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Members of the National Seminar on Jesuit Higher Education

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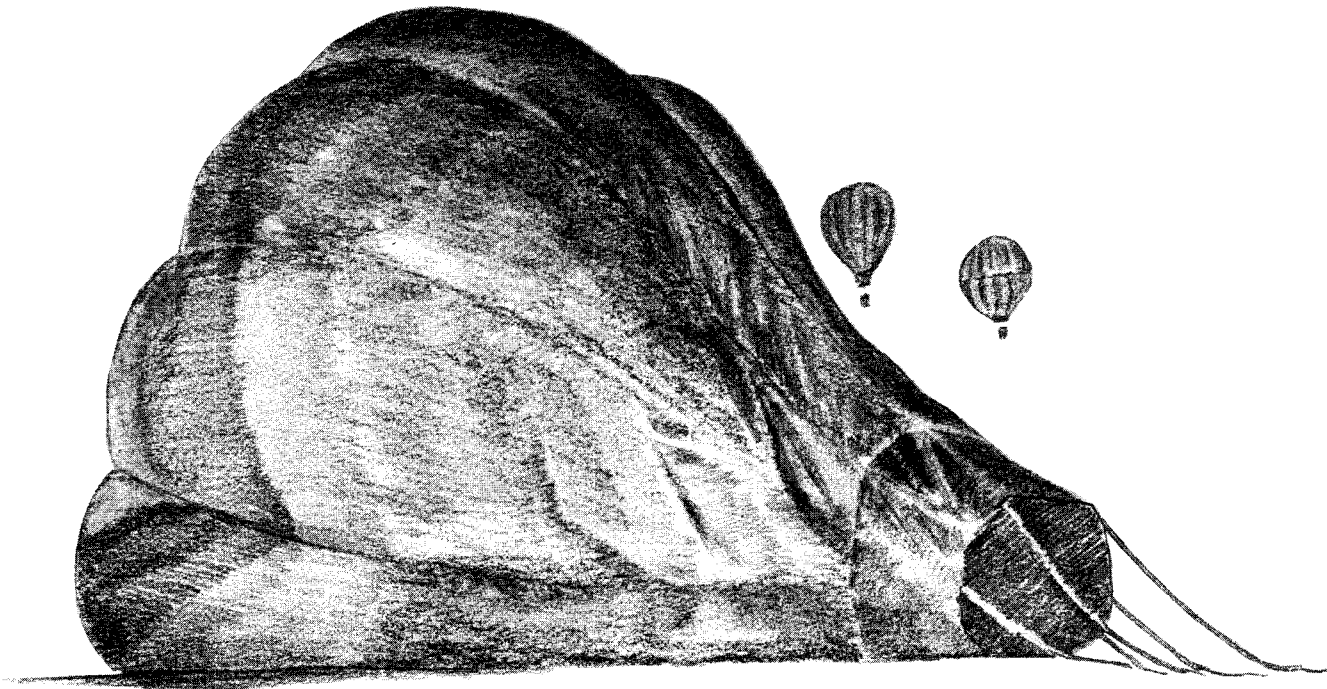
Raising Questions Encouraging Conversations Inviting Responses

This essay, expressing the viewpoint of the members of the National Seminar on Jesuit Higher Education, is meant to do exactly what the title says. We hope that the questions it raises and the conversations that it encourages will bring responses. The Seminar welcomes letters about this essay or about any other material in this and subsequent issues.

We wish to acknowledge the stimulus to our own first conversations and to the structure and content of the essay that came from a report on the mission of the College of the Holy Cross prepared in 1988-1989 by an ad hoc committee appointed by the president. One of the present Seminar members was a member of that committee, brought its report to our attention and secured permission for us to use it. We are grateful for this kindness that so aided our own work.

Jesuit colleges and universities changed dramatically in the last two generations. The first of those generations included the twenty-five years from World War II to about 1965; the second has gone from the end of Vatican Council II in that year to the present. Schools that once featured largely Jesuit faculties catering to relatively small student bodies drawn from first- or second-generation immigrant populations are now diverse and complex modern institutions much influenced by the changes both in American society and in the Catholic Church, graced with faculty, administration, and staff drawn from a diversity of backgrounds and serving all kinds of students. But at the same time it is important to understand that change did not just happen automatically or haphazardly. Those institutions changed because people connected with them wanted them to do so. Change will continue, and its pace and direction will be determined by those who participate in setting goals and shaping policy, by the men and women involved in Jesuit higher education. Whatever the outstanding opportunities or problems of those schools at present and for the future, these men and women, whether administration, faculty or staff, who play their varying roles in and at those institutions must now claim their full share of responsibility for that future.

