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From 1599 to 1999

Celebrating the Ratio Studiorum at Saint Louis University

To commemorate the four-hundredth anniversary of the publication of the definitive edition of the Ratio Studiorum or Plan of Studies, the foundational Jesuit educational document, the dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Saint Louis University sponsored a panel discussion on the history and present significance of the Ratio. The following are edited versions of three of the panelists' remarks, delivered January 17, 1999.

1 An Exploration of the Ignatian Roots of the Ratio

Michael W. Maher, S.J., Assistant Professor of History

On December 13, 1779, the great American statesman, John Adams, stopped in the port city of El Ferrol, Spain, during his European tour, representing the interests of the new and struggling Republic. While docked outside the city he attended a captain's banquet on board a ship. Adams left a record of this resplendent meal and the subsequent conversation in his journal:

A very fine turkey was brought upon table, among everything else that Land, Sea or Air could furnish. One of the captains, as soon as he saw it, observed that he never saw one of those Birds on a Table but it excited in him a deep regret for the Abolition [the suppression of 1773] of that order of Ecclesiasticks the Jesuits to whom We were he said, indebted for so many excellent Things, and among the Rest for Turkeys. These birds he said were never seen or known in Europe till the Jesuits imported them from India. This occasioned much Conversation and some Controversy: but the majority of the officers appeared to join this regret. The Jesuits were represented as the greatest Masters of Science and literature; as practicing the best system of Education, and as having made the greatest improvements, the happiest Inventions and the greatest discoveries for the comfort of Life and the Amelioration of Man and Society. Till this time I had thought that although millions of Jesuits, Pharisees, and Machiavellians still existed in the World, yet the word Jesuit as well as that of Pharisees and Machiavellian, had become so odious in Courts and unpopular with Nations that neither was ever advocated in good Company. I now found my Error, and I afterwards perceived that even the Philosophers were the principal Friends left to the Jesuits. (4:197)

John Adams' opinion concerning the Society of Jesus had, thanks to a turkey, changed dramatically. Especially worth noting is the admiration expressed by his dinner companions toward the Jesuits as the "greatest Masters of Science and Literature and practitioners of the best system of education." This year, 1999, celebrates the four-hundredth anniversary of that "system of education." Perhaps it would be worth going back *ad fontes*, as the Documents of the Second Vatican Council recommend for groups seeking renewal and reinvigoration of their founding charisms, to look once again at one of the most formative documents in the history of Jesuit education.

Four hundred years ago, on January 8, 1599, the superior general of the Society of Jesus, Claudio Aquaviva, promulgated the *Ratio Atque Studiorum*. This document presents several challenges to the late twentieth-century reader. In order to understand this document and the subsequent influence it played in shaping Jesuit education, we must start with the very beginnings of the Jesuit Order.

Officially approved by the Pope Paul III on September 27, 1540, the Society of Jesus established the primary goal of its existence as the defense and the propagation of the faith and the progress of souls in Christian life and doctrine. The founding document, the *Formula of the Institute*, identified these goals and suggested various means by which these goals could be achieved: teaching, preaching, administration of the sacraments, and working with the poor. Very soon after the founding of the Order in 1540, Ignatius and other Jesuits quickly realized that the work of education supplied one of the best means for attaining the goal set forth in the *Formula of the Institute*. The Jesuits established their first schools for their own members in training and not for those outside of the Society, known as "externs."

The Jesuits inaugurated a new ministry over 450 years ago, on April 24, 1548, when they opened a school specifically for "externs," in Messina, Sicily. This first school in Sicily marked a direction in ministry that would soon characterize the works of the Society of Jesus. Three years later, the flagship school of all future Jesuit schools—the Roman College—opened on February 23, 1551. Ignatius quickly became convinced that the schools provided one of the best means for promoting the goals for the Society. In a letter to a fellow Jesuit dated December 1, 1555, he observed that schools provided good training ground for young Jesuit teachers, supplied the students with the proper environment for the acquisition of doctrine, learning, and morals, and relieved parents of the burden of supplying good education for their sons. Ignatius also noted that the future graduates would become civic and religious leaders and that the education they received would by extension benefit others. By the time that Ignatius died in 1556

there existed thirty-three Jesuit-directed colleges or universities. How, we must ask, did the Jesuits create an educational enterprise which gentlemen, while dining on drumsticks more than two centuries later, would praise as the “best system of education”? A full answer to that question would require a book, but a good start might well point to two ideas of Ignatius of Loyola that permeate the *Ratio* and therefore provide the Ignatian grounding for Jesuit education: (1) Ignatius’s basic understanding that all creation, if properly understood, has the potential of moving a person closer towards God; (2) his conviction that this progress towards God takes place more successfully if it is assisted by means of a well-ordered plan.

