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### Heartlands Essay: Is There Such a Thing as the 'Jesuit' Thing?

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# IS THERE SUCH A THING AS THE 'JESUIT' THING?

*More a tango than a waltz*

By Paul G. Crowley, S.J.

In recent years we have seen many attempts to specify what makes a Jesuit school Jesuit. Often this takes the shape of the question, "What is the mission and identity of a Jesuit college or university?" Mission suggests what we are sent to accomplish. Identity concerns the prior question about who it is who is performing the mission. A Jesuit might ask himself, "What makes me a Jesuit?" The institutional analogue is: "What specifically makes this a Jesuit institution?"

Pursuing the issue this way, we are involved in a search for a substance, something specifiable. If only we could capture it, articulate it, and write it down for everybody to read, we could put everybody on the same page with the same level of enthusiasm and commitment and direction. We would know our mission and our identity because we would have the Jesuit substance in the can.

I want to suggest that despite its value, there are limitations to this approach, and that we need to find another. In asking about the Jesuit thing, then, I will

*The Jesuit thing is more a matter of spirituality than it is a program or a body of teachings.*



Creighton students perform at the annual International Banquet on campus.

suggest that is a matter of "style" over "substance." The issue concerning Jesuit distinctiveness, the Jesuit thing, is not so much a matter of what it is, but how we do what we do. So instead of starting with the "what" question, I'd like to start with the "how" question, the matter of style.

What do I mean by style? I am not focusing on style in that classical sense of the arts of rhetoric, the techniques of persuasion. Rather, I will take a page from historian John O'Malley, S. J., who wrote recently of "style" as a way of understanding what was going on in Second Vatican Council. Against those who would look at the Council through the lens of its many documents and an exegesis of its words, O'Malley argues that if we want to understand the Council and what's been going on in the Catholic Church in the past forty years, we need to think



in terms of the Council's overall approach to its task. The Council's style was not doctrinaire, confrontational, dogmatic, adversarial, or condemnatory, but rather was pastoral, irenic, homiletic, invitational, and affirming. Even the titles of documents, such as "The Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World" bespoke a distinctive style. It presented a new face of Catholicism that suggested a new way into the "substance" of Catholicism.

I would like to carry over O'Malley's useful trope to an understanding of Jesuit education. If there is any Jesuit substance, then it comes in and through a style. It does not stand alone as a Jesuit substance, a quiddity. It is discovered rather in the way we go about doing what we do. The key to understanding the Jesuit thing in higher education is found in understanding how people go about doing their work as teachers and scholars in a Jesuit style.

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**B**efore looking more closely at this Jesuit style, it might help to take note of the opposite approach: three ways people in Jesuit circles have tried to retrieve a Jesuit substance, through (1) the rediscovery of a Jesuit charism, (2) the reformulation of the original Jesuit vision for present-day circumstances, and (3) a new affirmation of the Catholic dimension of Jesuit institutions. Each of these approaches holds enormous sway over the situation in which we find ourselves today.

Rediscovery of the Jesuit charism. The word "charism" is one of those Catholic words of Greek origin, essentially meaning gift — what it is that God has given this group, what it is that makes them distinctive. In the past forty years or so, many religious orders, including the Society of Jesus, have tried to recover an original sense of their charism. In the case of the Society, this has focused largely on a rediscovery of the riches of the Spiritual Exercises, that program of the soul's journey in the form of a little book that was the fruit of Ignatius's own spiritual experiences over many years.

The great positive contribution of the rediscovery of the Exercises is that rather than look for a distinctive Jesuit substance or identity, the Society has been more deeply interested in looking for its own spirituality, the way Jesuits and other people can encounter God in their lives along this Ignatian way. This is an enormous gift in itself: that the Jesuit charism (or thing) is fundamentally more a matter of spirituality than it is a program or a body of teachings.

