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I N D E E D

THE MARYLAND-PROVINCE GATHERINGS: A STORY OF BEGINNINGS AND GROWTH

What are The Gatherings; and how did they start?

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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 Pfordresher 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 Gathering.”

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

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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 1995 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

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1997, they will join with Saint Peter's College for a New York Province session on Jesuit higher education; they hope for 30 to 40 people—a mix of faculty and administrators—and will likely follow 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 Service 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 realized the need during our discussions. More broadly, 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 common problems simply because five institutions met together; (3) a felt collegiality among lay professors and Jesuits, professors and administrators, and women and men of varied religious traditions—Jewish, Islamic, Lutheran, Episcopalian, Zen Buddhist, agnostic, and Catholic;

(4) about 125 different people (some of whom attended all seven Gatherings) have a deeper knowledge of the Jesuit tradition; (5) training for the future lay custodians of Jesuit education. It is important, I add, that the Gatherings are faculty-based and faculty-run: they are thus more credible and influential to those at the very heart—in the very classrooms—of Jesuit education.

What still needs to be done? The Catholic issue might be engaged more explicitly, not to ideologize but to probe and clarify. We might write case-studies on hiring for mission. We might explicitate how people of different religious traditions serve well in, and contribute to, Jesuit education. We might also consider issues of graduate and professional education. 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 choosing, there may not be much "Lord" still hanging around the halls and classrooms of Jesuit colleges and universities.

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