

Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education

Volume 45

Article 7

April 2014

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Recommended Citation

O'Toole, James M. (2014) "Serving Immigrants: An Old but Still Relevant Jesuit Tradition," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 45, Article 7.

Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol45/iss1/7>

SERVING IMMIGRANTS

An Old but Still Relevant Jesuit Tradition

By James M. O'Toole

“**A** day college for the youth of the city.” That was the goal John McElroy, S.J., set for himself when he arrived in Boston in 1847 to become the pastor of one of the largest and busiest parishes in New England. McElroy, who had emigrated from the Northern Irish province of Ulster as a young man, was one of the most prominent members of a new generation of American Jesuits in the years following the restoration of the order in 1814. The Society had come to Maryland with the earliest settlers in the 1630s, and two centuries later its priests and scholastics staffed half a dozen schools around the country, a number that grew steadily thereafter. Jesuits in other cities had plans similar to his, and in 1863 McElroy’s dream was fulfilled with the establishment of Boston College. A year later the first students were admitted. As at so many of the other Jesuit colleges of the time, the fortunes of the school and the fortunes of recent immigrants to the United States were intimately connected.

Famine in Ireland and political turmoil in Germany and elsewhere were sending previously unimaginable numbers of immigrants to American shores, and the change this represented for the country was unprecedented. To some, it was scary. Native-born Americans spoke of the newcomers as a “flood” or a “tidal wave,” hardly metaphors of welcome. Immigrants struggled for such basic necessities as food, shelter, and employment, but even as they did so they also wanted something better for the next generation of their families. That was why most had come in the first place, and education would be the principal means for realizing their hopes. At first, however, some of the schools in the emerging American Jesuit network remained out of reach. The College of the Holy Cross, for example, only 40 miles from Boston, was already well established by the time McElroy arrived, succeeding in its mission of education. It was a residential school, however, whose students (many of them from the

South) lived on campus; and its cost (\$150 per year) might just as well have been a million dollars as far as most immigrants were concerned. A common laborer of the time earned a dollar a day if he was lucky, and thus immigrant families needed access to what one bishop called “a thorough education, gratuitously or nearly so.” McElroy pegged his tuition at only \$30 per year – not entirely “gratuitous,” perhaps, but at least possible for students who would continue to live at home with their parents.

During its first academic year, about sixty students attended the new college, some for the whole year, some for only a few weeks. Few students had any intention of staying for the complete academic program, a seven-year progression of classwork defined by the *Ratio Studiorum*, originally published in 1599 and revised most recently in 1832. It emphasized the Greek and Latin classics, but with some concessions to “practical” coursework such as in bookkeeping. Most students and their families wanted to acquire some education, but a little might have to go a long way. Students could take a bit of learning out into the professional workforce, helping to advance the family’s status and perhaps also underwriting a few years of study by a younger brother. The full curriculum would not be in place until 1877, when the first degrees (just twelve of them that year) were finally awarded. Though called a college, this was not higher education as we have come to think of it. One of the students who enrolled on the very first day was only seven years old, and into the 1870s more than half the students were younger than fifteen. Even so, these immigrants and sons of immigrants put their education to its intended use.

Among the early students were those who had been born abroad and come to the United States as children with

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their parents. In the first class, for instance, there was Herman Chelius, born in Germany, the son of a musical father; Herman would become a musician and teacher. Frank Norris, whose Irish father was a carpenter, became a widely traveled salesman for a pharmaceutical company. Also from Ireland was Hugh Roe O'Donnell, later the pastor of several large parishes in and around Boston. The vast majority of students, however, were the American-born sons of immigrant parents, and many of these quickly proved that education was indeed the ticket to a better life. John Selinger's Austrian-born father, for example, worked in a piano factory, but young John (who later went by "Jean") became a noted portrait artist. The father of Edward McLaughlin, one of the first students actually to receive a diploma, was a day laborer his entire life; young Edward became a lawyer, president of several local civic and charitable organizations, and the clerk of the state's House of Representatives. The father and older brothers of William O'Connell (class of 1881) all worked in the mills of the nearby industrial city of Lowell; Will became a priest, a bishop, and in 1911 just the third American ever to be designated a cardinal. Many of their classmates had similar career paths, embodying the very kind of progress across the generations that immigrant families wanted. Some families had already taken halting steps in that direction, and the Jesuit education of their sons helped cement their newfound position. Four McAvoy brothers enrolled in the college's first decade, for instance. Their immigrant father became a successful iron merchant, and their immigrant mother employed Irish domestic servants to help manage the household. The younger generation resisted the temptation to slip back down the economic ladder, and the four boys had careers, respectively, as a businessman, a newspaper reporter, a clerk, and a Jesuit.

