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Many Catholic colleges in the United States were founded by Jesuits expelled by revolution from Europe. This Italian caricature, c. 1849, depicts Jesuits' flight from Italy following the closing of the Roman College. Courtesy of the Istituto per la Storia del Risorgimento Italiano, Rome.

Old Colonies and New Colors

Despite Obstacles, New Jesuit Colleges Are Born in the United States

By Gerald L. McKevitt, S.J.

How can a once powerful global institution be resurrected after being extinguished? That was the challenge facing the Society of Jesus after its worldwide suppression in 1773. Churchmen recognized that reestablishment might someday occur, but John Carroll, ex-Jesuit and head of the Catholic Church in the United States, believed that the longer the project was delayed, the more formidable it would be. “When the pres-

ent generation” of former members “is past, and the spirit which animated the Society is no more,” he predicted in 1782, recovery would be difficult. And a one-sided restoration centered on the letter of the law – the old organization’s rules and regulations – invited failure. Only the sustaining influence of living previous Jesuits could guarantee continuity with the order’s past and preserve what St. Ignatius called its “way of proceeding.”

The tension between spirit and law, especially when applied to pedagogical

policy, troubled the order throughout the nineteenth century. Much of that struggle centered on interpretation of the *Ratio Studiorum*, the Society's foundational plan of studies dating from 1599, and the extent to which it should be adjusted to the American scene. Some Jesuits, including John Carroll, believed education should be guided less by fine print than by commonsense and flexible accommodation. Others, including superiors abroad, inclined toward strict adherence to custom.

After restoration, leaders sought to recapture the spirit of the Society in the order's isolated American branch by recruiting seasoned personnel from Europe. The opposition faced by Jesuits in many parts of the world facilitated their enlistment for America. Barely reconstituted in 1814, the group was driven from one country after another, as fresh assaults reinvigorated stereotypes forged in the era of suppression. "Old calumnies, decked out with new colors, are scattered broadcast among the people," Father General Jan Roothaan wrote in 1839, "with word and writing, in book, pamphlet, and periodical flooding the world like a deluge, they daily defame and vilify us." Then disaster struck. In 1848, following additional political revolutions in Europe, a general dispersal propelled half the Jesuits in the world into exile within the space of a year.

Persecution in the old world, however, sparked resurgence in the new. Learning of the plight of asylum-seekers in Switzerland and Germany, a Maryland Jesuit wrote in 1848, "Perhaps with their arrival new houses can be formed in Pennsylvania, Virginia and other states where we have been unable to fulfill our hopes of having schools." Numbering fewer than two dozen in the United States at their dissolution in 1773, the restored Jesuits had by 1860 swollen to nearly 500, facilitating the founding of urban colleges, often in advance of public education, across developing America.

Even before the Society's official restoration, ex-Jesuits led by John Carroll had established Georgetown College in 1789. Others soon followed: St. Louis University, Spring Hill College, Xavier University, Fordham University, and the College of the Holy Cross. The second half of the 19th century witnessed still more foundings as Jesuits from Italy, Germany, and France immigrated to America. Although Anglo- and Irish-American Jesuits staffed Georgetown College, succeeding institutions were forged by émigrés. Saint Louis University was run by Belgians; French expatriates launched institutions in Alabama, Kentucky, and New York; and uprooted Neopolitans created Woodstock College, the order's national seminary in Maryland. German Jesuits deported by Bismarck's Kulturkampf founded five schools across the northeast from New York to the Mississippi River. When the school that became Loyola University Chicago opened in 1870, its staff of 20 numbered only one American. In the Far West, transplanted Italians operated colleges in Santa Clara, San Francisco, Denver, Spokane, and Seattle.

The foreign provenance of the schools had far-reaching consequences. Once-founding Georgetown College experienced such a surge in enrollment and professors that by the late 1850s it was one of the largest colleges in the United States. But if European transplants brought acclaim to the institutions, they also created disagreement. As the historian R. Emmett Curran has shown, Continental and Anglo-American-Irish Jesuits clashed over adapting Jesuit educational tradition to the republican values of young America. Continentalists championed a traditional course of studies centered on Latin, Greek, and philosophy. Anglophone clergy argued that science – not moral philosophy – should be the curricular capstone.

An abundance of personnel tempted the Jesuits to rush to occupy unclaimed educational territory. As early as 1840, Roothaan warned against overexpansion. "I cannot help entertaining very great fears for that portion of the Society," he wrote, "where the harvest is gathered before it is ripe and where one must look for grass instead of grain." The influx of foreign clergy also sparked nativist opposition that in turn prompted varied responses. Founders of the College of the Holy Cross excluded non-Catholics from their classrooms. Schools planted in friendlier regions admitted them because, Jesuits argued, it reduced prejudice. Expatriates were often not effective educational leaders. Everyone recognized that the best collegiate president was an American or, as one priest put it, "at least a well-Americanized Irish president." But few were to be had. Nowhere was the ethnic character of the Jesuits more acutely evidenced than in their labor to master English. Fluency in the American language was a must for teaching grammar and literature but also for training in elocution, which was highly prized in American eyes. Hence the effort to recruit native-born lay professors.