Some philosophers and theologians, especially those who favored the Platonic tradition, distrusted the material world as a valid means for coming to knowledge about God and perceived created things as a stumbling block to any form of spiritual ascent. Ignatius, on the other hand, viewed the world as reflecting its Creator and therefore having the potential for assisting men and women in moving them towards a fuller awareness of God in this life and eternal beatitude in the next. The First Principle and Foundation in Ignatius’s *Spiritual Exercises* states the matter clearly:

Human beings are created to praise, reverence and serve God our Lord, and by means of doing this to save their souls.

The other things on the face of the earth are created for human beings, to help them in the pursuit of the end for which they are created.

From this it follows that we ought to use these things to the extent that they help us toward our end, and free ourselves from them to the extent that they hinder us from it.

This First Principle grounds the *Spiritual Exercises* and therefore grounds Jesuit identity, Jesuit-directed ministry, and, in particular, the ministry of education. In the First Principle, Ignatius asks all men and women not to look at created things as ends in themselves, but rather, as means by which creation reveals the Creator. “Finding God in all things”—an expression often used by Ignatius—captures this same idea. The First Principle and Foundation had the most profound impact on the nature of Jesuit education. Because of this foundation, all creation became the legitimate subject matter for learning about God. The goals of the *Ratio* and of the *Spiritual Exercises* are in fact identical. Just as the First Principle and Foundation in the Exercises identified the correct use of created things as helping a person move towards God, so too did the *Ratio* insist that educational endeavors have as their purpose helping the students move ever closer to their Creator. The authors of the *Ratio Studiorum* of 1599 made this point clear from the very beginning of the document: “The aim of our educational program is to lead men and women to the knowledge and love of their Creator and Redeemer.” This First Principle and Foundation encouraged Jesuit minds to work on subjects ranging from astronomy to zoology; and, yes, some studied philosophy and theology as well. Scholars who delved deep into God’s creation and grew in their understanding of how all

things came from God and had the potential to lead humanity to God followed the insights and the goals established by Ignatius in the *Spiritual Exercises*.

The second important idea of Ignatius that permeates the *Ratio* is his insistence that well-ordered progress provides one of the best means of obtaining a desired end. Ignatius benefited from divine grace but also gained no little knowledge from his time spent in the school of experience. Ignatius’s first attempt at higher education was guided only by his own misplaced fervor. In his attempt to excel as quickly as possible he made an indiscriminate attempt to digest the logic of de Soto, the *Sentences* of Peter of Lombard, and the physics of Peter the Great. This haphazard approach undertaken at the University of Alcalá left him frustrated and, after a bout with the Spanish Inquisition, he packed all his books on a donkey and left for Paris in January of 1528. In Paris he experienced the well-ordered progress of studies known as the *modus Parisiensis*. At Paris, each course built on previous knowledge and at course completion the young scholar was left with questions that were answered in the following course. This method resonated with Ignatius’s propensity for ordered progression, the same sense of order he recommended for advancement in the spiritual life as described in his *Spiritual Exercises*. The experiences of Alcalá and Paris left an impression on Ignatius and later, when he composed the *Constitutions* of the Jesuit Order, he insisted that, “[a]n order should be observed in pursuing the branches of knowledge” (Part IV, chapter 6: 4). Several decades later, the authors of the *Ratio* implemented this admonition and laid out a well-ordered course of studies.

The *Ratio Studiorum*, therefore, does not stand outside of Ignatian spirituality, but rather incorporates its very essence. Did those gentlemen in Spain, in the midst of their turkey dinner, recognize that Ignatian spiritual insights permeated the “best system of education”? Probably not. These gentlemen understood the benefits of Jesuit education but perhaps were ignorant of the driving principles behind the *Ratio*. In our effort to continue the “best system of education,” perhaps these Ignatian insights and their method of implementation in the *Ratio* have something to say to us today.

