In Deed: The Maryland-Province Gatherings: A Story of Beginnings and Growth

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A gnawing unease brought them into being. In June, 1993, during the Maryland Province Days at Loyola College, Baltimore, most Jesuits and lay colleagues spoke of their work with contentment. But many in higher education worried about the Jesuit dimension of our colleges and universities, specifically in undergraduate education. I mentioned this unease at a public session, and on leaving the theater, Faith D. Gilroy of Loyola and John Plordresher of Georgetown caught me to express a similar concern. We talked over lunch, then decided to call a meeting. That evening some thirty people—professors and administrators, lay and Jesuit—came together, and in an hour or so we developed the concept and structure of "The Gatherings."

The plan was simple: to invite all the undergraduate professors and academic administrators of Georgetown, Loyola, Saint Joseph’s, Scranton, and Wheeling Jesuit to come together to discuss Jesuit undergraduate education. Each school had its “convener” who issued the invitations, and Gathering I (about 45 people) met at Loyola College on October 23, 1993, on the topic of “Institutional Individuality: A Gathering of Faculties.” Every semester since, about the same number—though not necessarily the same people—met together at Georgetown, Loyola, Saint Joseph’s, and Scranton. Under the common theme of “Institutional Individuality,” each Gathering had its specific topic: Gathering II: “Do Professors Really Change Students?” (Saint Joseph’s, March 19, 1994); III: “Faculty Hiring and Development” (Loyola, October 29, 1994); IV: “Faculty Development for Jesuit Education” (Saint Joseph’s, March 18, 1995); V: “Excellence of Teaching in the Jesuit Context” (Georgetown, October 28, 1995); VI: “Spirituality in the Classroom: The Teacher and the Student” (Saint Joseph’s, March 23, 1996); VII: “Keeping Jesuit Colleges Jesuit: The Pivotal Role of Lay Professors” (Scranton, October 26, 1996).

Three suppositions underlie the Gatherings: (1) without effective action, Jesuit education will lose its distinctiveness; (2) the faculty are the heart of education, and action is best built on a faculty base; and (3) given the decreasing number of Jesuits, the future of Jesuit education rests with the lay professors. Our methodology is equally forthright: since the professors and administrators who come are already experts, we can well reflect on our own experience without outside help and, on going home, can work to change our institutions.

The structure is also simple: meeting on a Saturday from 10 to 4:30, each Gathering hears a short keynote (or two), breaks into discussion groups (with institutions mixed together), then reconvenes for short reports and a plenary discussion. After lunch, a panel refocuses the topic, then we meet in institution-based groups (to plan action back home), reconvene for short reports and discussion, and towards the end decide whether to have another Gathering and, if so, on what topic. The costs are low: the Maryland Province pays for a light breakfast and a lunch, and the institutions provide the meeting rooms gratis. Happily, the schools in Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Washington are close enough for a
one-day return trip. Only Wheeling—and sometimes Scranton—need to stay over, and their institutions pick up at least some of the costs.

The Gatherings have been valuable; their continuing existence confirms this. The discussions—both small and plenary—have been forthright, probing, honest. Three afternoons also offered longer panels that were splendid: one panel of students probed the actual effect of education (see America, May 28, 1994, 14-19), and another offered students’ views on spirituality (Saint Joseph’s, 1994, 1996); finally, a panel of three lay professors (Georgetown, 1995) spoke movingly of lives dedicated to Jesuit education.