For some, this had led to conscious efforts to enter into that spirituality, to try to live it in some way, by seeking spiritual direction or going on retreats sponsored by Campus Ministry. But that is not the case for all, for a Jesuit university is made up of people from many different religious and spiritual persuasions. In fact, if the Exercises are invoked too much as a kind of symbol of a Jesuit substance, as indeed they can be, then we run the risk of making some people feel excluded from something that only insiders know. We must guard against turning the Exercises into some elusive Holy Grail, or something so laden with religious mystique that some people feel out of the loop. For the Exercises themselves are not the loop. However, they are a reminder for all of us in a Jesuit university that the original inspiration is a spiritual one, and that the Jesuit thing is fundamentally a matter of spirituality.

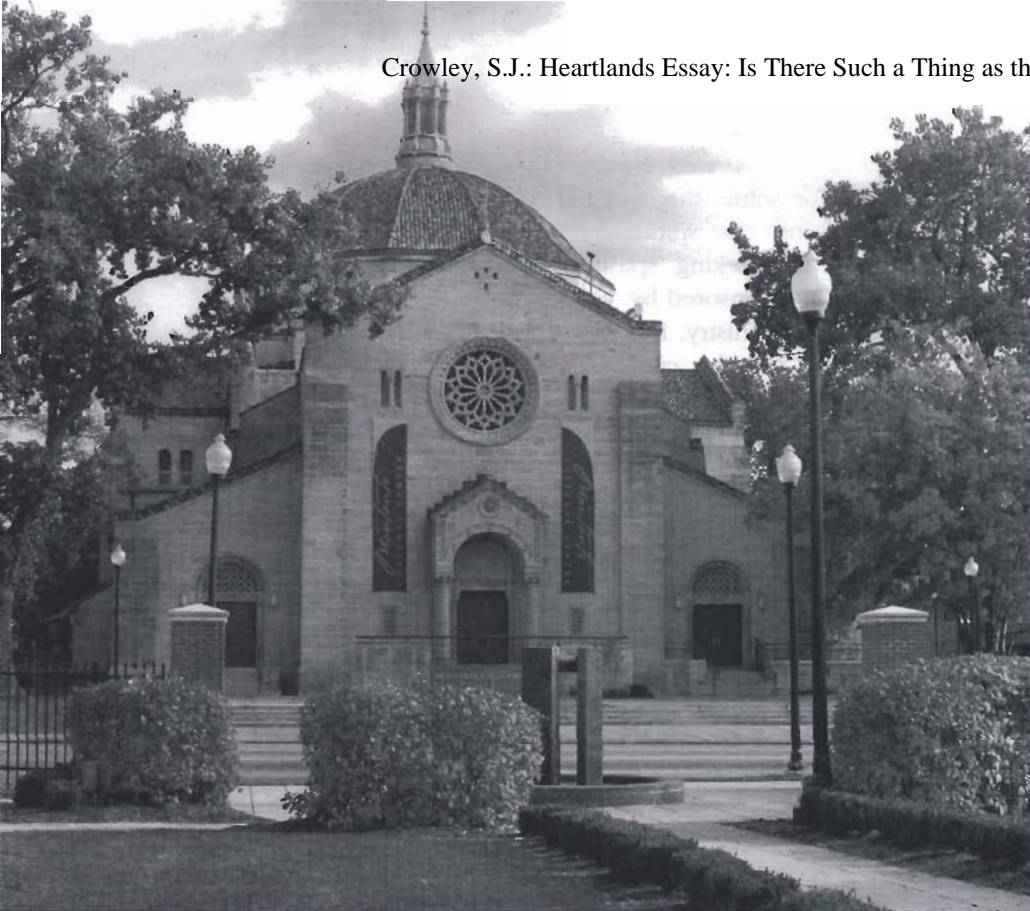
*We must guard against turning the Exercises into some elusive Holy Grail.*