Often overlooked or forgotten today, in the earliest years the largest percentage of actual immigrants at Boston College, as at other schools of the Society at the time, was among the Jesuits themselves. Even after restoration of the order, the Society remained controversial in many places, and by the middle 1840s Jesuits were regularly being expelled from one European nation after another. John Bapst, S.J., who would be president of the college in Boston after McElroy, was one such immigrant. He had been born in the canton of Fribourg in Switzerland, and he was ordained in 1846, just in time to be thrown out of the country with his fellow Jesuits for alleged political activity. Bapst landed in America and was assigned first to minister to tribes of Native American Catholics in Maine. To do this, he (a native French speaker) faced the daunting prospect of having to learn English and Penobscot at the same time, though he managed both with ease. He had come to grief in Maine, seized one day by an anti-immigrant, anti-Catholic mob, ridden through town on a sharp rail, and finally covered with hot tar and feathers. (It was said, perhaps apocryphally, that he celebrated mass the next day as usual.) His later time as

a college rector and as head of the New York Jesuit province was calm by comparison. Other immigrant Jesuits had not had to face his same harrowing circumstances, but the fact that so many of them were immigrants themselves gave them a deep understanding of and empathy with their students. In many classrooms around the country, there was an immigrant on both sides of the desk.

By the 20th century, at Boston College as at the other American Jesuit colleges, there were fewer immigrants among the students but still many immigrant sons. (Because most Catholic colleges were single-sex until the 1970s, the daughters of immigrants who sought higher education found it at the many Catholic women's colleges that were maintained by several orders of sisters.) Restrictive legislation in the 1920s closed the nation's doors to most new immigrants, apparently forever, and the actual experience of immigration in many families grew increasingly remote; immigration was now more likely to be something one's grandparents had gone through, not something one knew at first hand. Still, until after World War II the overwhelming majority of students on most Jesuit campuses were the first members of their family to go to college, and education remained a pathway to advancement. In a sense, the colleges and the communities they served were getting exactly what they had wanted all along: an educated lay population achieving this-worldly success even as it remained grounded in Catholic and Jesuit traditions.

Changing laws in the 1960s and again in the 1980s opened the gates of immigration once again, and the newcomers grew ever more diverse. The earlier generations of migrants from Europe were replaced now with strivers from Latin America, Asia, and Africa. As the recent discussions of more changes in the law have demonstrated, these immigrants too often face suspicion and hostility from the native-born; ironically, many of the latter are the descendants of earlier immigrants. The challenge to Jesuit colleges in serving these new populations is no less urgent than it was a century and a half ago, and it is perhaps more complex. The colleges and universities of today aspire to do many different things for many different kinds of students; that is how we have come to define "success." Those are worthy aspirations, but they must not cut us off from our historical grounding. We do not know how many immigrants and immigrant children, male and female, are enrolled at Boston College or the other Jesuit universities today; for perhaps obvious reasons, we do not collect that data. Moreover, the rising cost of higher education everywhere risks raising new barriers to access, unintended but no less real. If immigrants of the 1860s could not afford tuition of \$150 per year, how will today's aspiring families afford costs that are many multiples of that? But the commitment of Jesuit higher education to serve immigrants and their children must remain no less strong today than it was in the past. This tradition may be an old one, but it must also be a current and future one. Concern for social justice begins at home. ■