What have The Gatherings accomplished? In the sessions themselves, professors and administrators from the five schools developed friendships, shared identities and traditions, found common hope and strength, recognized a common care for students, and saw common problems in faculty hiring and development, and in balancing teaching and research. The Gatherings also had effects back home. At the least, they engendered conversations on Jesuit undergraduate education and sparked a camaraderie among those who attended. More corporately, the Saint Joseph’s Gatherers of 1993 informally convoked the faculty and academic administrators, raised crucial institutional issues, were invited to meet with the trustees’ Academic Affairs Committee, and (working with the three deans) nominated an academic consulting group whom the trustees engaged to advise on consultation, communication, and planning. The process continues, already with notable results, and the concurrent discussions set the scene for the Jesuit community’s recent “Invitation to a Conversation: Sharing a Commitment”—a conversation involving all the University constituencies, including athletics. At Scranton, two large groups studied John O’Malley’s The First Jesuits and John Paul II’s Ex Corde Ecclesiae, and Fr. O’Malley later lectured there. The Gatherers also reinforced—and by meeting with other institutions helped validate—their President’s examination of Scranton’s Jesuit identity, an initiative which resulted in the report “A University Missioned to Ignatian Education” (written by the “Task Force on Ignatian Identity and Mission”) and the University’s new Center for Mission Reflection.

Wheeling Jesuit had its own accomplishments: through their initiative, the Gatherings began to have effects beyond the Maryland Province. On April 27, 1996, groups from Wheeling Jesuit, Xavier, and John Carroll Universities met in an equidistant Columbus, Ohio, in a Gathering-like format for a “Dialogue on Catholic Intellectual Life” based on the Fall 1995 issue of Conversations. As a further effect, professors of psychology from Wheeling Jesuit, Xavier, John Carroll, the University of Detroit Mercy, and Loyola University of Chicago will meet at Xavier on May 13-15, 1997, to discuss “The Impact of Jesuit Values on Teaching and Professional Training in Psychology.” The New York Province is also planning their first Gathering-like session.

Canisius and LeMoyne Colleges and Fordham University all sent observers to the Maryland Gatherings, and in September or October of
1997, they will join with Saint Peter’s College for a
New York Province session on Jesuit higher edu-
cation; they hope for 30 to 40 people—a mix of
faculty and administrators—and will likely fol-
low the pattern of the Gatherings.

Back in the Maryland Province, Gathering VIII
will convene this spring at Loyola College; the day is
March 22, the topic, “Jesuit Education in Ser-
vice of the Poor.”

And what has all this meant? A “conversion-
story” may help: driving home from Scranton, an
accounting professor told me that, having long
heard about hiring Catholics, he finally real-
ized the need during our discussions. More broad-
ly, I see several results: (1) a greater consciousness of
the problem of continuing the Jesuit (or Ignatian)
tradition in education; (2) a shared sense of com-
mon problems simply because five institutions
met together; (3) a felt colleagueship among lay
professors and Jesuits, professors and adminis-
trators, and women and men of varied religious
traditions—Jewish, Islamic, Lutheran, Episco-
palian, Zen Buddhist, agnostic, and Catholic;
(4) about 125 different people (some of whom
attended all seven Gather-
ings) have a deeper
knowledge of the Jesuit
tradition; (5) training for the future lay
custodians of Jesuit edu-
cation. It is important, I
add, that the Gatherings
are faculty-based and fac-
ulty-run: they are thus
more credible and influen-
tial to those at the very heart—in the very class-
rooms—of Jesuit education.

What still needs to be
done? The Catholic issue
might be engaged more
explicitly, not to ideolo-
gize but to probe and clar-
ify. We might write
case-studies on hiring for
mission. We might explic-
tate how people of differ-
ent religious traditions
serve well in, and con-
tribute to, Jesuit educa-
tion. We might also con-
sider issues of graduate
and professional edu-
cation. But, I urge, the
Gathering’s focus on
undergraduate education
should not be clouded or
lost. For haven’t we—lay
professors and Jesuits—
dedicated ourselves to
changing undergraduates?
And even perhaps to
changing them “in the
Lord”? We might ponder,
and even work to define,
that old Jesuit phrase “in
the Lord.” For if we don’t
soon do some defining
and clarifying and choos-
ing, there may not be
much “Lord” still hanging
around the halls and
classrooms of Jesuit col-
leges and universities.

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