For some, perhaps for many, at Jesuit colleges and universities, to share in open conversation about the "mission" of those institutions is a new experience. In the past there may have been a tendency to define the nature and purpose of Jesuit schools in a process which seemed to take too little account of lay persons, for example, or non-Catholics, or advocates of faculty self-governance, or even those who might have held views at variance with "official" positions. But if we are to have a vital and honest intellectual life on campus, every variety of person participating in the life of Jesuit colleges and universities must now feel welcome to join the conversation about the future of our schools. Our conversations should be invitational and inclusive, avoiding the extremes of narrow dogmatism and anarchic pluralism. A gen-



uine willingness to listen to others and a frank witness to our own traditions and values must mark our exchanges.

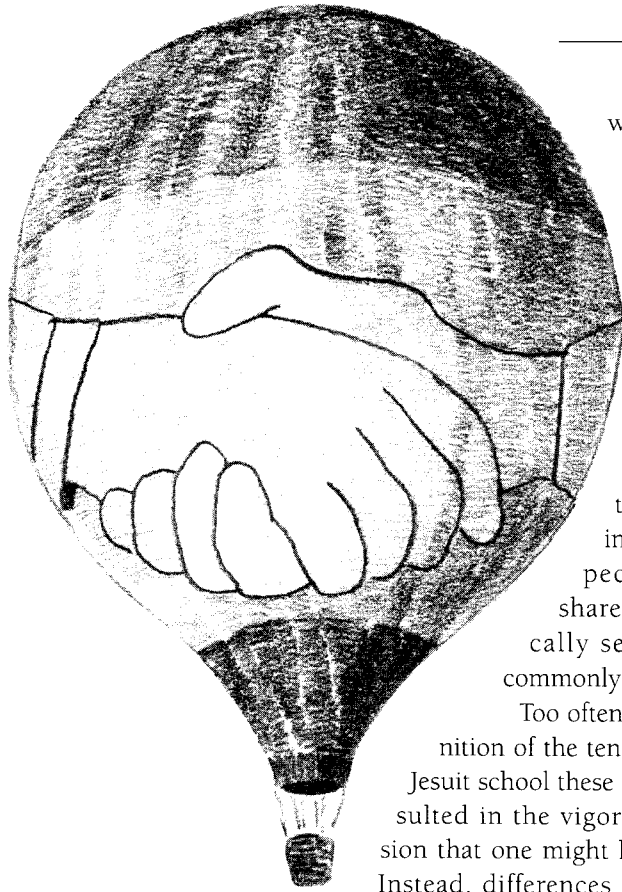
To speak honestly, a consensus on what constitutes an ideal Jesuit and Catholic education does not currently exist. But if we participants in that educational endeavor will speak more frequently and more honestly to each other, if we will be more public about our work as scholars and teachers and administrators and staff, we can initiate a variety of conversations which can enrich both personal and professional lives, enable the school to better serve its students, and perhaps contribute to resolving some of the central issues both of Catholic higher education and of higher education in general. Such issues, for example, include pluralism and its advantages and its limits, the relationships among the disciplines and between the particular disciplines and the larger goals of college and university education, the moral life and education of adolescents and young adults, the role of women in our institutions, the ethical responsibilities of scholarship, and the sharing of the spirituality that arises out of the heritage of Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits.

Professionalism: Quality and Purpose

Over the last several decades one committee after another in twenty-eight Jesuit colleges and universities has recommended drastic changes in everything from the components of the liberal arts curriculum to the position of

the physical plant to the composition of the governing body. People did not agree on all the proposals, but they did agree that it was time to bring those schools more fully into the mainstream of American higher education. They also believed that every effort should be expended to make those schools as academically distinguished as possible. The pursuit of such academic excellence, in the context of a continuing commitment to the Catholic and Jesuit character of the schools, has often become one of the explicit goals of Jesuit colleges and universities.

