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# TO THE JESUITS: DON'T FORGET YOU'RE CATHOLIC

By Peter Steinfels

**A**t the beginning of the 1990s I spent many months preparing a *New York Times* article on the challenge that Catholic colleges and universities confronted in retaining a distinctive, meaningful religious identity. In my recently published book, *A People Adrift: The Crisis of the Roman Catholic Church in America* (Simon & Schuster, 2003), I describe some of what I found.

I quickly began noticing, for instance, "how many Catholic institutions downplayed their Catholic connection in student recruiting ads and brochures, fund-raising appeals, and job announcements. What was stressed was their city, region, history, or founding religious orders. Jesuit schools evoked their order's historical association with Renaissance humanism and rigorous learning. Franciscan and Vincentian schools recalled the images of all-embracing charitable service associated with Saint Francis of Assisi and Saint Vincent de Paul. In a culture warm to vague spirituality but suspicious of institutional religion, it was evidently considered the better part of marketing to go lightly on the links of these religious orders and schools to a church—especially one that was demanding and controversial. Catholic institutions wanted not only to escape their own narrow and sometimes authoritarian pasts; they felt burdened by the often exaggerated stereotypes of these traits that existed in their publics."

Jesuits, I discovered, had a particularly difficult time resisting the temptation to hide their institutions' Catholic identity behind their order's identity. The reason reflected well, to be sure, on the Society of Jesus: currently the image and reputation of the Jesuits is overwhelmingly positive. As I pointed out in speaking to several gatherings

of educators from Jesuit colleges and universities, it is a fascinating detail in American culture, and a tribute to the Jesuits as well, that the public's impression of them has become so favorable. In 1830, a writer in a respectable quarterly could note that the very name Jesuit was "synonymous with all of ambition, craft, and treachery, duplicity and talent, to be conceived by the human mind."

Today, virtually no one believes that—outside of a few Jesuits anyway. Instead, "Jesuit" suggests not only, as I already indicated, Renaissance humanism and intellectual rigor but also theological venturesomeness, tolerance, and a commitment to social justice.

Now I confess that a heavy dose of studying nineteenth-century Catholic history has made me slightly cynical about the selective memory at work in many renditions of the "Jesuit tradition." Looked at from the latter half of that century, the Jesuit tradition was strongly tinged with theological reaction, intolerance, political authoritarianism, and even anti-Semitism. But that is only a quibble, something forgotten by most Catholics, unknown to most Americans, ignored by most Jesuits, and vexing only to a few of us who believe in historical veracity.

For everyone else, as I have also pointed out at those gatherings of educators, the one thing that complicates this positive picture of the Jesuits is the Catholic church. Or perhaps two things: the Catholic church and maleness. But primarily the Catholic church.

Which explains to me why I have found that publicity issuing from many Jesuit schools often maximizes the Jesuit and minimizes the Catholic, in some cases almost to the vanishing point, as though the latter were not essential to the former. After a while, I fear, this view of things is no longer

just public relations; it becomes internalized. I cannot tell you

how many times I have been in conversations with faculty from Jesuit institutions—from Georgetown, Fordham, Loyola of Chicago, Boston College, University of San Francisco, Fairfield, and Seattle, to recall a few—only to hear someone say "I'm all in favor of strengthening our Jesuit identity; it's the Catholic identity that I object to." This is said without irony, without any apparent recognition that there is something odd about setting "Jesuit" over against "Catholic."

Consequently, I have repeatedly pleaded with leaders of Jesuit schools not to let this highly complimentary but also highly bowdlerized, indeed even eviscerated, notion of Jesuit identity go unchallenged. In particular, I have urged those who are the authoritative interpreters of Jesuit identity, namely Jesuits, to build on their well-earned reputation (despite the Society's nineteenth-century deviations) and kindly but firmly insist that detaching it from its ecclesial framework is too high a price to pay for the compliment. Still more important would be to explain convincingly why Jesuit humanism, rigor, daring, tolerance, and hunger for justice are rooted precisely in Jesuit witness to the Christ known and encountered through his Spirit in the church.

I look forward to the day when every mention of the word "Jesuit" in a college or university's self-descriptions is accompanied by the words "and Catholic."

