

Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education

Volume 39

Article 3

2-1-2011

A Characteristic Impulse Toward Excellence

John W. O'Malley

Follow this and additional works at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations>

Recommended Citation

O'Malley, John W. (2011) "A Characteristic Impulse Toward Excellence," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 39, Article 3.
Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol39/iss1/3>

A Characteristic Impulse Toward Excellence

“We are not born
for ourselves alone.”

By John O'Malley, S.J.

Any school worth talking about wants to excel. That's why it hires coaches to produce winning teams. That's why it sets up search committees to hire the best faculty. That's why it sends out agents to recruit the best students, and why it spends lavishly to build the smartest classrooms and the most attractive residence halls. Striving for excellence is hardly a monopoly of Jesuit schools, and we should beware of making silly claims about our purchase on it.

Nonetheless, we are heirs of a tradition of education that stretches over four and a half centuries in which excellence was a consistent leit-motif, sometimes implicit and subtle but always in play. It had its origins in the origins of the Jesuit order and especially in the main founder, Saint Ignatius. It got woven

into the ethos of the order and thence into the ethos of the schools. I can point out three sources for it. Though the sources can be distinguished from one another, they are so interrelated that they become one in their historical manifestations.

The first source is the person of Ignatius himself. Like the founders of other orders, he impressed traits of his personality on the Society of Jesus. He is often described as a “Renaissance man.” That designation is true up to a point, but we must remember that he was born into a noble family in which the chivalric ideals of the medieval knight valiant were still very much alive. Before his religious conversion, his favorite reading was stories about great deeds of such heroes, and on his sick bed at Loyola he made St. Francis and St. Dominic over into great achievers for God like the knights of old. As he decided to imitate those saints, he determined he too would conquer souls and do great deeds for God.

TOP 50 MASTER'S UNIVERSITIES*
*Public institution

8 S.J.S.

1. St. Mary's University (TX)
2. Creighton University (NE)
3. Trinity University (TX)
4. Hamline University (MN)
5. Le Moyne College (NY)
6. Truman State University (MO)
7. SUNY at Geneseo (NY)
8. Mary Ba
9. Loyola
10. Villan
11. Unvr
12. Xavi
13. Valj
14. Un
15. Jo
16. G
17.
18. I
19.
20.
21. Edificio

Charlotte Brontë

MOBILITY

How to Fight Plagiarism on Campus

SERVICE

To the Editor:
"For 'Students in Internet Age, No Shame in Copy and Paste'" ("Cheat Sheet" series, front page, Aug. 2) illustrates the ease with which students can circumvent this problem. But if they take the time to design more complex assignments, which might require multiple drafts and peer review, they can circumvent this problem. Love at the computer screen, they will do.

Regional Universities

What Is a Regional University?

Regions at a glance

North Midwest
South West

THE CHRONICLE
of Higher Education.

MEASURING **STICK** First in a series

The Quality Question

BY DAVID GLENN

Acceptance rate '09: 7%
Average alumni giving rate: 18%

1. Villanova U
2. Providence

As he progressed in the spiritual life, he purified the ideal, but he never lost the desire to achieve “great things” for the king he now served. That desire manifested itself in a number of ways. Especially pertinent for us academics is his decision when he was about thirty-three to go “spend some time in studies in order to help souls.” In the concrete, that meant going to a university, which meant he had first to learn Latin. I find it remarkable that this man, who according to sixteenth-century standards was well into middle-age, would sit in a classroom with pre-pubescent boys to try to drum into his reluctant head the rudiments of Latin and then matriculate into a university, where in this period of history students entered in the early teens.

Much more remarkable, however, is the list of universities in which he tried to pursue his goal—Alcalá, Salamanca, and, finally, Paris. These ranked among the “top ten” or even top five on the continent of Europe. In our day he would equivalently be taking on Stanford, Johns Hopkins, and Harvard. Ignatius, though academically not particularly well equipped to do so, not only tackled the best, but gravitated toward them with a characteristic impulse toward excellence.

He was not a great writer, but he produced a classic of spiritual literature, the *Spiritual Exercises*.