But almost from the start, these deliberate efforts to improve the quality of the schools coexisted uneasily with the determination to preserve their Catholic and Jesuit identity. The size and newfound diversity of the faculty, the increasing participation by lay people in governance and the claims of departmental autonomy marked a growing professionalism. Institutional mission was all too rarely a subject of common discussion. This tension caused confusion about educational goals, about the balance between a substantially secular liberal and professional education and a religiously inspired foundation and mission. This confusion can continue to touch the entire institution, from decisions about financial allocation, to curriculum, to student life, to faculty recruitment. In the absence of open discussion, a Catholic and Jesuit presentation of the educational mission of a school may survive, but only as an ambiguous rhetoric, to a large extent removed from day-to-day educational commitment to the real life of the college or university. Genuine conversation, however, can lead to a carefully articulated,



well understood and widely accepted educational philosophy as the centerpiece of our schools. This philosophy can pervade the working climate of the schools, taking the form of expectations tacitly shared, goals specifically set, and a vision commonly understood.

Too often, however, recognition of the tensions that beset a Jesuit school these days has not resulted in the vigorous discussion that one might hope for. Instead, differences are pa-

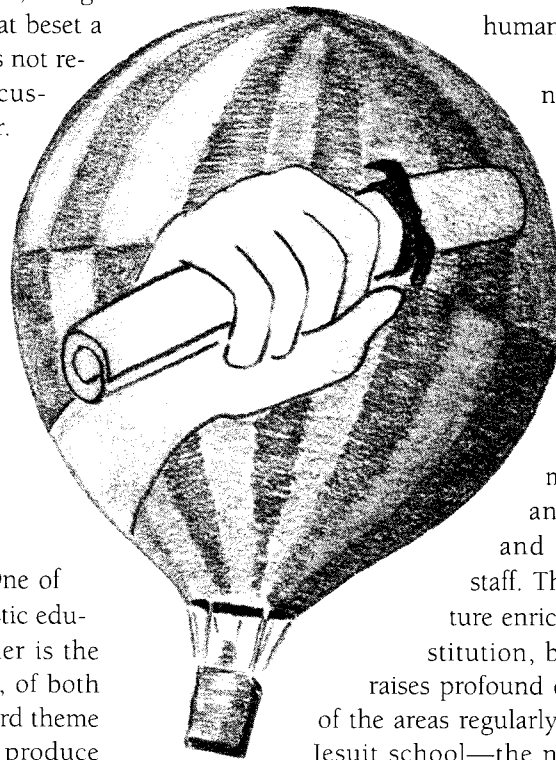
pered over, sometimes by giving prominence to a specific but isolated department such as Religious Studies or Theology, or at other times by sharpening the distinction between academic affairs and student life and then arguing that to a very large extent it is some of the nonacademic aspects of a college that make it specifically Catholic and Jesuit.

Yet, some concerned participants in the life of Jesuit schools have tried to articulate for their schools the mission of Jesuit education. This has consistently emphasized three central themes. One of them is a strong commitment to serious humanistic education and to professional competence. Another is the compatibility, indeed the mutual enhancement, of both terms in the phrase "Catholic education." The third theme is that contemporary Jesuit education aims to produce "men and women for others." Today, while these three themes all appear regularly, it is the last which has become increasingly prominent and specified in a phrase, "The Service of Faith and the Promotion of Justice," taken from the title of one of the documents of the 1974-1975 meeting of the legislative body of the Society of Jesus, the Thirty-second General Congregation.

Structure

Over the last twenty-five years, Jesuit colleges and universities have established institutional frameworks

within which any conversation about the mission of those schools must be situated. In general, that structure has the following characteristics. The school is governed by a board of trustees, which in turn has sometimes a formal, sometimes an informal, agreement with the Jesuit community, which in most cases is itself an incorporated body. The Jesuit community is the agency through which the Society of Jesus makes its commitment to the school. That commitment involves primarily the Jesuits' major resource: capable, professional members fully involved in the life and work of the institution. The specific purpose of both the board of trustees and the Society of Jesus in this arrangement is to guarantee that the institution will be recognizably Jesuit in its operations rather than simply in the accidental characteristics of its organization. The more general purpose is to help create a school which witnesses to the church's commitment to pursue and disseminate truth in all areas of human activity.



