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How We Got Here

A History

By **Raymond A. Schroth, S.J.**

The overall reputation of Jesuit colleges and universities today is higher than it has ever been. But this status has not come quickly or easily, and progress, as always, has left its wounded along the road.

Conversations has addressed aspects of this theme from the beginning, but most recently in its issue on the role of philosophy and theology (32), on how professional education is “Jesuit” (35), on revision of the core (38), and finally on the search for excellence (39). Change means competition, stress, tension, gain and loss. In some places the gain in prestige has come with a slip in morale, less free time, less socializing with fellow faculty and students, and a profound power shift from Jesuit dominance to leadership from lay men and women, many not Catholic, who may or may not buy into the traditional Jesuit and Catholic ethos.

The story, which has unfolded over 110 years, begins with a little fantasy, which I referred to in *Conversations* #32, from *Woodstock Letters*, the journal published at the Jesuit theologate in Woodstock,

Md., since 1872, which chronicled the history of the American Society of Jesus as it happened, in first person narratives, reflections, and obituaries. Two young Jesuit scholastics were walking along the road during summer vacation in 1892 while the older one instructed the younger, who was about to begin his teaching assignment, about the status of our institutions. One weakness he said, was that they had had to hire some lay persons for a while; but fear not, the following year the staffing would be 100 percent Jesuits. At that time there were 28 Jesuit institutions in the United States and Canada, 11 of which were boarding schools, with a total enrollment of 7,086; 22 of them are among the 28 colleges and universities in America today.

The first nail in that balloon came the following year when Charles W. Eliot, president of Harvard, published new rules on who would be admitted to Harvard Law School, rules which excluded graduates

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Magnificent stained glass window at John Carroll University.

of Catholic and Jesuit colleges — not because of prejudice, but because the Jesuit curriculum, known as the *Ratio Studiorum*, required the Classics at the expense of science, and emphasized public piety and dormitory surveillance to build the Christian gentleman. This left its students intellectually ill-equipped. Jesuit spokesmen eloquently defended their system; but the overall impact was to lay bare the weaknesses of the system of which the Jesuits were smugly proud.

While the rest of the country followed the accrediting agencies and divided high school and college into two four-year experiences, Jesuits clung to a seven-year sequence, even though most students stayed only three or four years and only a third were doing college level work. Enrollment in Jesuit colleges declined and the number of Catholics at Harvard College went up.

The Jesuit General at the time, Luis Martin Garcia, opposed modern ideas, and the American Society was governed largely by European immigrants who did not understand the New World. The American New York-Maryland provincial, a lonely reformer, asked, “Why should our Society alone hold itself, as it were, aloof and remain a stranger in the land?” The unhappy fact was that American Jesuits, in terms of research and scholarly productivity, were just not very intellectual.

Measuring Up

The process of adapting to American higher standards stretched out over several generations. Beginning in the 1920s the 21 Jesuit colleges and universities began accommodating their structure and philosophy to the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAUP), the North Central Association for Colleges and Secondary Schools (NCA), and the devastating bombshell from the American Council on Education (ACE) which surveyed 77 graduate schools offering PhDs in 1934 and accredited zero Jesuit programs.

The Society’s internal wake-up call was known as the Macelwane Report (1931-1932), from a committee led by James B. Macelwane, S.J., an outstanding physicist at St. Louis University. Why were non-Catholic institutions better? They had well organized statutes and laws, hired faculty who wrote books and articles, participated in professional associations, and taught demanding courses that required maturity to master. Only 9 percent of Jesuits surveyed had PhDs and published research. The Report concluded that every Jesuit should have a PhD, that seminaries should move to university campuses, and that the Society had at the time too many “pious but useless men.”

The next watershed in the transformation of Jesuit identity was the post-World War II period called the “Golden Era,” in which the two sources of “gold” were the influx of veterans on the GI Bill of Rights and the availability of government funding. As a result, colleges started thinking of themselves as “universities,” because they added professional undergraduate and graduate programs — nursing, law, medicine, business, social service, education, etc. — and the traditional liberal arts core courses were sometimes given low priority, demoted to “service” courses, their requirements chipped away, to make room for the programs generating income. As a result, where professional programs quickly dominated, professors and students distinguished between the humanities, which traditionally embodied Jesuit ideals, and “real world” education which promised security and wealth.