Reformulation of the Original Vision for Present-Day Circumstances. Along with the recovery of charism Jesuits have tried to reformulate the original inspiration of the Society in light of the needs of the contemporary world. In a series of meetings, or Congregations, the Society declared that its religious mission could not be abstracted from its presence in a world of great suffering and social and economic inequity. Congregation 32 (1975) put it into language that contemporary people could readily understand: The works of the Society were to be seen in the service of faith, of which the promotion of justice is an absolute requirement. This reformulation of the original inspiration has been taken very seriously by the Society, and in some parts of the world, it has exacted the cost of human life, as we witnessed at the University of Central America in 1989. There really is no way we can adequately understand Jesuit education today without grappling with the meaning and implications of this reformulation.

In that spirit, the Society itself realized in its most recent Congregation, 34 (1994), that this earlier

*The Jesuit thing is a style*





The Montante Cultural Center, Canisius College.

formulation, while still valid, was in some ways inadequate. This Congregation said that the service of faith and the promotion of justice must be placed in working relationship with interreligious dialogue and a grasp of cultures other than one's own. This implies that we live in a post-modern world of enormous pluralism and ambiguity, where "identity" is no longer so simply fixed as in the past. The Jesuit thing would be found in the dynamic interplay of inculturation, inter-religious dialogue, the service of faith, and promotion of justice. And, they said, this was not a task for Jesuits only, but for all who shared in this vision, Jesuits and co-workers alike, and notably, women.

One key concern of these Congregations has been a creative fidelity to the Jesuit and Catholic heritage in concert with ongoing attention to human reality as it continues to unfold. In this respect, the Society stands as a beacon of hope to many people at a time when some other religious institutions seem to be in retreat from the world, or place themselves at odds with it.

On the other hand, it must also be said that the temptation is strong to reduce the Jesuit thing to the reformulations of these Congregations, to what some people call "faith and justice." Although these are often well-meaning attempts to pay heed to the fact that a school is Jesuit, they can be inadequate. As Jesuit scholars like Michael J. Buckley have pointed

out, this reformulation finds its warrant, its roots, in a far richer understanding of the goals of education.

One of the most important of these is *humanitas*, which leads the student to a cultivated and discerning understanding of and compassion for human misery. The very richness of its provenance is liable to get lost if we reduce such a rich insight to a slogan.

On the other hand, the commitment of the Society to this vision is strong and deep. For many people on Jesuit campuses it is not encountered as a slogan, but as a welcome institutional commitment. It imbues the way we go about things and decisions about what we do. A faculty-student Spring break in Tijuana building houses may well come out of this shared spirit, this Jesuit commitment quietly at work in the institution itself.

One fact remains when all is finally said: the Jesuit thing does not lie in documents alone, nor in parsing them for meaning; it lies rather in how people live the vision, in the manner of their doing it, in a style.

**R**ecovery of the Catholic Dimension of Jesuit Identity. In recent years the phrase "Catholic, Jesuit" has become more commonly used to describe our schools. At the same time there have been several movements within the Catholic Church itself to reassert a Catholic religious identity within Catholic universities. This has occurred against the backdrop of the fact that some people have no problem saying that they teach or work at a Jesuit university, but they have a bit more of a problem saying that they work at a Catholic university. For some people, the very term "Catholic" may evoke a range of neuralgic feelings.

Nevertheless, the affirmation that a Jesuit university is also a Catholic university, and that these are not two separate species, is necessary for gaining a grasp of the Jesuit thing. Despite suffering great hardship at the hands of popes and Church bureaucrats, Ignatius was firmly loyal to his Catholic Church, and wrote into the heart of the Order a kind of spiritual fealty to the papacy itself. But this has never been simple. If it were a dance, the relationship between the Society and the Church could be case more like a tango than a waltz; there have been a lot of creative and occasionally tense, even sharp movements between the



partners. Speaking to Jesuits themselves, the current leader of the Society, Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, put it well a few years ago:

Without doubt all the tasks which the Church entrusts to us entail risks in their accomplishment. To announce to a world distant from the church the love of God manifested in Jesus Christ; to do this by means of social commitment and inculturation, dialogue and ecumenism, theological research and pastoral experience—this requires of us initiatives which lay us open to misunderstanding. Let us recognize in this fact still another reason...for making it clear within the Church itself that we are living out an authentic mission within the Church, a mission given by the Church. This “missionary” openness to a world at a distance from the Church or allergic to the Church will not always be understood by those ecclesiastical movements whose apostolic priority is primarily or exclusively the reinforcement of ecclesiastical structures or the unification of the faithful alone.

It is important to keep in mind this mediating position of the Society vis-à-vis the Church and the world, because it seriously informs what we can understand the Jesuit thing to be. We must be on guard to avoid too narrow a notion of “the Catholic” itself, or a resting content with a certain “brand name” Catholicism reducible to papal teachings, or to a “crisis Catholicism” focused on current issues besetting the Church. The world of Catholicism is much larger than that. The prescient Jesuit William Lynch warned against “those Catholics who would reduce Christ or Catholicism to an ideology, or some identification of the Good Tidings with a tribal instinct...” What we must keep alive is the broader picture, which calls for critical intelligence, historical imagination, a certain sense of irony, even comedy. There is in fact something distinctive to be prized in the Catholic idea, something that could be lost either in evading it or reducing to an ideological stance. This is where I believe a sense of Jesuit style can lend some balance.

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Having examined briefly these three ways toward reaching a Jesuit substance, what can we say it is that constitutes Jesuit style? Taking my cue from E.B. White’s *Elements of Style*, I suggest here five “elements” of such a style. Rather than spell out their implications for a life of teaching and scholarship at a Jesuit university, I will leave it to the read-

er to connect the dots and to imagine how these might shape their own approach to teaching and scholarship within a Jesuit university.

1. Jesuit style involves a keen sense of the transcendent in everyday life and, indeed, in the whole of what we call creation. The poet Rilke captures it well:

I find you, Lord, in all Things and in all  
my fellow creatures, pulsing with your life;  
as a tiny seed you sleep in what is small  
and in the vast you vastly yield yourself.

The wondrous game that power plays with Things  
is to move in such submission through the world:  
groping in roots and growing thick in trunks  
and in treetops like a rising from the dead.

This instinct for the transcendent extends from the obvious, such as Ignatius’s own tears as he gazed upon the stars, to the more terrestrial, like those occasions when, standing before a classroom of students, we might wonder what human mysteries lie before us. But even in the most mundane things, we are called to a life of “hallowing the everyday,” as Martin Buber put it.

While for Ignatius and the Jesuit heritage, this “hallowing of the everyday” is done with an eye toward God, toward “seeing” God within and working through every moment and aspect of our existence, what we are describing here is a sensibility and not an article of religious faith. Vaclav Havel, the former Czech president and an atheist, said in a speech a few years ago at Stanford that what people need to recover now more than ever is a sense of transcendence and that without it something very precious about human existence will have been lost.. Jesuit style especially prizes a sensibility for the transcendent, and that somehow it functions as the tacit dimension of much of our life in a Jesuit setting.

2. Jesuit style is world-embracing and does not understand itself as fundamentally at odds with the world, much less in combat with it. This is not to say that Ignatius, for example, did not find real evils within the world, false standards, empires of darkness. He did, and saw himself as in some way called to combat against those forms of evil. But the world itself was not evil.

One of the greatest pitfalls of religion today is casting the world as an evil reality in itself. To be

religious is to ally oneself with the powers of light over darkness, life over death, truth over falsehood, goodness over evil, spirit over matter. St. Augustine refuted this worldview, also known as Manichaeism, back in the fifth century. But it still lingers with us. To be religious, according to this view, means to reject the world, and in Christian terms, to set Christ against the world. Nothing could be further from the Jesuit style. There is no subject matter that is not fair game for teachers and scholars in a Jesuit university because it all belongs to the world that we inhabit and should therefore be understood, and, even in what is incomprehensible, affirmed as a place of divine dwelling, or at least potentially so.