But the Jesuits are not the only ones engaged in this endeavor of Jesuit education. No one of these schools would or could exist without other elements, most notably the diverse but interrelated groups of remarkably dedicated and generous faculty and administrators and staff. This diversity of structure enriches the life of the institution, but at the same time

raises profound questions about each of the areas regularly cited as central to a Jesuit school—the nature of liberal arts and professional education, the Jesuit and Catholic identity, and the meaning of education for justice.

Central Issues

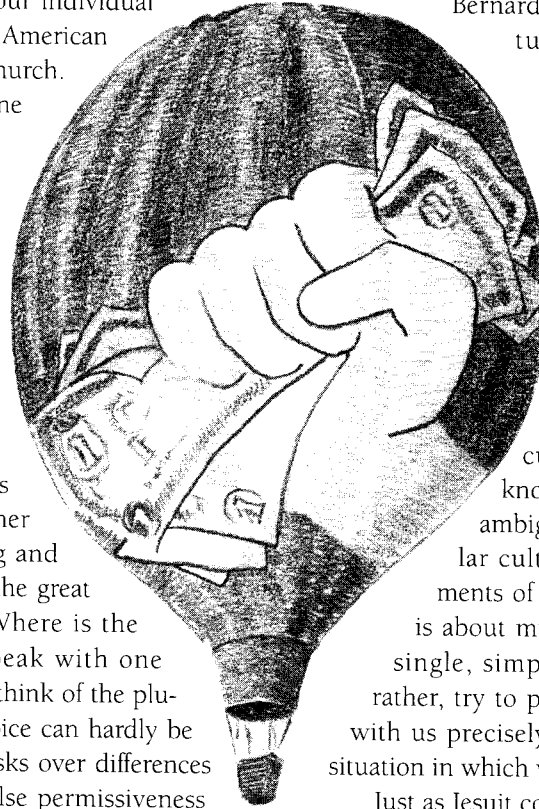
Perhaps no one at a college or university can claim to know exactly what is required for authentic liberal arts education and for moral professional education today. Nor does anyone have a neat and detailed blueprint for Catholic and Jesuit education, much less for education that can inspire "men and women for others." Yet all of us who are involved with Jesuit higher education are called

upon to confront these questions. If we do so honestly and competently, by learning in depth our own tradition and by drawing upon its rich resources and upon our own intelligence and imagination, we can make an important contribution not only to our individual schools but also more generally to American education, to society and to the Church.

We must continue to speak with one another, not simply about matters of educational policy, but also about matters of personal conviction and intellectual responsibility. The occasion of thinking about the mission of a Jesuit college or university is an opportunity for reflection and for conversation.

Those who have traveled this road have discovered that colleges and universities are much like other places, and questions of meaning and purpose reflect here as elsewhere the great cultural divisions of our time. Where is the community today which can speak with one voice? And what in the end do we think of the pluralism evident around us? The choice can hardly be between a false consensus that masks over differences on the one hand, or an equally false permissiveness that reinforces privatization and the erosion of shared meanings on the other. We cannot, for example, separate religion from the rest of life nor can we leave justice to experts in ethics. Rather the Catholic and Jesuit university or college must do two things simultaneously. It must respect academic freedom and keep the forum open for the serious expression of all convictions, even those repugnant to it; and at the same time it must, in word and deed, give witness to those values that it cherishes, the values of Christianity. Even as we attempt to be communities of discourse, we recognize that in that discourse itself we are trying to find language adequate to articulate the questions of mission and adequate to expressing the ways in which we carry out such a mission. "Liberal arts," "professional education," "religion," "faith," "reason," "values,"—not to mention "God"—mean different things to different people. It is in this shifting and difficult space of diverse understandings that we live and breathe as religiously committed institutions of higher education, both liberal and professional. And our life here is marked not by the silence of easily settled conclusions but by continuing discussion, by the sound of serious and inclusive conversation not only about facts but also about beliefs and values.

