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James W. Sauve

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# Complex Simplicity

*James W. Sauvé SJ*

Assistant Secretary of  
the Society of Jesus, Rome

**J**esuit higher education in the United States includes twenty-eight colleges and universities, located in eighteen states and the District of Columbia, from Boston to Los Angeles, Milwaukee to New Orleans. Two of the institutions are liberal arts colleges awarding only a bachelor's degree while thirteen offer a doctorate. Among the latter are complex universities having as many as a dozen different schools and colleges which offer a number of different professional and graduate programs, and award as many as twenty-one distinct associate, bachelor, master and doctoral degrees. Teaching and research in Jesuit institutions embrace theater arts and theology, data processing and dance, molecular virology and mathematics, physical therapy and philosophy. Included on the twenty-eight campuses are four schools of medicine and another four

of dentistry, thirteen law schools, six colleges of engineering and nine nursing schools, plus colleges or schools of architecture, aviation, business administration and management, education, fine and communication arts, foreign service, health professions, languages and linguistics, music, pharmacy, public health, and social work.

The Jesuit institutions were founded between 1789 (Georgetown) and 1954 (Wheeling). The number of students in the fall of 1990 ranged from 1,305 (Spring Hill) to 14,780 (Loyola University, Chicago), for a grand total of 182,628; these students are preparing for careers in teaching, business, law, medicine, dentistry, communications, aeronautics, music, and a host of other fields. Twenty-five thousand students receive degrees each year, and more than a million men and women living today are graduates of American Jesuit colleges and universities. Nine hundred Jesuits are faculty members or administrators; they are joined in partnership by more than twelve thousand lay men and women and clergy and members of other religious congregations.

Particularly at the larger institutions, the faculty, staff, administration and student bodies reflect the complex religious and cultural makeup that characterizes the United

States. Protestants, Jews, Orthodox, Muslims and nonbelievers teach and study along with Catholics. Minority groups make up almost fifteen percent of the student body (26,887 such students). Many faculty members and 7,387 of the students come from other countries, especially in schools on the Pacific coast. This includes increasing numbers of Asians (some, for example, the children of refugees, others exchange students from mainland China).

Each of these institutions has its own board of trustees or directors. With one exception (Loyola University, New Orleans), a majority of the board members are lay people. Each institution is careful to guard its autonomy; each is proud of its unique traditions and its own distinct contributions to the church, to American society, and to the specific city and region in which it is located.

It is true, of course, that all twenty-eight institutions were historically founded by or entrusted to the Society of Jesus. Until fairly recently, nearly all of the administrators and most of the faculty were Jesuits. And because they are Jesuit schools, they continue to have educational goals and methods in common: all offer a core curriculum that includes English, mathematics, history, and social science, and all offer a bachelor of arts degree.

All of these colleges and universities are members of the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities (AJCU), whose board of directors is made up of the presidents of the individual institutions. The Association promotes cooperative efforts, provides a forum for the exchange of experiences and information and offers services to its members; it represents Jesuit higher education and its interests to other educational groups (especially other associations of higher education) and promotes the cause of Jesuit higher education to the United States government. But the Association does not and cannot invade the inner workings of individual institutions, or do anything that would question their autonomy; nor can it create a commonality in areas where none exists.

With such a complex diversity, what does it mean to talk about "American Jesuit higher education" as though it were a single entity? Do these institutions have enough in common to give any real content to the phrase? Or is it an echo of their past that remains only as an historical curiosity?

Certainly the more than eight hundred representatives (lay and Jesuit both) of these twenty-eight institutions who came to Georgetown University to participate in "Assembly '89" found meaning in the expression, "American Jesuit higher education." For four days in the summer of that year they participated in lively discussions about issues in areas that included academic professionalism, fidelity and freedom, faith and justice, the

place of philosophy and theology, the core curriculum, and Jesuit spirituality. In all these areas they found elements common to all of the institutions that they represented, and their high praise of the assembly suggests that they thought the discussions were worthwhile.

Perhaps specific clues to the content of the expression "American Jesuit higher education" can be found in two of the major talks given at that same assembly. In his keynote address on the "Mission and Ministry of Jesuits in Higher Education," Frank Rhodes, president of Cornell University, spoke about the foundations of Jesuit higher education wherever it exists. Those foundations, he said, are (1) the contribution of principled and committed professors who acknowledge and profess their commitment; (2) a student-centered learning community that contrasts sharply with the discipline-centered environment found in most universities; (3) excellence in scholarship.<sup>1</sup>

Two days later the superior general of the Society of Jesus, Father Peter-Hans Kolvenbach SJ spoke about the "identity" of Jesuit higher education in terms of the "Ignatian themes that enlighten and give impetus to our work in higher education: the Ignatian world view is world-affirming, comprehensive, places emphasis on freedom, faces up to sin, personal and social, but points to God's love as more powerful than human weakness and evil, is altruistic, stresses the essential need for discernment, and gives ample scope to intellect and affectivity in forming leaders."<sup>2</sup>

In these brief characterizations, a certain simplicity—or at least a common thread—can be found in the midst of the complex diversity. What the colleges and universities share—what makes it possible to refer to twenty-eight distinct institutions as if they were in some sense one, comprising "American Jesuit higher education"—is to be sought at the level of a common inspiration. From this common inspiration will then flow convictions held in common, a distinctive educational philosophy leading

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to common attitudes toward curriculum, student development, professional formation, and many other areas of concern to higher education.