3. Closely related to this embrace of the world is the embrace of the human condition, not only in its lofty reaches and sublime accomplishments in art, letters and the sciences, but also in its muck and mire and ugliness of its failure and in what we can rightly call sin. This implies that beauty and virtue can be found even in what meets us as repulsive or grotesque or weak or defeated. The theological warrant for this, in Christian terms, is the mystery of the divine having become a loving and suffering human being, and that within this humanity can be found the truth that we call the divine. This is one reason why Jesuit education has always prized the humanities in their full range and encouraged the development of students with a sensibility for the human condition as it is.

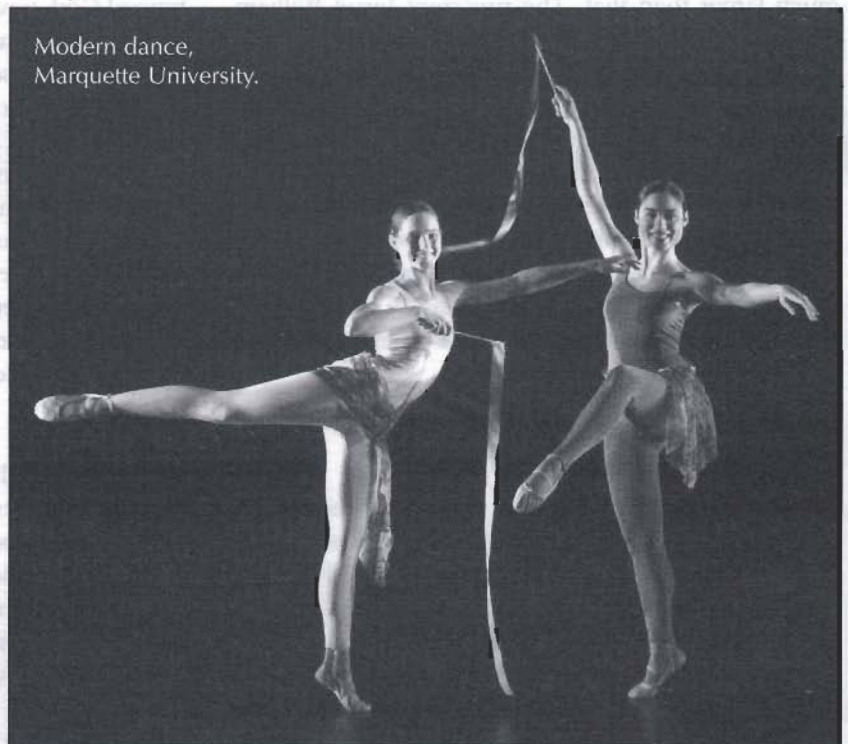
We can look at the recent movie interview with Robert McNamara and see there a man humbled by the fact that his confidence in a certain technocratic ideology led to so much destruction and death. Arguably, in a world torn up by war and terrorism, it is the humanitas imbuing Jesuit style that we need now more than ever. It is this humane sensibility that gives us a nose for suffering, misery and injustice, and sparks in people a desire to right wrongs.

4. In all of this, an openness to the ambiguity of life is essential. We live in a world — mere mortals that we are — where we can

rarely claim the luxury of apodictic certainty about very much. Jesuits learned this in trying to work out a new universal calendar in the seventeenth century! The Jesuit style, I would argue, is at home with a great deal of ambiguity, and lives comfortably with a modicum of uncertainty about what cannot be finally settled. It resists what William Lynch called “the absolutizing instinct.” In theology, for example, this was seen in the Jesuit tradition of casuistry, in which broad moral or ethical principles were applied to particular cases and their meanings and implications thus sorted out.