The conclusion to be drawn from all of this is that the discovery and appropriation of the mission of a Jesuit



college or university must be an ongoing process. This desire for process, this preference for lively conversation over silent conclusions reflects basic features of contemporary intellectual life. During the era of what

Bernard Lonergan has called "classicist culture"—when Western culture conceived itself to be universal, permanent, and thus normative—statements of mission and purpose existed to articulate that vision of culture and to indicate how the vision somehow answered the question "Why do we do what we do?" In our present world, however, marked as it is by a critical historical consciousness, we recognize the diversity of cultures in time and space. We acknowledge, furthermore, that profound ambiguities lie at the heart of any particular culture. Within such a context, statements of what a Jesuit educational institution is about must do more than try to articulate a single, simple doctrinal vision. They should, rather, try to propose challenges which are always with us precisely because of the plural, ambiguous situation in which we work.

Just as Jesuit colleges and universities some twenty-five to thirty years ago began to reconceive themselves historically, so did the Roman Catholic Church. The church increasingly understands itself as a pilgrim church embedded in society and history. In this context, an American Catholic Jesuit school shares much with other American colleges and universities: a commitment to standards of open, critical inquiry which derive from the Enlightenment, a tolerance born of insight into the plural and ambiguous character of societies and of history, and an intellectual and moral community which affirms freedom of inquiry, of speech, and of religion. A Jesuit school thus in large part accepts the institutional structures and assumptions about knowledge and inquiry that are honored in any Western college or university. At the same time, precisely as a Catholic and Jesuit school, it recognizes honestly and publicly its particular, distinctive responsibilities. Most important, religion is taken seriously. Women and men are encouraged to search for ways to respond to the mystery of divine revelation. In the words of Elie Wiesel,

We are here to search for truth about God, about human beings, about life. And that truth should neither hurt nor diminish anyone; quite the opposite; it should elevate everyone; it should bring people together, not separate them.¹

That search and response to the mystery of divine revelation, if it is to be true to the complexity of human beings as both individual and social, will take diverse and in many instances complementary forms, such as a personal intellectual inquiry into that mystery of God's revelation, an active worshipping community, an operative concern that the justice and mercy of God be mirrored in a just and compassionate world, an acknowledged commitment to an organized structure of belief and believers.

A Catholic and Jesuit college or university must question some of the dominant assumptions that operate within the discourse of contemporary American academic life. According to the common sense of the contemporary academy, for example, "the religious" is usually conceived as a non-cognitive realm of experience, or a matter of certain ethical values, or certain affections and passions, or certain shared patterns of social behavior. Its phenomena can be studied in the sense that any set of phenomena can provide objects for inquiry. Such assumptions, however, have traditionally left little room for what has classically been referred to as faith seeking understanding, or for an intellect sufficiently aware of the fragility of its presence that it feels obliged to examine its faith. Yet this must continue to be one of the truly important functions of a Catholic and Jesuit institution.

In that context the following statement is an excellent articulation of one aspect of the distinctive kind of mission to which a Jesuit school is called:

Perhaps what is most distinctive about a university with a religious identity today is not that it represents the doctrines of a particular religious group, but that it sponsors and values precisely the kind of discussion where all religious experience is brought into dialogue with "secular" knowledge, faith with critical inquiry, not as one of many things that might go on in a university, but as the central activity which the university community thinks of as its characteristic interest. Rather than be a matter of private concern, or the business of a few specialists, the dialogue of religion and culture should stand in the foreground of our attention. Clearly this does not mean that everyone need be preoccupied with it. A university is not a church. All sorts of inquiry go on there which do not need authenticating from a religious point of view. But perhaps it is not a bad shorthand formula to say that in a pluralist and overtly secular culture, a religious university is one which keeps open the lines of communication about the meaning of faith, keeps finding better language in which to carry on the discussion.²

To be sure, Jesuit schools must be modest about what they, as only a part of American higher education, can accomplish. But they have made claims about Catholicism, about the Jesuit heritage, and about education in both the liberal arts and the professions in those schools. Perhaps

now is a time to test the claims, to ask whether a school can do for itself what it dreams its students might do, that is, to begin to overcome the divisions between faith and reason, between religion and culture, between personal and public life, between human learning and human work. That is why this journal invites and hopes to stimulate conversations on such matters on Jesuit campuses.

