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The Best Training for Public Life

Reconciling Traditions: Jesuit Rhetoric and Ignatian Pedagogy

By Paul Lynch

In *Jesuit Child*, British journalist MacDonald Hastings offers the following anecdote about the Jesuit education he had received at Stonyhurst in Britain. A renowned correspondent during the Second World War, Hastings had been asked to participate on a panel on current affairs. After the program ended, he was approached by one of his co-panelists, who asked Hastings which Jesuit school he had attended. Having said nothing about his schooling during the evening, Hastings asked how his co-panelist had guessed. “Everything you said on the platform tonight made me suspect it. Your attitude on any question, whether it concerned intensive farming, town planning,

loneliness and whatever that silly question was about sex we had to answer in ten seconds, was predictable.” Does this mean that his answers had been Jesuitical? Hastings inquired. “I wouldn’t say that,” replied the discerning colleague. “People only call a man Jesuitical when they are beaten in an argument.”

It should not be surprising that a certain style of argumentation would mark the graduate of a Jesuit school. From its earliest days, Jesuit education put argument at the center of its basic curriculum. The *Ratio Studiorum*—the program that organized the Jesuits’ worldwide system of schools for

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almost two centuries—required deep study in the classical arts of persuasion, more commonly known as *rhetoric*. Day after day, students in the humanities course were drilled in rhetorical practice. They delivered orations, wrote and rewrote compositions, and engaged in endless debate with their peers and their professors. Students worked through sequences of written rhetorical exercises: letters of petition, eulogies, descriptions, narrations, and poems. They also practiced all of Aristotle’s rhetorical genres: deliberative, forensic, panegyric—that is, speeches for public deliberation, for judicial proceedings, and for ceremonial occasions. The goal of all this work was *eloquentia perfecta*, or perfect eloquence, which, according to *Ratio*, “includes two most important subjects, oratory and poetics (out of these two, however, the leading emphasis should always be given to oratory) and it does not only serve what is useful but also indulges what is ornamental.”

For the modern educator, the most striking aspect of the Jesuit rhetorical curriculum is likely to be its emphasis on contest and competition. The *Ratio* repeatedly charges Jesuit educators to engage their students in rhetorical *agonism*, a term derived from the Greek *agon*, meaning not only “contest,” but also “assembly” or “gathering.” Agonism essentially means a “struggling together.” Just as we cannot produce a game without the striving of opposing teams, agonism assumes that we cannot produce a community without the striving of opposing arguments. It is therefore different than antagonism. Rather than seeking to destroy the opponent, agonism assumes that struggle will strengthen and improve both opponents. This assumption animates Jesuit rhetorical education in the *Ratio*. Students were assigned rivals, or *aemuli*, and these rivals not only debated and corrected each other, but also were responsible for each other’s progress. The faults of a given student’s oration were the responsibility of his *aemulus*, as well. So intense was public argumentation that the Jesuit instructors were charged during disputations to “forcefully press the arguments being presented to heat up the competition more.” In other words, it was often the teacher’s job to stir the pot.

Why this emphasis on rhetorical contest? Jesuit educators assumed that it would provide the best training for public life. Cypriano Soarez, the author of an early and influential Jesuit textbook, offered the following rationale for rhetorical training: “The excellence of eloquence can be understood from the fact that it has always especially flourished and ever held sway in every free people, and most of all in undisturbed states.” This justification directly links *eloquentia perfecta* and community participation. The Jesuit graduate would eventu-

ally take his place of leadership through his practice of rhetoric. In our day, however, rhetoric has lost this noble association. The word “rhetoric” is now more likely to elicit suspicion than support. It is all-too-common to hear statements like, “Hey, let’s tone down the rhetoric and just say what we think” or “don’t let his rhetoric fool you; let me tell you what he really wants.” Most ironically, our campaign seasons are filled with accusations of rhetoric, as in “My opponent has got nothing but rhetoric” or “He’s all style while I’ve got substance.” Rhetoric is always what the other guy is selling.

The art of persuasion has suffered such accusations since its Athenian beginnings, when Plato accused the sophists of being peddlers in deceit. Even the Jesuits, who were sometimes perceived as the sophists of their day, suffered scruples about the using “the spoils of Egypt,” as Ignatius put it, “for the honor and glory of God.” In spite of early misgivings, however, the Jesuit *Ratio* made *eloquentia perfecta* the ultimate end of its humanistic curriculum. In contrast to the Socratic and Platonic tradition of skepticism toward rhetoric, the Jesuits adopted the Ciceronian tradition that saw rhetoric as training in public service. For the Jesuits—as for Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian—rhetoric was the art of argument in the public sphere. Rhetoric, as Aristotle puts it in his famous definition, is a means of discerning, in any situation, the “available means of persuasion.” It offers a way of deliberating over important practical questions, of producing good reasoning and avoiding bad reasoning.

