THE SPIRITUAL HUMANISM OF THE JESUITS

No enterprise, no matter how secular, is merely secular. We live in a universe of grace. From the Jesuit perspective, therefore, holiness and humanism require each other.

This past August the U.S. Episcopal Church's house of bishops added to their liturgical calendar--of all people!--St. Ignatius Loyola. Though the action was reportedly taken without much debate, there were questions about appropriateness. Jesuits, after all, had been banned from Anglican England under penalty of death. And, along with the Council of Trent, what group more than the Society of Jesus had come to symbolize the Counter-Reformation, with its anti-Protestant, anti-Anglican defensiveness?

Bishop Frank Griswold of Chicago championed the inclusion of Ignatius in the Episcopal prayerbook. He described himself as but one of many Anglicans nourished by Ignatian spirituality. The prayer authorized for the feast encapsulizes what he meant. It reads in part: "Almighty God . . . we thank thee for calling Ignatius of Loyola to the service of thy Divine Majesty and to find thee in all things. . . . "

Apparently Jesuit spirituality is not just for Roman Catholics any more. Maybe it never was. Back in 1954 Yale Professor Louis Martz pointed out in his book *The Poetry of Meditation* that Ignatius' Spiritual Exercises had a marked influence both on the spirituality and popular culture of Elizabethan England. Ensuing 17th-century English verse bore a similar Ignatian imprint. One finds it in the meditative poetry not only of Jesuit Robert Southwell but of such Anglicans as John Donne, George Herbert and Richard Crashaw.

It seems that Jesuit treatises on meditation enjoyed the same widespread popularity in late 16th-century England that they had on the continent. In England, however, the treatises had to be anonymous or falsely attributed. The Society of Jesus was outlawed, and its members were constrained to work underground. Given those undercover operations, it is not surprising that the Oxford English Dictionary gives as a secondary meaning to the word Jesuit "a dissembling person; a prevaricator."

The Jesuits have come a long way from the connotations of "Jesuitical," and not just because there are Anglo-Catholics who make Ignatian retreats. For some time now Jesuit spirituality has not been just for Catholics or even just for Christians. In my 15 years teaching theology alongside Jesuits at Saint Louis University, I have found my Jewish and Muslim students affected by it as well, not by becoming Catholic but by becoming more religious, more devoutly Jewish or Muslim.

That used to give me pause. Was this to be counted as a failure of our theology program or a success? Were the students in my classes receiving a "Jesuit education" from me, whatever that meant? And how could a non-Jesuit Roman Catholic like me help provide them a Jesuit education, not to speak of my colleagues in the theology department who are of Lutheran, Presbyterian or Anglican traditions? I began reading about Jesuit education and found I was not the only one asking questions like these.

Suzanne Matson, a professor of English at Boston College, describes herself as an agnostic. In the fall 1994 issue of *Conversations*, a quarterly on Jesuit higher education, she writes about being compelled to confront the anomaly of her situation. Was it hypocrisy for someone like her, with more "questions than belief," to be part of a Catholic university community?

She tells about attending a Jesuit institute on faith and the academic vocation, where she and other lay faculty at Jesuit educational institutions were asked to consider how their intellectual and spiritual lives intersected. There she was introduced to some "generous and hospitable ideas" about sacramentality, community and social justice, ideas that have since become part of the texture of her own thinking. Professor Matson describes herself as still having religious doubts but now with fewer defenses, a new sense of identification with her Jesuit home university and a lot of things to think about. Jesuit spirituality for self-described agnostics?

Origins and Identity.

In that same issue of *Conversations*, Professor David J. O'Brien of Holy Cross looked at the issue of Catholic identity and higher education. He admitted in passing that conversations about Jesuit identity and higher education are friendlier and a "lot more civil" than those about Catholic identity. Jesuits enjoy enormous respect these days, Professor O'Brien wrote, without explaining why that is. The only reasons he suggested were that Jesuit academics are "extremely well educated" and his belief that "Jesuits have been working hard at being better known and liked." But what is there to know and like?

Professor O'Brien was writing on Catholic, not Jesuit, identity, so he could not be expected to come up with a more probing analysis of the distinction between the two. At one time, few would think there was one. Most non-Jesuits, like the dons who authored the Oxford English Dictionary, even most Catholics have tended to identify Jesuits as simply the vanguard of the Counter-Reformation. With the Second Vatican Council and the end of that reactive era, the Catholic Church changed and the Jesuits did too. That is all there was to them. Or so it might seem.

But the Jesuits were not founded to counteract Protestants, nor for that matter to become residential school teachers. St. Ignatius' original intention was that he

and his companions would be missionaries among the Muslims in the Holy Land. While waiting in Venice for a ship to take them there, they used their time to work at a variety of ministries, among them working in a hospital for patients with syphilis. They washed dishes, scrubbed floors and emptied slop pails.

