

JESUIT SPIRITUALITY: THE CIVIC AND CULTURAL DIMENSIONS

Précis: Earlier appreciation of Jesuit spirituality as interiority is yielding to a newer grasp of its civic and cultural dimensions. In the schools, Jesuits taught pagan texts as a source of virtue and civic sensitivity. They integrated the schools, which were civil as well as church institutions, into the artistic and cultural life of the cities. This integration affected the evolution of Jesuit spirituality. Now this civic and cultural dimension of spirituality characterizes Jesuit and ignatian spirituality, alike.

The great landmark in the study of Jesuit spirituality was without doubt Joseph de Guibert's *La spiritualité de la Compagnie de Jésus: esquisse historique*, published in Rome in 1953 by the Jesuit Historical Institute. The book was both a symptom of the new, more historically grounded approaches to Jesuit spirituality that were already well under way, and also a further stimulus to them. The enterprise, largely focused on St. Ignatius himself, has borne remarkable fruit in the intervening fifty years.

De Guibert was especially important for recovering the mystical dimension of St. Ignatius's spiritual experiences and thus of rescuing him from interpretations that tended to reduce him to a master of pious platitudes. In so doing he also helped rescue the *Spiritual Exercises* from the tiresomely moralistic and voluntaristic interpretations into which they had largely fallen. It would be hard to improve on his description of St. Ignatius's deepest interiority as a "mysticism of service." By calling

attention to Ignatius's practice of giving his fellow Jesuits great leeway in making decisions on the spot, even when those decisions might seem to contravene his own instructions to them, de Guibert also helped break the caricature of Ignatius as a rigid martinet demanding blind obedience to his every order.

Important though de Guibert's book was for spurring a reevaluation of Ignatius, most of it was devoted to the subsequent history of Jesuit spirituality. This magnificent survey covering four hundred years highlighted the diversity of appreciations and emphases within a common framework that the Jesuits shared. Although since de Guibert wrote, there have been a few important studies of the spirituality of individual Jesuits besides Ignatius, by and large we have not progressed very far beyond where he left us a half-century ago. Indeed, in some circles "Jesuit spirituality" is not only (and perhaps quite properly) distinguished from "ignatian spirituality" but is also (perhaps not so properly) viewed with a certain disdain.

I think, however, that we may be on the verge of a new break-through in our understanding of both ignatian spirituality and Jesuit spirituality, in which the distinction between them, while still valid, may be slightly less sharp. In any case, this break-through is the result of studies that are as much dependent upon social history as they are on the analysis of texts. While some exception must be made for de Guibert's treatment of Ignatius, his book, for all its merits, is fundamentally a study of what Jesuits wrote about spirituality and much less about how they lived and what they did; the Jesuits ministries, for instance, are at best incidental to their spirituality. The book is a study of ideas about spirituality — and spirituality understood as consisting largely in devout practices and various forms of prayer and asceticism. For St. Francis Xavier, for instance, de Guibert notes little else about his spirituality than that he was humble and obedient and very much commended the practice of the so-called particular examination of conscience. That Xavier spent ten years of intense evangelization in Southeast Asia is barely mentioned, and no inferences are drawn from it about the character of his spirituality.

Especially in the past ten years there has been a veritable explosion of interest in the Society of Jesus by historians of almost every religious

and ideological persuasion. Most of these historians have no interest in Jesuit "spirituality" as such. They are in a general way interested in what motivates Jesuits, but they often venture no opinion on the matter, either for lack of evidence or for lack of sensitivity to the evidence they encounter. What they are more specifically interested in and try to describe is what Jesuits *did* — what they accomplished or what they wanted to accomplish.

Such studies may seem to have nothing to do with spirituality, but I think we can exploit them to tell us a great deal about the *lived* spirituality, which in many ways may have transcended or even contradicted what Jesuits were saying or writing about their spirituality. They, like the historians who would later study them, made little or no connection between their ministries and how they would describe the dimensions of their motivations and their inner life — so strong is the force of traditional categories in our thinking.