Today, “rhetoric” is what the other guy is selling

There are many reasons why rhetoric eventually lost its central curricular seat in Western education: the emergence and eventual dominance of print culture, the Enlightenment’s emphasis on scientific method and an often rigid rationality, the invention of the modern research university. Despite their commitment to classical humanism, Jesuit schools were not immune to these developments, and their curricula eventually came to resemble the curricula of non-Jesuit institutions. Yet there is another potential challenge to the revival of rhetoric, and ironically enough, it comes from the Jesuit tradition itself: Ignatian pedagogy, which offers the most contemporary vision of Jesuit education.

Ignatian pedagogy was articulated in two documents produced by the International Commission on the

Why I Write

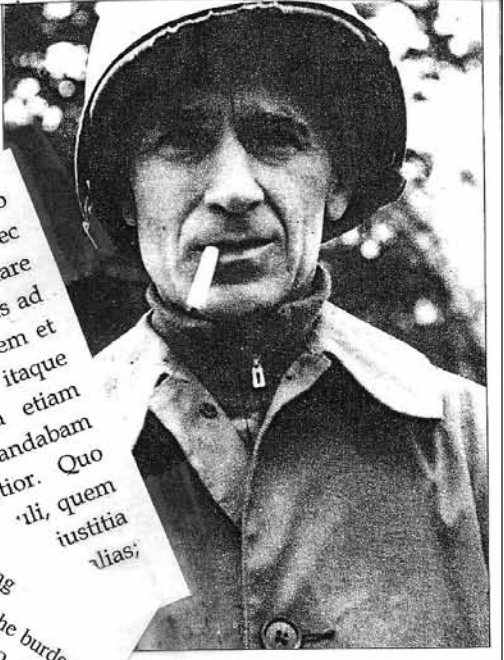
FROM a very early age, perhaps the age of five or six, I knew that when I grew up I should be a writer. Between the ages of about seventeen and twenty-four I tried to abandon this idea, but I did so with the consciousness that I was outraging nature sooner or later I should have to write books.

I was the middle child of three children, the other two on either side, and I was the only one who wrote.



...private world in which I have lived my failure in everyday life. I was serious—i.e. seriously induced all through my childhood not amount to half a dozen lines of poetry at the age of four or five, and I was down to dictation. I cannot remember that it was about a

Your correspondent: Good writing is true writing. If a man is making a story up it will be true in proportion to the amount of knowledge of life that he has and how conscientious he is so that when he makes something up it is as it would truly be. If he doesn't know how many people work in their minds and actions his luck may save him for a while, or he may write fantasy. But if he continues to write about what he does not know about he will find himself faking. After he fakes a few times he cannot write honestly any more.



...ton Stanley Raises the Stars and ... Lake Tanganyika for the Herald ... inds a Sick Old Man Who Sought the Fountains of Herodotus

... of 1866 a Scottish explorer-missionary named David Livingstone ... landed on the shore of East Africa near the mouth of the river ... Shortly thereafter he disappeared into the bush. From that time ... died in 1873 at a remote African village seven hundred miles from ... the great Parent," in order to achieve "a great good for Africa." ... To resolve all doubts concerning Livingstone's fate and to build up news- ... paper circulation, James Gordon Bennett, Jr., the enterprising young pro- ... To resolve all doubts concerning Livingstone's fate and to build up news- ... paper circulation, James Gordon Bennett, Jr., the enterprising young pro- ...



... rnatu... dress... Cic.; Pl... orna... o; q.v... provide... rnis... ; cla... provid... Liv.; sh; do... TRANS... tatem... tam, ... in M... and su... shipped... ti orni... en ad... Tr... ornatia... endidly... Cic.; l... Verg., Hor... ano, Verg.;



... is, m. (obs/cano), t. t. of ... e, a bird from whom ... ken (e.g., th... Hor.
augur multa narrare de C. Laelio
emoriter et iucunde solebat nec
m in uni sermone appellare
o aut- re ita eram deductus ad
ur- ut, quoad possem et
discederem; itaque
Onus probandi: a, multa etiam
mandabam
actor. Quo
li, quem
iustitia
lias;
This refers to the fact that the burden of
proof lies upon the one who makes a
certain charge or assertion rather than on
the one who denies the assertion's truth
nostrae
stantissimum
c redeo ad augure

... is' spokesman and friend—he was on their side. His columns became the ... e's" letter to the folks back home. "I love the infantry because they ar ... ney are the mud-rain-frost-and-wind boys. They have no comforts, an ... to live without the necessities. And in the end they are the guys that was ... about."