II Instruction

Paul Shore, Associate Professor of Educational Studies

Central to the execution of the program outlined in the *Ratio* was the instructor, and without a grasp of the duties and expectations of this instructor the *Ratio* cannot be understood. The teacher of the curriculum outlined in the *Ratio* was a Jesuit. This meant, among other things, that the instructor would approach the content to be taught from a fully integrated perspective of one who saw spirituality and academic formation as completely intertwined. This integrated viewpoint, common to many educational programs in sixteenth-century Europe, informed all aspects of instruction detailed in the *Ratio*. The instructor was expected to provide moral as well as academic leadership, and to be a role model of probity and religious orthodoxy at all times. The teacher was censored both by his superiors and by standards set out in the *Ratio*, and functioned himself as a censor, an interpreter of literature and an exegete of philosophical and theological texts. He was authority, judge,

and guide to his students, some of whom were as young as ten or eleven. Yet he did not possess academic freedom in the sense that it would be understood by a modern-day teacher or professor. Undoubtedly many of the parents who entrusted their sons to such teachers saw the instructors functioning in *loco parentis*, looking to these teachers to provide structure, supervision, and role modeling to their students.

The Jesuit teacher was both a representative of, and a part of the corporate identity of the Society of Jesus. Jesuits observed their classrooms carefully to try to recruit their most able students for the Society. As frequently very visible members of the community in which they worked, these teachers were expected to model ideal conduct as representatives of the Society, hence the emphasis in the *Ratio* on the high moral standards and intellectual competence expected of them.

These instructors were aided in their work by the structural unity of the educational program they taught. A noted scholar of Jesuit educational history, George Ganss, has pointed out that “[t]he procedural unity established by the Jesuit *Ratio* was in fact much greater than would be desirable or possible today” (27). Central to this unity was the use of Latin not merely as a subject of instruction but as the instrument of instruction. Jesuit schools from Portugal to Transylvania were thus able to maintain a remarkable uniformity of instructional practice because of the use of Latin. Modern students of educational techniques should note that this meant that in effect, the entire Jesuit school, scholars and teachers, were interacting in a language other than their mother tongue. When teachers and students spoke different mother tongues, as might often be the case in the Low Countries or Central Europe, this use of Latin may have been a distinct advantage in reducing regional or ethnic rivalries.

The *Ratio* mandated a very high level of mastery in Greek, as well, although instruction was never carried out in this language. The teacher of Rhetoric, for example, is enjoined to “correct any fault in oratorical or poetic structure, in elegance and grace of expression, in transitions, rhythm, spelling, or anything else.” Here the teacher had to function not merely as the corrector of mechanical flaws, but as an aesthetic arbiter. He was allowed a fair degree of leeway in the interpretation of Greek texts, as well. The teacher thus was a self-conscious descendant of the instructors in the schools of oratory that had flourished in ancient times, teachers such as Quintilian and St. Augustine. The teacher in turn trained his students to carry on this aesthetic tradition in their own work as diplomats, clergy, teachers, or men of affairs.

The curriculum of the *Ratio* was focused upon the mastery, recall, and production of the written and spoken word, and so it is not surprising that instruction would likewise focus on rhetoric and declamation. The instructor of Greek, for example, would deliver a “prelection” or oral summary and analysis of the text in question. This performance, for it can be considered nothing short of one, did more than simply convey content. The prelection would both establish the authority of the teacher with regard to the curriculum, and more importantly, provide a model to the students of a skilled oral performer. Teachers were encouraged, whenever possible, to lecture without notes, thereby rendering their performance more lively and engaging.

Students also performed in the Jesuit school, where disputations were a central element of instruction. The instructor’s role in these events was to be an unbiased moderator, and to take the opposite side of each argument, seeking to test the limits of the students’ ability to think on their feet and to manipulate the content of their arguments. Such disputations were to be undertaken with a good deal of the competitive spirit common to the *Ratio*, but also, it should be noted, with “moderation and harmony.” The victors in such disputes received public recognition, and in the most formal disputations of the higher grades, distinguished members of the community were in attendance. Students of rhetoric and humanities were expected to perform declamations, in which they would demonstrate their oral skills in a more structured context. Declamations were also attended by the teacher, who would no doubt provide what we would call today “feedback” to performers. Repetition was an important part of Jesuit educational praxis. Hour-long sessions of repetition of significant texts formed part of instruction at the higher level. By modern standards these periods of repetition might seem boring, but the Jesuit intention was to foster complete auditory recall, which was an esteemed skill in Renaissance culture. Recall was likewise an important element in the examination program outlined in the *Ratio*.