In the long run, however, national variety proved an asset in a land where by mid century every third person was foreign-born. Guided by mentors who themselves wrestled with the challenge of acculturation, the sons of newly arrived European immigrants filled classrooms from New York to San Francisco. Academies in New Mexico and California were founded to educate Spanish-speakers swept into the United States by the Mexican War, 1846-1848. Enrolling students of diverse nationalities, races, and economic backgrounds, the Jesuit college aimed at strengthening the faith of immigrant children in a culture unfriendly to Catholicism while preparing them to participate in American society.

Like many educators of the day, Jesuits championed a pedagogy that was both formative and informative. "Intellect, body and soul, all must receive their share of development," they insisted. "The acquisition of knowledge, though it necessarily accompanies any right system of education, is a secondary result of education. The end is culture, mental and moral development." The shaping of character required that students enroll at an early age, sometimes as young as nine. Hence the typical Jesuit college was more akin to the European *gymnasium* than the American college of today. From East to West, formational goals were advanced through classical languages and literature,



Although all Jesuit colleges in the U.S. offered a classical curriculum, institutions in the West and Midwest also provided vocational training. This woodcut is of a class in assaying at Santa Clara College c. 1877. Courtesy of the Santa Clara University Archives.

although with more success in the East. “For the mere bookworm – for the Latin and Greek antiquarian – this is certainly not the country,” a California educator wrote. Nevertheless, higher superiors enjoined compliance with hallowed custom, but resistance to liberal education kept native-born Jesuits in a constant boil over how best to respond to the peculiarities of American learning.

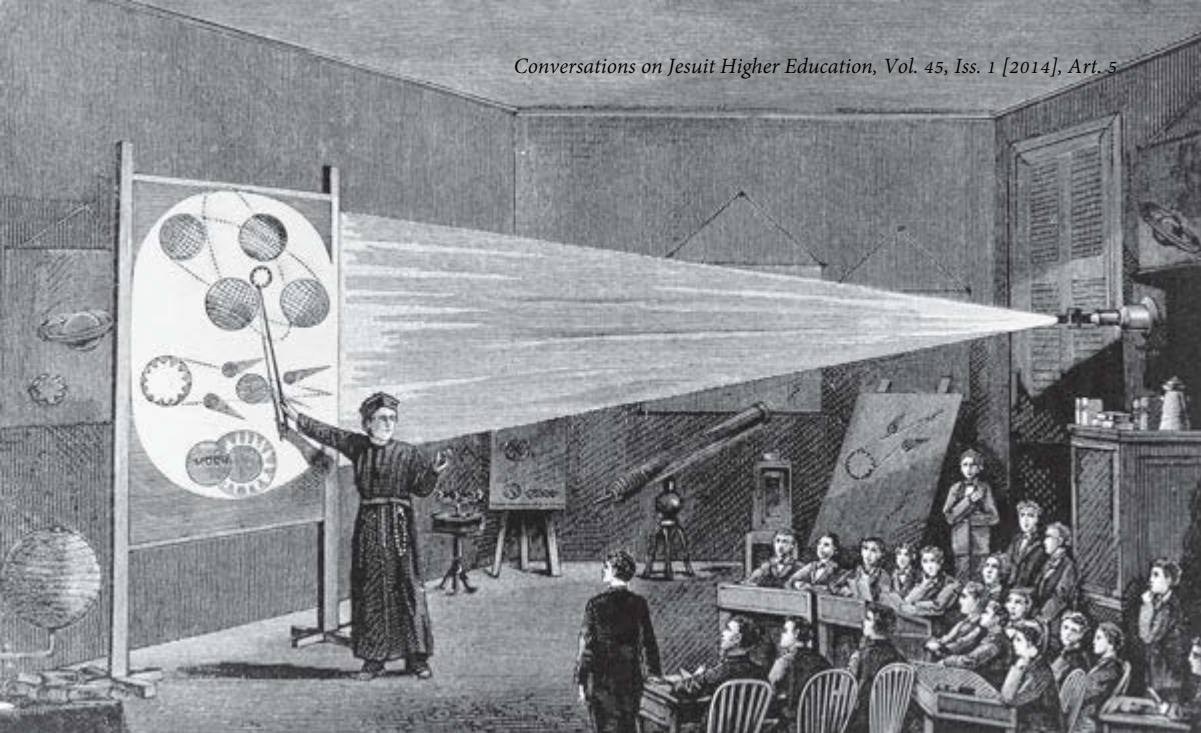
Most students, as at other American institutions, did not remain long enough to earn a diploma. During much of the 19th century, training for the professions was accomplished through apprenticeship rather than by classroom training. Of the nearly 6,000 students attending Jesuit colleges in 1884, less than two percent graduated with the classical bachelor of arts degree. Therefore, in addition to the classics, most schools offered an English program leading to a bachelor of science diploma.

