesuit Week, which celebrates the Jesuit tradition and values. The mass is a central event of the week, and it is attended by students, faculty, and staff from the university. The mass is celebrated by Father Smith, who is a Jesuit priest and a professor at LMU. The mass includes readings from the Bible, prayers, and a homily, which is a sermon that reflects on the readings and the message of the day. The mass is followed by a reception, where the community comes together to celebrate and reflect on the day's events.

The mass is a significant event for the Jesuit community at LMU, as it provides a space for reflection, prayer, and community building. It is an important part of Jesuit education, which values the integration of faith and learning, and the importance of community and service.

The Jesuit Week is an annual celebration that takes place at LMU and other Jesuit institutions around the world. It is a time to reflect on the Jesuit tradition and values, and to celebrate the contributions of Jesuit priests and lay professionals to the world. The week includes a variety of events, such as lectures, workshops, and community service projects, that are designed to educate and inspire the participants.

In conclusion, the mass is a central event of Jesuit Week at LMU, and it is an important part of Jesuit education. It provides a space for reflection, prayer, and community building, and it is an important part of the Jesuit tradition and values. The Jesuit Week is an annual celebration that takes place at LMU and other Jesuit institutions around the world, and it is a time to reflect on the Jesuit tradition and values, and to celebrate the contributions of Jesuit priests and lay professionals to the world.
Furthermore, at some level, the core has to be fashioned not so much with an eye to professional competence as to the education’s larger purposes, namely to all that bears most significantly on the development of the students in their vocation to be fully human, fully spiritual persons who are progressing toward wisdom — wisdom about God and the good, about nature, about ethics, about culture and society, about family, about relationships, about themselves, and about what it takes for them to live a truly good life.

To achieve success, it will also be necessary to descend to the details of course contents and make judgments about what should be guaranteed in the educational core. It is not enough to say that everyone should have 1 or 2 or 3 hours of economics or philosophy. A Ratio-inspired consciousness asks further questions about the details: what exactly are we going to put into those hours? What texts are better, more appropriate, more productive, more successful than others? What topics are most worth the students’ time and attention. What best supports intellectual, cultural, moral, and religious conversion? It makes sense to pour energy into assessment practices if and only if we are agreed on what to assess.

How can the faculty achieve such an effect? It needs to develop a Ratio Studiorum-like vision, and that cannot be done in a single year or even in a single decade. The Ratio Studiorum was the product of many voices over time, and we may need a similar investment. If we accept the principle that the curriculum is the carrier of the mission, some type of faculty “on-the-job” formation will be a high priority, something that makes it clear to every teacher that there is a distinctive corporate approach here. The effort supports the institution’s academic freedom to be what it is supposed to be.

Part of that approach involves learning to think formationally. For example, a young philosophy teacher may emerge from graduate school very impressed with Nietzsche’s Twilight of the Idols and eager to teach it. But there is a formational question that needs to be asked: Given the mission and character of our school and even simply given basic pedagogical considerations, is this the best text to give freshmen as their introduction to philosophy? If this text is to be taught, how does it fit into the larger rationale? Where are we trying to lead the students with it? This decision, I think, should not just be left to the individual, as it often is today. There is a corporate wisdom that should at the very least be part of the decision. Everyone is invested in the next generation’s education. No one has a blank check.

The Ratio Studiorum would never have succeeded without the existence of the right type of oversight structures and the bona fide agreement of a faculty to cooperate. For practical reasons, Jesuit college programs
today probably also need a kind of internal governing board that goes beyond what most curricular committees tend to do, in order to support ongoing reflection and work on the curriculum.

**Order in the Curriculum**

One of the main tasks would be the question of order in the curriculum. How does each year of college build on and extend the work of the previous year? Ever since my own college years, I have been awed by the vast variety of the course-offerings available today. I have been equally distressed by the fragmentary jumble that any curricular program seems to be forced to be. Ataldril MacIntyre put it very well in 2006, in *Commonweal*. Academic has produced more and more fields and more and more specialists and therefore more and more possible criticisms. It has not been equally dili-
gent about developing a habit of thinking about how the parts relate within a larger totality. The freedom to choose from a great array of courses may feel very good to us when we are college students, but does it serve us well in the long run? Certainly when I was in college I would have preferred to have been able to assume that the faculty had worked out a very solid, coherent, well-organized core, delivered with a consistent and even improving quality through the years. In fact, they had not done anything like this. There were simply generic distribution requirements, and the students had to fill them out as best they could.

It is time to go back to Ignatius’s radical insight that it is better not to jumble things up in the curriculum but to take them in a certain sequence, with thorough preparatory grounding, and with a sense of how they fit into a larger educational plan. One of the greatest things the Ratio Studiorum can give us (and all schooling) is simply the very idea of ratio, or plan.

Electives need not be eliminated, but they do not necessarily have to be superfluous. And certainly at minimum there should always be, at the very least, a curricular option for the more ordered, integrated, and systematic approach, one that might more clearly be in the tradition that impressed Ignatius on his journey so many years ago. This option is usually not present today. I believe we need a standing team of faculty that is explicitly commissioned to work out a program that inte-
grates the best of what might be covered in language and letters, philosophy, theology, and spirituality. Such a program would constitute, in my view, the greatest promise of Jesuit education. It would allow us to estab-
lish a distinctive kind of university that would give stu-
dents a real option in types of liberal arts curricula.

Surely this kind of diversity will be a valuable thing to promote, and surely it is just the kind of diversity that we should be most expected to promote.

**Conclusion**

I would like to conclude as I began, with some words of wisdom:

A disciple asked Confinius about the cultivated person. Confucius said, “Cultivate yourself by seriousness.”

The disciple asked, “Is that all?”

Confucius said, “Cultivate yourself to make others secure.”

The disciple asked, “Is that all?”

Confucius said, “Cultivate yourself to make all other
selves enough to make all people secure.”

—Thomas Chitty, *The Essential Confucius*.

Just so, the *Ratio* has a very large aim. It is not just about self-cultivation for some kind of possibly narcissistic personal security, nor is it about leaping to just any kind of other-oriented action in some kind of naive activism. Rather, it looks to a certain type of energized wisdom that involves a self-cultivation, a broadened and deepened consciousness that has undergone conversion and that can act for a universal and transcendent end. That is why recovering the spirit and the genius of the Ratio Studiorum is one of the most important things that we can do now.