The first to courageously call attention to the church’s academic mediocrity was Catholic University’s leading historian, John Tracy Ellis, whose “American Catholics and the Intellectual Life” appeared in *Thought* (1955), published at Fordham University. Ellis, among other points, lambasted Catholic colleges who opened graduate programs without the libraries or scholars to justify them.

The Turning Point

The major break with the past came at the 1967 meeting at Notre Dame’s villa house at Land O’Lakes, Mich., of 26 presidents and other intellectuals in response to Vatican II’s Constitution on “The Church in the Modern World.” They decided to compete for excellence on the same terms as secular schools and at the same time remain as a community of scholars in which Catholicism is “effectively operative.”

The year before, Paul Reinert, S.J., president of St. Louis University and of the Jesuit Educational Association, proposed changes that gave lay faculty a full voice, including the vote on the appointment of Jesuit faculty, and established lay-dominated boards of trustees and separate incorporation of the Jesuit community. This was the breakthrough, the first separately incorporated Jesuit institution independent of Roman and provincial supervision. By 1972, 20 of the 28 Jesuit communities had gone down the same road.

The impact was revolutionary. The imagined conversation of the two scholastics in 1892, which expressed the Jesuit culture of the time, was in the waste basket. But it clung in various forms. An older generation of Jesuits in the 1960s and 1970s still looked upon their institutions as “patrimony,” property they had built not just to serve an apostolate but as an investment in a secure future. Now, to a vociferous minority, separate incorporation was a “sellout,” in both the economic and moral sense.

The trouble was that Jesuits at some institutions believed that the “course” of 13 years, for all Jesuits, whether or not they had PhDs or did scholarly research, qualified them to

teach philosophy and theology and other things, even in the old seminary mode of lecturing from mimeographed notes. When Michael Walsh, S.J., became president of Boston College in 1958 he discovered that many philosophy and theology courses were taught by Jesuits who were intellectually below par. So he reduced the combined requirement to 9 courses, set up an honors program, removed some Jesuit faculty, and pushed all the faculty to do more research. To celebrate Boston College’s centennial in 1963, he gave an honorary degree to Harvard president Nathan Pusey, whose university, a half-century before, had refused to recognize the Boston College degree.

The loss of Jesuit control meant loss of ownership, that the Jesuit rector was no longer the president, that the control of student life went to lay professionals, and that the provincial could no longer assign a young Jesuit to Fordham or Boston College. The Jesuit had to compete, get his PhD, build his resume with publications, and surpass outstanding men and women, probably younger than he, fresh out of Ivy League Universities with publications already on their resumes, and who may or may not care a fig about the Jesuit Identity of the college where they applied.

As a dean for six years at two Jesuit colleges, I interviewed a long list of applicants. When I raised the identity question with applicants who had not done their homework and had to explain what “Jesuit” meant, several replied, “Oh, I could live with that.” The 1970s produced a surge of bright doctoral students from the “best” universities, and the inclination was to hire them whether or not they would foster the spirit of the school. Some lay faculty would embrace half the double identity of “Catholic and Jesuit.” They may not believe in God, but liked the Jesuit political commitment to the weak and the poor.

Today, 9 of the 28 colleges and universities are led by lay persons, and Jesuits, whose numbers in the United States have shrunk, for many reasons, from their peak of 8338 in 1960 to 2650 today, struggle to redefine their role. One strategy is that the smaller cohort of these dedicated men must work three times as hard and develop their ability to be in several places at the same time. Another is to train laymen and women in the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola, who was himself a lay man when he created the Exercises and trained his first followers, and trust them to protect the flame. Another is an affirmative action that reaches out to what Jesuit talent is available and creates non-tenured positions that might showcase their talents. But the era of lay-Jesuit antagonism has slipped into the past. The once rulers are now a comparative remnant. And it took only a hundred and ten years. ■

Right, Fordham University fans cheer on their team.
Photo courtesy of Stephen Moccia.