The inspiration that the institutions hold in common originates with one man, Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Society of Jesus. As he reflected on his own life, and his experience of God at work in that life, he developed a distinctive "world view" which Father Kolvenbach summarizes briefly in the paragraph cited above. He shared that world view with others, and he applied it to education in his writings, especially in the fourth part of the Constitutions of the Society of Jesus and in his letters to Jesuits working in the first schools founded by the Society. That same vision was developed by the immediate successors of Ignatius, who applied it to the different circumstances in which they found themselves as Jesuit schools were rapidly being established throughout the world. The same process continued in the course of history, and continues today. A common spirit lies behind pedagogy, curriculum and school life, even though the more concrete details of school life differ greatly from institution to institution.<sup>3</sup>

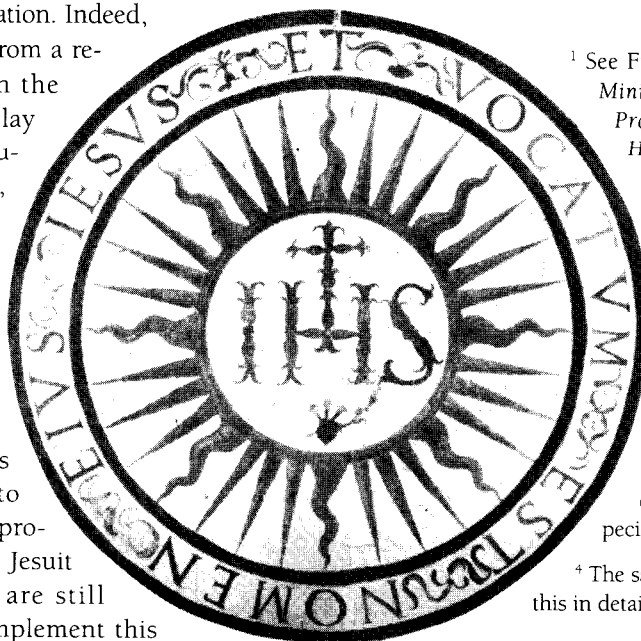
It is important to note that the source of the inspiration is Ignatius, and not the Society of Jesus that he founded. Although the education is usually called "Jesuit," many prefer to designate the inspiration that unites the schools as "Ignatian," since it is in no sense the exclusive property of Jesuits; those who are not members of this Society do not have a secondary role. Ignatius was a layman when he developed the world view described in detail in the Spiritual Exercises. Through more than four centuries, and in our present day, countless lay people and members of other religious congregations have shared in and been influenced by his inspiration. Indeed, since the inspiration comes from a reflection on God at work in the world and in human lives, lay people have their own particular contribution to make to it, based on their experience of God in family and society.<sup>4</sup>

The shape that the Society of Jesus wishes to give to its ministry today, in response to reflection on the world and to an explicit call from the church, is marked by a commitment to the service of faith and the promotion of justice. While the Jesuit colleges and universities are still searching for the ways to implement this

commitment more adequately within educational parameters, the priority itself is common to all twenty-eight institutions. Common efforts to clarify this thrust and implement it in the individual institutions is another thread which unites these schools in their common Ignatian inspiration.

When Frank Rhodes spoke about "foundations," he was reflecting on some of the effects of this Ignatian vision as it has been worked out in Jesuit higher education. This brief article is not the place to try to develop that vision in all its details, or to develop its applications to Jesuit higher education, uniting the schools in their diversity. Scores of other articles have done that and each of the American Jesuit colleges and universities, as part of its celebration of the five hundredth anniversary of the birth of Ignatius Loyola in 1491, has sponsored lecture series and seminars which develop these details within its own circumstances. In addition, one of the chief purposes of the National Seminar on Jesuit Higher Education is precisely to explore the ways in which that vision gives a common inspiration to the distinct institutions, and future publications of the seminar will be dealing with this topic.

It is surely worth stressing, in conclusion, that a vision or an inspiration is never automatically carried from one generation to the next; it must be made concrete in school policies and school life by men and women who identify with it and whose lives are influenced by it. To the extent that this is done, the individual colleges and universities will remain truly "Jesuit" and the twenty-eight institutions together will continue to exemplify in all its complex simplicity Jesuit higher education in the United States.



<sup>1</sup> See Frank H. T. Rhodes, "The Mission and Ministry of Jesuits in Higher Education," *Professionalism and Catholic Identity in Higher Education*, Washington, DC: The Jesuit Conference, 1990, pp. 9-11.

<sup>2</sup> *Assembly 1989: Jesuit Ministry in Higher Education: Address of Very Reverend Peter-Hans Kolvenbach*, June 7, 1989, Washington, DC: The Jesuit Conference, 1990, p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> This point is developed in more detail in a document entitled *The Characteristics of Jesuit Education*, Washington, DC: The Jesuit Secondary Education Association, 1987, especially par. 8.

<sup>4</sup> The same *Characteristics* document develops this in detail in par. 4.