I hope you will pardon a personal reference, which I adduce only because it illustrates what I am talking about. As is the practice in North America, Harvard University Press sent out my manuscript, "The First Jesuits", to anonymous reviewers to help the press decide whether or not to

accept it for publication. One of the reviewers said in his evaluation that he was deeply moved by the spirituality that the book presented. I was delighted with the comment, of course, but also surprised by it, for I did not think I was writing about spirituality. I was, rather, deliberately and professedly writing about what Jesuits *did*, especially in their ministries. Yet, one of the theses of the book was that what they did made them what they were. And I now realize that in talking thus about what they were, I was in fact talking about their spirituality. But this is spirituality in a sense that includes but may well go beyond religious beliefs and devout practices.

Another of the theses of my book was that the "first Jesuits" changed. Although the continuities were stronger than the discontinuities, they were notably different in 1565 from what they were in 1540. In that regard

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my book is not unique among recent historical studies of the Society, which take it for granted that along with a core identity the Society changed considerably in its long history. We now must reckon with change as a part of our understanding of the Society in a way we did not do several generations ago.

This means changes in Ignatius himself. He details a number of changes in himself in his so-called *Autobiography*. But what about those last fifteen years as general of the Society, years not covered in his personal account? Among the issues needing exploration for that period is, I believe, the influence on “ignatian spirituality” of Juan Alfonso de Polanco, with whom Ignatius worked so closely in the elaboration of the Jesuit *Constitutions*. Part Nine of the *Constitutions*, for instance, lists and describes qualities desired in the superior general, and it thereby in effect delineates the qualities of the ideal Jesuit. Such qualities are the equivalent of manifestations or traits of ignatian/Jesuit spirituality. Among them is magnanimity, greatness of soul, largeness of vision. Is it not interesting that the paragraph describing magnanimity is not dependent upon any biblical text but is a loose paraphrase of a paragraph from Cicero’s *De officiis* (1.20.66)?

The paragraph is important for two reasons. First of all, it almost surely had to come from the humanistically trained Polanco rather than from Ignatius, who was quite limited in that regard. Yet Ignatius must have found the paragraph consonant with his spirituality. Secondly, it suggests the influence of Renaissance Humanism on the “Christian spirituality” that pervades the *Constitutions*.

It is perhaps possible to dismiss as superficial the influence of Humanism on the *Constitutions* that I have just suggested — nothing more than incidental incursions or superficial forms that do not affect content. I do not think the matter can be dismissed that easily, but I in any case take that aspect of the *Constitutions* as symptomatic of a deeper and more widespread phenomenon. I have become, in fact, more and more persuaded that the momentous decision taken in 1547 to engage in formal schooling as a ministry of the Society had profoundly transforming effects on the Society, which included profound effects on its spirituality. Most of the schools were *humanistic* schools, that is, the study of the classical

literature of ancient Greece and Rome was the core of the curriculum. Even the Jesuit universities included those subjects as the first part of their program, so that no Jesuit school existed without them.

We need to recall that those *pagan* texts — Virgil, Terence, and the others, but especially Cicero — were read for their inspirational and ethical value as well as for their literary elegance. The Jesuits taught those texts not as propaedeutic to theology, the traditional clerical rationale, but as a program that in and of itself would provide laymen not only with certain skills they needed to be successful leaders in the world but also help form them as good and committed Christians — good and committed Christians active in the world, not in the cloister.

In the Jesuit colleges neither the Bible nor the Fathers of the Church had a place in the curriculum. If ethical or spiritual inspiration was going to be related to texts studied in class, those texts had to be the texts of Virgil, Terence, and the like. A text practically every Jesuit had taught at some time or other and that many taught year after year was Cicero's *De officiis*, which I like to translate as *On Public Responsibility*. Perhaps the best known passage goes as follows:

We are not born for ourselves alone.... Everything the earth produces is created for our use, and we, too, as human beings are born for the sake of other human beings that we might be able mutually to help one another. We must therefore take nature as our guide and contribute to the common good of humankind by mutual acts of kindness, by giving and receiving from one another, and thus by our skill, our industry and our talents work to bring human society together in peace and harmony (1.7.22).

Jesuits would surely have been able to correlate this message with the Principle and Foundation of the *Spiritual Exercises*, which tells us we were created for the praise, reverence, and service of God, which in the Christian context of course cannot be separated from concern for one's neighbor. But the passage from Cicero is directed more to the betterment of this world than, as in the *Exercises*, to one's eternal salvation. I suspect the Jesuits would have seen Cicero's message, however, as an enlargement of the Principle and Foundation rather than as a contradiction of it.