The teacher, as described in the *Ratio*, was accessible to his students. We are told, for example, that professors of the higher faculties were to remain in their classrooms both so that they could be available to answer questions, and most interestingly, so that they could learn how effective their lectures were. Thus the perceptions of the pupils, so seldom taken into consideration in the educational practices of the Renaissance, were part of the process of instructional review and evaluation. Jesuit schools pointedly made little distinction in their treatment of noble and common students (although an exception to this was found in the lower school, where “nobles are given the choicer seats”). We are told that the professor, “with the help of God’s grace . . . must give his attention to the advancement in studies of the poor and the wealthy with equal solicitude.” Moreover, while Jesuit schools unquestionably saw their role as a support of the Catholic faith, a fair degree of tolerance was allowed the teacher when dealing with materials that were controversial among Catholics. The *Ratio* enjoined teachers to exhibit a “prudent charity” and to be sensitive to the feelings of Catholics who might resent a particular interpretation of an author. The Jesuit educator was not to pose as an alien and hostile element in the community, but as an individual capable of understanding and adapting to local conditions.

An unfamiliar feature of Jesuit education outlined in the *Ratio* was the “public censor” appointed for each class in the school. This was a student, sometimes also called a decurion or Proctor, who noted infractions committed by other students, but also had the right to beg off the punishments allotted to his classmates. Whether his classmates regarded this individual as a person of standing or merely a privileged snitch is not entirely clear, but this practice continued for almost two centuries in Jesuit schools, and even longer in some of the elite English “public” schools.

What the *Ratio* as a document of course cannot tell us is how well the men who taught according to its principles lived up to these principles, or how effectively they carried out the

instructional techniques outlined in the document. We may infer from the reputation that Jesuit educators acquired in the century following the publication of the *Ratio* that many teachers were successful in their efforts to train boys in the classical curriculum. Yet the more subtle aspects of instructional practice are difficult, if not impossible, to reconstruct. When a professor was enjoined to avoid “worthless, obsolete, absurd, or patently false opinions,” how did individual teachers determine the limits of this prohibition? How responsive were Jesuit teachers to the reactions of their own students to their teaching? How were the spiritual and academic elements of instruction integrated in the widely varying settings in which the curriculum of the *Ratio* was implemented? Further research may shed some light on these questions, but we are ultimately left with only a tantalizing glimpse of the instructional process which the *Ratio* brought into existence.

III Curriculum

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One might well ask what a four-hundred-year-old document has to offer contemporary pedagogical debates. This lengthy, detailed prescription for sixteenth-century Jesuit schools superficially contains only quaint glimpses of student life and educational concerns which bear no relation to our experience. Yet like the framers of the *Ratio Studiorum*, we live in a fractured and bewildering cultural context. Our struggle to (re-)discover the fundamental purpose and goals that ground our programs of study mirrors the lengthy debates of the sixteenth-century Jesuit pedagogues. They addressed difficult and painful questions which we also confront. A closer look may instill hope and courage in challenging times.

Our Jesuit colleges and universities experience the pull of three quite different sets of priorities. As Roman Catholic and Jesuit institutions we affirm that Christianity communicates ancient truth about creation, redemption, and the sacred character of human history. As educational enterprises molded by the Enlightenment, we prize rational investigation, appeal to empirical evidence, suspect traditions, and assume the universality of certain human aspirations. Yet we must participate in an emerging intellectual ethos that denies the universality of any truth claim and suspects the possibility of reasonable and responsible inquiry. The challenge we face is this: can we form students to live in a diverse (modern and postmodern) society that gives priority to material culture while guiding them to live by the ideals, beliefs, and self-understanding of an ancient religion?

Cultural Context of the *Ratio*

The last decades of the sixteenth century were far from peaceful or settled times. European civilization had substantially remade itself during the century. A new information technology—the printing press—and a challenging shift in intellectual priorities—Renaissance humanism—threatened long-established patterns of acquiring and framing knowledge. Great strides in the sciences made travel to the far corners of the planet possible, and advances in military hardware permitted small bands of Western Europeans to subordinate large populations. The pretense of a unified Western Christendom

vanished, and a major council—the Council of Trent—sought to resolve disputed issues with mixed results. Religious convictions became a litmus test with serious political, social, and economic consequences. In this setting a small cadre of elite, highly trained spiritual soldiers became a crucial influence in centers of European power and around the globe. The formation that made Jesuit influence a reality remains one of the great stories in the history of education.