Apostolate of Jesuit Education (ICAJE). The first, *Characteristics of Jesuit Education*, appeared in 1986 (exactly four hundred years after the first official draft of the *Ratio Studiorum*). Seven years later, the ICAJE published *Ignatian Pedagogy: A Practical Approach*, whose title reveals the document's purpose and contents. While teachers at Jesuit schools had embraced the ideals of *Characteristics*, they had asked for more specific guidance on how to implement those ideals. (Interestingly, this was the same request that had prompted the 1599 *Ratio Studiorum*, which was essentially a more practical version of the 1586 *Ratio*. Then, too, Jesuit teachers had applauded the ideals of the 1586 *Ratio* but wondered how they were to make it work. Thus, we have the 1599 *Ratio*, or what we now know as "the" *Ratio*, which is practical in the extreme and anticipates every detail of educational administration, curriculum, method, and discipline.) *Characteristics* and *Ignatian* together rearticulate the distinctive nature of Jesuit education, but they do so for a modern world, a world of coeducation; lay leadership; advances in science and technology; and racial, ethnic, and religious diversity. *Characteristics* is the vision statement and offers "an inspiration that can make the day-to-day struggle have greater meaning and bear greater fruit." *Ignatian*, on the other hand, offers "a paradigm that speaks to the teaching-learning process, that addresses the teacher-learner relationship, and that has practical meaning and application for the classroom.

Unfortunately, both documents also eschew the rhetorical heritage of the *Ratio*. *Characteristics*, for example, makes only a couple of short references to eloquence, and

Ignatian reminds us that the fourth section of the Jesuit *Constitutions* (the section dealing with schools) “appears to place teachers’ personal example ahead of learning or rhetoric as an apostolic means to help students grow in values.” Both documents also reject the competitiveness that marks the *Ratio*. *Characteristics* does so explicitly: “Jesuit education today faces a different reality: a

world of excessive competitiveness reflected in individualism, consumerism, and success at all costs.” *Ignatian*, meanwhile, describes a paradigm that implicitly rejects agonism. The Ignatian model offers pedagogy based upon the “interplay of experience, reflection, and action.” Learning is not the public struggle of argument, but rather an engagement with meaningful experience that bears some relation to the students’ actual lives and that, through reflection, leads students to a new course of action. The reflection called for in Ignatian pedagogy follows Ignatius’ spiritual habit, enshrined in the *Exercises*, of paying attention to what moves him in a given situation. In this model, the teacher is more like a spiritual director and less like a debate moderator.

Obviously, there is much to recommend the Ignatian model, which reminds us that Jesuit education has always been about something more than the accumulation of knowledge as the basis for a lucrative career. It also is easy to see why the designers of Ignatian pedagogy would be wary of the endless argumentative contest of the *Ratio*. Five minutes of cable news is enough to convince anyone that the last thing our culture needs is more argument. And surely we should discourage the kind of competitiveness that leads students to see a grade of B as nothing more than the end of their (or their parents’) dream of the right law school or the right medical school. Yet if we are to join the pursuit of justice articulated in *Characteristics* and *Ignatian*, we would be unwise to ignore the rhetorical heritage of the *Ratio*. *Characteristics* specifically calls for a “critical analysis of society” [emphasis in original] and *Ignatian* hopes that students will “have a powerful and ever growing sense of how they can be effective advocates, agents and models of God’s justice.” To encourage analysis and advocacy without any means of persuasion is to send students into battle with no

weapons. This martial metaphor will likely seem unpersuasive to many, as will any call for a return to the *Ratio*’s agonism. Yet we know that the world is unlikely

to thank our students for being men and women for others, just as we know that the pursuit of justice often attracts more enemies than friends. If we say that we wish students to pursue justice, we are also saying that we wish to prepare

Learning is not the public struggle of argument, but rather an engagement with meaningful experience ...

students for struggle. Rhetoric, as the authors of the *Ratio* understood, is the art of struggle, and Western culture’s oldest pedagogy of advocacy.

Of course it is neither desirable nor feasible to think that we could simply graft Renaissance humanism onto our current curricula. Jesuit education has always been too sensitive to the particularities of time and place to attempt such a simplistic revival. Yet without some version of rhetorical training, the commitment to service enshrined in Ignatian pedagogy seems equally implausible. The moral leaders Jesuits admire—Arrupe, Ellacuria, Romero, Day—all shared a talent for persuasion. To emulate them, we need not assign students *aemuli* (or even Cicero in the original). But we do need to consider how we might fashion a contemporary rhetorical pedagogy. That project should begin with the idea that rhetoric can be taught through the Ignatian triad of experience, reflection and action.

First and foremost, rhetoric is an experience, one that engages mind and heart; indeed, rhetoric is something our students experience all the time. Rhetoric is also something they *do* all the time. They write papers, request extensions, discuss politics and sports and music (and occasionally the material we assign). They apply for scholarships and jobs and further schooling. They perform a great deal of community service, around our campuses and around the world, and these projects demand constant communication. In other words, our students are already immersed in both the *experience* of receiving rhetoric and the *action* of producing it. As teachers of perfect eloquence—no matter our discipline—our job would then be to lead students through the *reflection* that makes rhetoric intentional. Ignatian pedagogy thus offers the perfect vehicle for crafting an *eloquentia perfecta* appropriate to our moment, shaped by deep erudition, manifested in a range of communication media and, most importantly, unwaveringly committed to justice. ■