This was in sharp contrast to the tendency to apply a principle absolutely, with little or no room for messy human circumstances. Similarly, in the famous controversy over free will and determinism between Jesuits and Dominicans, Jesuits argued for a way to let reason lead to a realm of freedom of will and a fundamental orientation of one's life in accord with God's grace. This approach meant that there would be uncertainty in knowing where we quite stood before God, but it was based on a fundamental trust in divine providence and the God-given capacities of human beings to make free decisions.

At a time when so many forces-cultural and political, as well as religious, clamor for an absolute certainty in matters that have historically eluded certainty, this element of Jesuit style is indeed a



Modern dance,  
Marquette University.



distinctive contribution to higher education, something that sets us apart.

5. The Jesuit style is idealistic, visionary, and hopeful, even in its most sober-minded and skeptical moments. Jesuit education is an education with a purpose, and that purpose is to help make the world a better place, more reflective of God's desires, in and through the lives of students and graduates shaped by such a vision. This last element, in fact, brings us back to the primacy of the student in the Jesuit style, for these ideals mean nothing if they are not embodied and lived, and Jesuit education will have failed if our students do not come to share in the ideals, the vision, and the hope toward which Jesuit education aspires. When Jesuit schools use the motto, "Men and Women for Others," they are invoking this spirit of idealism and hope.

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Finally, then, this Jesuit style is not a substance so much as it is a spirituality. It is played out within an often tacit but sometimes explicit atmosphere of faith—an interpreted faith, lived by human beings. Some of these human beings are Jesuits. But the vast majority are not. And some people on campus do not share in an explicit Christian faith, much less that of the Catholic Church. What we do share in a Jesuit institution is a common horizon, a horizon of mystery, of the transcendent and the eternal, of truth, beauty, goodness and love—all of which are names in Christian faith for God, made known by Jesus to those of us who share that faith. While we can be explicit about that horizon in the language we use, it is normally there in a tacit way as we go about our work in Jesuit style. Our students share in this style through what we teach and write, and especially in the way we approach them. They go into the world from the university and many live this style themselves. On the surface, they might not appear any different from their peers at a nearby private university. On the surface, you might not, either. But within, in the style of it, you will be part of a somewhat different world, one that tries to make a substantial difference in its own distinctive way.

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## HEARTLAND FACULTY CONVERSATIONS, 2004

Heartland Faculty Conversations is an annual conference held by the eleven middle-America Jesuit colleges and universities and St. John's College, Belize, to engage in discussion on the nature of Jesuit higher education. This year's gathering at St. Louis University, February 20 – 22, focused on the question asked by many faculty members: what is different about research and teaching in a Jesuit college or university? The seventy-seven member group first heard a keynote address by John Padberg, S.J., "The Pilgrim's Progress," addressing the ways in which a distinctly "Jesuit" approach to higher education developed. Padberg's talk was followed the next day by a panel of five professors, who described ways in which they implement the Ignatian ideals in their research, teaching and mentoring of students.

Paul Crowley's slightly ironic title, "The Jesuit Thing: Style or Substance," of which a version is published in this issue, illustrates his argument that Jesuit education is unique precisely because of its style – the way in which we go about the work of education – and not its "substance," which might well be the substance of any Catholic educational process. Crowley's paper stimulated vigorous discussion: perhaps the most intense focus was on the often neuralgic subject of tenure. That is, how can junior faculty manage to do research, publish, teach, mentor and serve on committees, and still have time to engage in projects that promote Jesuit identity in a university? If we mean what we say about our institutions being unique, can there not be a widening of the categories under which young professors can be promoted?

On the final morning of the conference, the Center for Organizational Learning and Renewal conducted a group session to facilitate discussions about putting into practice the ideals and hopes discussed over the weekend.

*Carl F. Starkloff, S.J., Saint Louis University.*