There is another reason for such an invitation. A statement of what a school is about must be something more than a paragraph in the college catalog or a speech to alumni or students. It is a statement of the entire community's purpose, expressing what it has done, what it is doing, and what it hopes to do. It represents a mutual commitment from the members of an educational institution to assist each other to realize their personal projects, to share responsibility for their common tasks and to engage each other in dialogue about the meanings of their lives, their work, and their world. It must emerge from the community and command its respect. It must put into words shared ideals and broad objectives which inform day-to-day work. Most of all, it must reflect some degree of trust and mutual commitment among those for whom it speaks. It is thus something that must be lived as much as written. For too long people have spoken of educating for an integrated understanding of life and history, which is something they themselves have not achieved. The response is not to abandon that ideal, but to reaffirm its importance by building its pursuit more fully into the work that the men and women of that community do together.

Mission

As a first step in these conversations, the members of the Seminar on Jesuit Higher Education propose the following general statement of what Jesuit schools are about, recognizing, of course, that each school will have its own particular mission statement appropriate to its history and circumstances.

Jesuit colleges and universities are, by tradition and choice, institutions in which education in the liberal arts and in professional competence and in societal responsibility takes place, each with the emphasis decided upon by a particular institution. To participate in the life of such a school is to accept an invitation to join in dialogue about important questions posed by contemporary culture. How do persons and communities find meaning in life and history? What obligations do women and men owe one another, and in particular what is their responsibility to the poor and disenfranchised at the end of this tragic century? What is the moral character of learning and teaching at this time and place in history?

Jesuit colleges and universities hope to pursue the highest standards of excellence in teaching and research in a setting of freedom, tolerance, and civility. We encourage all who share our lives to join in building a community whose shared vision is enriched by diverse interpretations of human experience. Because questions of meaning and value are at the heart of the intellectual life, critical examination of fundamental religious and philosophical questions is an integral element of the education that our schools hope to foster not only in students but also in the other members of the educational community. We value the resulting dialogue among diverse traditions, as it continues to be concerned with that sense of the whole which always confronts human beings as a question, calling them to self-transcendence and challenging them to seek that which constitutes our common hu-

manity. If, as Gerard Manley Hopkins says, "the world is charged with the grandeur of God," then a growing knowledge of that world can lead us ever more deeply into the conversation among the diverse traditions of its members in the context of the Catholic and Jesuit institutional commitments of our schools.

As Jesuit institutions, we seek to exemplify the long-standing dedication of the Society of Jesus to the intellectual life and its contemporary commitment to the service of faith and the promotion of justice. Jesuit education is education for power, power to do good in the world. We want to graduate students with brains and heart, with enough brains to make a difference and enough heart to want to do so. The spiritual and cultural endowment of Catholicism and the contemporary vitality of the church enrich our schools as they see themselves accountable precisely as academic institutions to that Catholic tradition. An active worshipping community is a significant feature of the life of our schools and the Eucharist is at the center of that community. We seek to create a setting where Catholics and others can learn to give an account of their beliefs and to give a living witness to them, not apart from other communities of meaning and value, but among them.

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As communities of women and men, we challenge all to be open to new ideas, to be patient with ambiguity and uncertainty, to combine a passion for truth with respect for the views of others, and to make informed, discriminating moral choices. We endeavor to create an environment in which integrated learning is a shared responsibility, pursued in classroom and laboratory, studio and theater, residence and chapel. Shared responsibility for the life and governance of our schools should lead all members of our communities to labor together in the education of mind and heart in our colleges and universities.

In 1551, Ignatius Loyola, the founder of the Society of Jesus and of the Jesuit educational endeavor, hoped that "a variety of those who are now students will in time go on to play diverse roles . . . and their good education in life and learning will benefit many others with fruitful results increasing every day."³ For some two

hundred years Jesuit schools have labored to make that hope come true in the United States by offering a distinctive education in life and learning. Today, all of us who participate in carrying out the mission of our Jesuit colleges and universities can best do so by renewing a commitment to and engagement with the intellectual, moral, and religious questions of our day as they are addressed in these institutions which are Catholic in commitment, Jesuit in inspiration and American in context.

That is what *Conversations* would begin, and we invite you to join us in that endeavor.

*The Members of The National Seminar
on Jesuit Higher Education*

¹ Carol Rittner, "A Conversation with Elie Wiesel," *America*, November 19, 1988, p. 398.

² Joseph A. Appleyard SJ, "The Languages We Use: Talking about Religious Experience," *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*, 19/2, March 1987, p. 30.

³ *Monumenta Historica Societatis Jesu*, Rome 1964, vol. 29, p. 9.