When war made it clear that they would never set sail for Palestine, they accommodated. Ignatius and his companions put themselves at the disposal of the Pope, requesting direction as to where he thought they could be most useful, eventually taking a fourth vow to work at whatever ministry the popes would ask of them. Outsiders do not ordinarily think of Jesuits as male nurses tending to victims of sexually transmitted disease, but long before they began teaching school, they were involved in any number of similar, supposedly non-Jesuit ministries--to criminals in prison, to homeless victims of famine, to women driven by poverty into prostitution.

Ignatius described himself and his companions as pilgrims constantly on the move. They were to accommodate to their situations and go wherever they could do the most good. He and the others of his company had received advanced degrees at the University of Pads, but their education was never intended for its own sake. It was so that they could do more and do it better. "More" (*magis* in Latin) was a favorite word for Ignatius, and he used it often in his writings about the Society of Jesus.

Ignatius founded the Jesuits to give glory to God by "helping souls," as he put it, doing whatever needed to be done. When asked to provide teachers for a boys' school, Ignatius acceded to the request. It was 14 years after the first Jesuits had banded together and 8 years after they had become a religious order. Teaching school was simply another opportunity to "help souls."

So what do these origins and this broad range of activity mean for non-Jesuits, like me, teaching at a Jesuit university? I found myself thinking about this, after I experienced how much in the way of financial and human resources the administration at Saint Louis University was expending to communicate to the non-Jesuit faculty and staff what it meant to be part of an institution with a Jesuit identity. I was encountering attempts to describe Jesuit identity in terms of "dynamism," "adaptability" and the pursuit of "excellence." Such phrases may have been inspired by Ignatius' pilgrim metaphor and his proclivity for the word magis, but the translation sounded more like automobile advertising to me.

I began reading histories of the Jesuits and asking them how they understood themselves to be different. The conventional answers to my question tended to describe Jesuit identity along lines like "active contemplation," concern for social justice and "solidarity with the poor." I had difficulties with those answers, however. Long before Ignatius and his companions came along, Benedictines were conjoining work and prayer, Dominicans were sharing the fruits of their contemplation, and Franciscans had pretty well tied up poverty as a hallmark.

And social justice is a quite modern concept born of a quite modern social situation long after the Jesuits' origins.

So are they simply more (*magis*) of the same? Are Jesuits simply factotums who recapitulate or fine-tune the various traits and spiritualities of the religious orders that preceded them? Are they really more distinctive for what they do not do, like not staying put in a monastery and not praying in choir? There is some truth to all of the above, but there is something else too, something quite peculiar to Jesuits that has been there from the beginning and is, I would argue, far too little communicated.

It may be presumptuous of me as an outsider to suggest to so astute and articulate a group of men what stands out about them, but I believe it is what makes them congenial at once to Episcopal bishops and their fellow non-Jesuit, even agnostic, academics. It is what attracts readers to this periodical and makes it peculiarly Jesuit. As one proximate enough to observe Jesuits close up, yet distant enough to make out the forest for the trees, I am struck time and again at what, for lack of a better term, I can only call their spiritual humanism.

Jesuit Spirituality.

There is no understanding Jesuits without some idea of Ignatius' Spiritual Exercises. Every Jesuit makes at least two 30-day retreats based on them. First on his sickbed at Loyola and then for 11 months near the town of Manresa, Ignatius had profound experiences that changed not only his life but history. He had no doubt, as he later related in his *Autobiography*, that God was treating him as a child "whom he is teaching." And like a diligent student privileged to learn under such a teacher, Ignatius took notes. He began recording into a copybook his perceptions of what was going on deep inside him, in that core dimension of the personality that, for lack of a better word, we metaphorically call the human spirit.

Those copybook notes Ignatius made matured over the years into the *Spiritual Exercises*, unquestionably one of the most influential books ever written. It has been published some 4,500 times, an average of once a month for 400 years. The number of copies printed has been estimated to be some 4.5 million--despite the fact that the book is about as dry and uninspiring as a teacher's manual. For that is what the *Spiritual Exercises* are, a how-to handbook with a set of directions on how to discern and decide: amid the cacophony of conflicting voices, how to hear the voice of a God who speaks in the deeper stillness of the heart; and amid the many options regarding what to do with one's life, how to respond.

While a student himself at the University of Paris, Ignatius began guiding a group of his fellow students in prayer along the lines laid down in the *Spiritual Exercises*. And what began as a fraternity of college friends eventually became

the Society of Jesus. Ever since those beginnings, Jesuits have been about spirituality, which is to say, about experience and awareness. As a former courtier and soldier born at the end of the Middle Ages, Ignatius used the metaphors of waning kingdoms, battlefields and banners. And where Jewish mystical tradition speaks of the presence of God that accompanied Israel even into exile (the *Shekinah*), where mystics in other religious traditions speak of ineffable intimacy and oneness, Ignatius used the trinitarian language of Catholicism, which assumes strong interior guidance by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God that gave the Ten Commandments, the Spirit of Christ that guides and governs the church, that self-same Spirit speaks to us. We need only to learn how to pay more attention. The experience of God is not only for a selected few mystics but for anyone who would listen.