As a classic the book by definition is susceptible, within clear parameters, to a range of interpretations, and in the course of its long shelf-life it has in fact undergone a considerable range. The text itself suggests and even encourages a certain malleability of perspective on what is to be accomplished by “doing the Exercises.” When they are undertaken in their entirety, however, in their full thirty-day form, the motif of “distinguishing oneself” emerges clear and strong.

The Exercises, then, are the second source of striving for excellence. They are a distillation of key elements in the Christian tradition of spirituality but

Equivalently, Ignatius would be studying at Stanford, Johns Hopkins, and Harvard.

as interpreted by Ignatius. Their full program is clearly impregnated with his personality. A key moment in them, as everybody acknowledges, is the contemplation on “The Kingdom of Christ” placed between the First and the Second Weeks. In the Third Point (n. 97) Ignatius makes clear the level of response to the call to serve Christ that is expected: “Those who

wish to give *greater* proof of their love and to *distinguish* themselves...will not only offer themselves *entirely*...but will make offerings of *greater* value and of *more* importance..." Here is the first and most significant font of the *magis* with which we are all so familiar—a code word for excellence.

The central moment in the Second Week comes with the considerations Ignatius provides in preparation for the "election" or major decision the individual is facing. In those considerations—the "Meditation on the Two Standards," "On the Three Kinds of People," and the "Three Kinds of Humility"—the same spirit prevails. In the last of these, for instance, the "third kind" of humility, which is the one held up as the ideal to strive for, is described as "the most perfect kind."

Much, much more could be said about the Exercises in this regard, but the third source is less well known and appreciated. It was only when Ignatius rather late in life moved to Rome with his companions that he encountered Renaissance culture in its home. Almost immediately young men began joining the order who were imbued with it. To make a long story short, this led to the momentous decision to begin to operate schools that for the most part would operate according to the ideals of humanist educators of Renaissance Italy.

What attracted the Jesuits to the humanist program was its student-centered focus, unlike the universities, which were by definition professions-

Deeds fraught with danger

tered. The humanist program was not only student-centered but had quite specific ideas about the kind of graduate it could help produce—somebody devoted to the public weal, somebody devoted to the service of others. Cicero had articulated the ideal centuries earlier, "We are not born for ourselves alone" (*De officiis*, I.7.22). That pagan ideal the Jesuits found more than compatible with their Christian ideals and made it their own. Centuries after Ignatius, Pedro Arrupe almost certainly unwittingly paraphrased Cicero when he crystallized the ideal in the expression "Men and women for others."

But Cicero proposed an ideal beyond mere service. He proposed an ideal of self-sacrifice in the pur-

suit of justice and right order in society that might even cost one's life. He proposed the ideal of high courage and magnanimity, of undertaking "not only great deeds and ones useful in the highest degree to the common good," but also "those fraught with danger both to life itself and to many other goods that make life worth living (*ibid.* I.20.66)." This text was taught in all the Jesuit schools, and many Jesuits therefore knew passages from it by heart.

Most remarkable, however, is the fact that the passage from which I just quoted was, without acknowledgment, paraphrased and incorporated into the Constitutions Ignatius and his secretary, Juan Alfonso de Polanco, wrote for the members of the Society of Jesus. The passage occurs in Part IX that deals with the superior general and that includes a list of the qualities he should have. As is often noted, those qualities are ideals held up not only for the general but for every Jesuit—by extension for everybody engaged in enterprises in the traditions of the Society. The passage echoes Cicero. The general must possess "magnanimity and fortitude of soul." Those qualities will lead him into "initiating great undertakings...and persevering in them with constancy and not losing courage in the face of contradictions, even though they come from persons of high rank and power" and even though they may cost him great suffering and even loss of life.

There is something, I believe, in the human spirit that urges us to do our best, but, as we know all too well, we do not always heed that something. Attending a little bit to the tradition of which we are a part can perhaps help us pay closer heed and make it operative in our common enterprise. I have provided a scrawny sketch of some elements of the striving for excellence that is a component of the Jesuit tradition and that has manifested itself in so many ways in the history of the order. Every school strives for excellence. So do we. We have a characteristic impulse toward it. ■

*John W. O'Malley, S.J., author of *The First Jesuits and What Happened at Vatican II*, is university professor at Georgetown University.*