Primary Purpose of Jesuit Education

The *Ratio Studiorum* reflected the consensus of Jesuit pedagogues after fourteen years of collaboration. Far from a finished product, the framers of this document urged ongoing assessment to improve the program of study. Yet the primary purpose of this curriculum was clear and unambiguous: To instill knowledge and love of the creator and redeemer of humanity. They sought to realize this goal through a rigorous intellectual formation designed to transform attitudes and moral choices.

Curriculum Design

Perhaps the most striking aspect of this document is that it begins with the end in mind. The reader must work from back to front if the developmental character of the curriculum is to be understood. At the apex of this education students ably applied Truth found in sacred scripture to their contemporary context. Yet this achievement occurred through a skillful adaptation of long-established educational concerns and the incorporation of new priorities.

While Jesuit pedagogues did not abandon fidelity to established ways of knowing, it is significant that they gave priority in early formation to this new emphasis. The core of their educational program rested on grammar (the study of Latin and Greek), rhetoric, and the humanities (mastery of a corpus of respected Latin and Greek texts). Students then progressed to studies in mathematics, moral theology, philosophy, cases of conscience, and scholastic theology. This background enabled them to tackle the challenge of Hebrew studies and the interpretation of sacred scripture.

This curricular design has four important qualities worth noting. First, the program emphasized the mastery of basic skills in the early years. Second, there was an unambiguous agenda to form the attitudes and moral choices of students. Third, human experience was emphasized and given constant evaluation. Finally, standards of performance were high and levels of ability were considered crucial in progressing through this program.

Equally important for our consideration are dimensions of this curricular design which challenge modern and post-modern priorities. Professors were urged not to deviate from the norm. Innovation was discouraged. All immoral texts were to be censored or suppressed. Students were not to read authors hostile to Christianity. New opinions were to be avoided and the “common” understanding of authorities emphasized. Intellectual discourse served the orthodox faith and devotion. Orthodox faith and devotion were not to be the foil for disputations. Professors were to follow Thomas Aquinas in theology and Aristotle in philosophy, except where they conflicted with established church teaching.

All of this has an eerie resonance in our own experience at the end of the twentieth century. We too are passing through a revolution in information technology, and must respond to formidable challenges to previous systems of ordering knowledge. Exponential strides in the sciences have enabled humanity to achieve lunar travel and robotic expeditions to the farthest reaches of our solar system. We have mastered military technology which potentially empowers a determined few to decide the fate of our planet. Global Christianity remains fractured and the efforts of the most recent council have not resolved divisive issues among Roman Catholics. What difference can graduates of Jesuit universities make in this context?

Jesuit pedagogues at the end of the sixteenth century recognized that lengthy collaboration and ongoing assessment were essential in the development of a dynamic educational program. They also understood that the spiritual and moral transformation required rigorous intellectual formation. Are we faithful to this Jesuit ideal? What distinguishes our university's mission from its nearest secular counterpart?

The *Ratio Studiorum* maintained a clear focus on the end result of their educational formation. Its framers sought to form able and articulate apologists for the Catholic faith, as it was understood in sixteenth-century Europe. They creatively adapted basic curricular priorities to the realities of an evolving intellectual environment. While maintaining fidelity to established ways of knowing, they struggled to translate those ideals in a changing context. This required a rethinking of the basic intellectual skills needed and setting new priorities. Do we have a clear vision of the end result we hope to achieve? How are we adapting our work to meet new challenges, while remaining true to long-established and cherished values? The *Ratio Studiorum* established clear boundaries of the acceptable and permitted. Norms were valued, innovation was suspect, immorality and heterodoxy were ruthlessly excluded. What are our boundaries of the acceptable and permitted? What do we value? What do we suspect? Which interpretations and conclusions about human experience are ruthlessly excluded from our intellectual discourse?

These questions can enrich our current pedagogical discourse. In this era when it is fashionable to speak of mission, goals, and outcomes, it is reassuring to take up the *Ratio*. In its detailed sixteenth-century prescriptions one discovers that dramatic cultural transitions can be a time of creative adaptation in intellectual formation. If we have the courage, we have the opportunity to carry into the future a Jesuit tradition that dramatically shaped global culture during the last four hundred years.

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