I cannot believe that teaching texts like this year after year and trying

to make them relevant to the formation of their students did not have impact upon the Jesuits' own consciousness, self-awareness, and even self-definition. The texts especially of the classical orators and historians were consistently concerned with the ethical and political well-being of the state or, more particularly, of the city. They thus had a notable orientation to the *civic* good. I am becoming ever more persuaded that by the seventeenth century the world-affirming aspects of ignatian spirituality took on in certain quarters in the Society of Jesus a decidedly civic dimension.

I do not have the space here to argue this point at any length, but I will call attention to two recent and remarkable books. The first is by Giovanna Zanlonghi, *Teatri di Formazione* (Vita e Pensiero, 2000), in which the author describes the great programs of poetry, pageantry, theater, dance, tapestry, and ephemeral architecture the Jesuits designed and produced at the behest of the officials of the city of Milan over the course of two centuries on the occasion of important political or diplomatic events. In masterly fashion, she also analyzes the philosophical and theological bases out of which these Jesuits operated, as they committed their time and talent to the enhancement of civic celebrations.

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The second book is a collection of papers edited by Manfred Hinz from a conference at Villa Le Balze, in Fiesole, Italy: *The Jesuits and the Education of the Western World (16th-17th centuries)* (Bulzoni, 2004). As a collection, this book is of course more diffuse than the monograph by Zanlonghi, but a pervasive theme of the volume is the impact on Jesuit mentality that the schools made. What we must never forget about the schools is that they usually owed their origin to requests for them that came from the city, that they were funded with money that somehow came from the city, and that they were intended for the benefit of the city — for the city's spiritual, intellectual, and cultural benefit. We tend to think of the schools as Jesuit institutions, as church-related institutions, which indeed they were, but we must not forget that they were also civic institutions, most often located in fact in the city center.

Cultural benefit? Yes, because besides the great civic spectacles for

grand occasions described by Zanlonghi that had counterparts in at least some of the other cities and towns in which the Jesuits operated schools, practically all the schools produced several plays a year open to the public and as well as public academic festivities that entailed music, poetry, and sometimes dance. In the smaller towns and cities they were often the main providers of organized entertainment, but even in the large cities they played an important role in that regard. Before the founding of public libraries, which did not become common until the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the libraries of the Jesuit colleges seem to have come close in some cities to performing that function. From their *actions* it is abundantly clear that the Jesuits saw providing these “cultural” enterprises as part of their mission.

I think, therefore, that we can begin to speak of the civic and cultural mission of the Society of Jesus. Although this mission might seem more manifest in the Pre-Restoration Society, that is, up to 1773, it surely has had more contemporary manifestations. Some of them are stunning, as in the large universities the Society operates especially in North and South America but also in Asia and other parts of the world. In any case we surely cannot speak of that mission as something independent of the Society’s religious mission, as if it were a purely secular pursuit. It is somehow integral to that more fundamental mission. And if it is part of that mission, does it not then have some impact on Jesuit spirituality as a lived reality? If so, can we not begin to speak of the civic and cultural dimension of that spirituality for at least a large number of Jesuits working in the schools, institutions with a fundamentally civic orientation? If we can speak this way, then we are beginning to reexamine our method for studying spirituality and even how we define spirituality itself.

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The question before us in the current number of this review is how Jesuits and laity share in ignatian spirituality. It is sometimes said that persons who are not Jesuits can share in ignatian spirituality but not in Jesuit spirituality, which by definition is proper to members of the order. Jesuit spirituality under this aspect would not only include, for instance,

the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience but would specify them as they are articulated in official Jesuit documents. This is a valid distinction, but I have been trying to show how Jesuit spirituality, when viewed under other aspects, is not only applicable to lay men and lay women, but in some ways may be even more appropriate for them than for the Jesuits themselves. If that spirituality has (at least in some of its manifestations) a decidedly civic orientation, it of course applies to Jesuits, who were and are citizens of their cities and share in the common concern for their welfare. But lay men and lay women are in some ways even more grounded in them. They, for instance, pay taxes (!) and can hold public office. The basic point I want to make, however, is that ignatian/Jesuit spirituality is a large and rich reality that can perhaps yield even more fruit if we begin to examine it from new perspectives, especially taking into account the flood of new studies on the Society that can roughly be described as social history.