The apex of all study was rhetoric. Mastery of *eloquentia perfecta*, or articulate wisdom, meant not merely the ability to communicate with ease and elegance, but, as one scholar put it, “the capacity to reason, to feel, to express oneself and to act, harmonizing virtue with learning.” To this end, students participated in dramatic productions that inculcated lessons of virtue, enhanced memory, and perfected oratorical expertise. “All our Western boys wanted to shine as orators,” a Jesuit in Kentucky said. “In their estimation, no

one in the world was superior to the great Henry Clay or to John C. Calhoun.”

Jesuits were of one mind in the conviction that their schools were explicitly Christian in purpose, not merely value-oriented, to use a spongy contemporary term. And yet formal theological instruction did not occupy a large place in the curriculum. Instead, spiritual values and moral training threaded through every aspect of campus life. Religious holidays abounded; Marian sodalities promoted piety and good example; devotional symbols appeared everywhere; all students attended obligatory church services. In sum, the regimen of the school, the personal relationship of student and teacher, and weekly catechetical instruction all aimed at inculcating the principles and practices of Christian faith.

Students came from every economic class. St. Xavier College, a commuter school in the center of Manhattan’s developing mass transit system, served a blue-jacket, lunch-bucket clientele. “No student, however poor, is refused admission because he is unable to pay tuition,” officials at Boston College reported in 1899, “and of the 400 young men registered in the college, scarcely more than half do so.” Although the Jesuits preferred to run day schools, which necessitated fewer personnel and lower costs, they opened boarding colleges at Georgetown, Worcester, Spring Hill, New York, Denver, Spokane, and Santa Clara. Requiring additional fees, those



Although Jesuit institutions promoted a traditional classical curriculum everywhere in the U.S., clientele in the West and Midwest also sought vocational training. In this 1887 lithograph, a priest at Santa Clara College instructs science students with the aid of a magic lantern. Courtesy of the Santa Clara University Archives.

establishments enrolled a more restricted clientele. By 1880, the order's 20 institutions in the United States were evenly split between residential and commuter colleges.

By century's end, the Society's far-flung network of colleges had achieved remarkable success against considerable odds. Fifty years prior, European higher-ups had decried the poor quality of teacher preparation and a lack of pedagogical uniformity in the schools. The arrival of professors from abroad had introduced a more standardized curriculum conforming to the Jesuit liberal arts tradition. That reform was strengthened by the 1869 founding of Woodstock College, where European mentors imparted Jesuit educational practice to future Jesuit teachers. The colleges of the Society, boasting alumni prominent in government, church, and the professions, had emerged as conspicuous assets in the eyes of communities across the nation. With the launching of professional schools, some of the more progressive Jesuit institutions were even inching toward university status.

Nevertheless, as they became more and more vulnerable to external forces, these schools were soon swept into an educational backwater. Once the sole center of learning in a city, the typical Jesuit college at the turn of the century faced competition from rising state and private institutions. With the emergence of the public high school, the Society's integration of secondary and collegiate instruction grew anachronistic. Formerly an advantage, the foreign character of Jesuit academies transformed into a handicap as the American church embraced Americanization. "Only American-born, or Irish priests, would work in this country for the glory of God," a bishop declared in 1908 at the prospect of receiving European Jesuits in his diocese. When electivism became the hallmark of undergraduate education,

insistence on a controlled classical curriculum hobbled the ability of graduates of the Society's colleges to gain admission to the nation's top professional schools. The final blow came when accrediting agencies intent on standardizing American higher education judged many pioneer Catholic colleges second rate. By 1900, "we were losing caste as educators," lamented a St. Louis Jesuit, "being looked upon as high school teachers and little more."

The crisis had many causes. One centered on the on-going debate about the true spirit of the

order's mode of proceeding, which John Carroll had noted when the Society was restored nearly a century earlier. Educators in the United States often sought to adapt the order's tradition to America educational needs, but European superiors, usually men without personal experience of the country, insisted everything be authenticated as a bona fide feature of the Society's accepted educational practice. The Jesuits had also become victims of their success. As early as 1889, a Georgetown president warned there were "too many Catholic colleges in too many isolated places."

The early decades of the 20th century, then, were devoted to recovering from missteps of the 19th. Schools run for decades on shoestring budgets now struggled to assemble financial endowments and sufficient library holdings, each a sine qua non for accreditation. Pioneer educators' penchant for launching schools left their successors burdened with so many needy institutions that Jesuit personnel could not be released from classroom work to pursue advanced degrees. The result was that many colleges and universities, lacking faculty with doctorates, fought for years to win the approval of regional standardizing agencies. Nonetheless, in the end reform did prevail. Despite high hurdles, in the early decades of the new century a fresh generation of American educators grappled with the challenge of modernizing the Jesuit system, creating eventually the network of colleges and universities we have today. ■

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