From the time of his sickbed conversion and then repeatedly for the rest of his life, Ignatius had intense mystical experiences. He could have them anytime, anywhere--not only at prayer or in churches but in classrooms and on street comers. The sight of a flower or a piece of fruit could bring him to tears or send his spirit soaring. There were times, he later confessed, when he would have to brush these ecstacies aside so he could study or get some sleep.

As a corollary of these experiences, Ignatius came to see God as present and busily at work in all creation. God's spiritual presence so infuses the universe that nothing is merely secular or profane. Hence the Ignatian ideal of "finding God in all things," first canonized in the Jesuit Constitutions and now echoed in the liturgy of the U.S. Episcopal Church. For Jesuits there was never anything like a flight from the world, nothing like the medieval idea of Thomas a Kempis (*Imitation of Christ*), that leaving the monastery meant coming back less a monk. As one early Jesuit (Jerome Nadal) put it: The whole world is our home.

That became true, not only literally, for the missionaries of the Society, but figuratively, for its scholars. It allowed Jesuit spirituality to become at once worldly and humanistic, seeing God as deeply immersed in all creation and in all human endeavor. It could take for its own the words of Terence, the pre-Christian (do we still say "pagan"?) poet--*Nil humanum alienum a me puto* ("Nothing human is foreign to me")--because nothing human is merely human. And no enterprise, no matter how secular, is merely secular. We live in a universe of grace. From the Jesuit perspective, therefore, it followed that holiness and humanism require each other.

Renaissance Humanism.

Thirty years ago, the Lutheran theologian Paul Tillich suggested that the word "spiritual" had been so misused and misunderstood that, even within the church, it was no longer usable. Time proved Tillich wrong. Not only for Christian writers but for anyone thinking seriously about the human condition and the contemporary search for meaning, the concept of spirituality has proven to be

indispensable. Just as indispensable for understanding Jesuits, I believe, is their humanism, a term equally problematic and, within most Christian circles at least, as much in need of rescue.

The words "humanist" and "humanism" have an old and distinguished heritage that long allowed them to be applied to such worthies as Petrarch and Erasmus, St. Thomas More and Jacques Maritain. More recent usage, however, at least in the United States, has narrowed the meaning of humanism tout court to its non-theist variety. The American Humanist Association and its periodical The Humanist have been allowed to appropriate the terms for themselves. The religious right wing aided and abetted the co-option, happy to identify humanism with a rejection of God and to hold it up as the demon responsible for all that is wrong with pop culture, the public school system and the world.

In its widest sense, humanism describes those attitudes and beliefs that attach central importance to the human person and human values. Originally it designated the Renaissance emphasis upon classical studies in education, going back to Petrarch and his enthusiasm for the classics of Latin antiquity ("the humanities"). Even today, the definition of humanism as human-centeredness has the firmer claim to correctness over non-theistic secular-ism.

The 15th-century *umanisti* were not only engaged in but devoted to the *studia humanitatis*, in which *humanitas* entailed the development of human virtue in all its forms and to its fullest extent, not only insight and understanding but eloquence and action. For the humanists, the study of the classics led to an active, not sedentary or reclusive life. Insight without action was barren, and action without insight was barbaric. Holding up *humanitas* as an ideal meant striving to strike a balance between action and contemplation. It was a balance born of complementarity.

Clearly the Jesuits were born of the Renaissance. Before they became engaged in the Counter-Reformation, Ignatius and his companions were contemporaries of Michelangelo and Da Vinci. They spoke and read classical Latin and as students breathed the air of humanism at the University of Paris. The "contemplation in action" they aspired to was not of medieval provenance but drawn from the ideals of their humanist contemporaries.

The Renaissance rediscovered the pre-Christian classics and sought to imitate their eloquence. Like the other *umanisti*, Ignatius believed that there was much in the classics that was useful for leading a devout and fully human life. This fit in with the Ignatian view of a God actively engaged in the world, speaking everywhere, even in and through "pagan" authors. Jesuit education would come to emphasize good literature as beneficial to good morals, and eloquence as an objective. Even the Jesuit habit of accommodation had its origins in Renaissance rules for rhetoric. To have an impact on people, an effective Jesuit missionary or spiritual director, no less than an effective speaker, had to know when and how

to adapt to circumstances.

Spiritual Humanism.

It is precisely their spirituality, rooted in the Ignatian *Exercises*, and their humanism, rooted in the Renaissance, that made and continue to make Jesuits distinctive. It carried through their history, winning them both friends and critics. Working in India, Jesuit missionary Roberto de Nobili took up the life-style of a Hindu holy man. He wore the same clothes, ate the same food, fasted and prayed with the same ascetic rigor as the Brahmins.

Similarly in China, Matteo Ricci and Adam Schall assumed the garb and lifestyle of Chinese mandarins. They and their Jesuit successors mastered the language and literature of China. Not only did they translate Confucius; they called him Shang, the Chinese word for venerable, but close enough to saint to alarm less accommodating Catholics in high places. That got those early Jesuit missionaries into trouble with the Vatican, but they had come not only to respect but to love the cultures of India and China, not as something alien but as something human and hence not without God's spiritual presence.

These Jesuit missionaries could affirm non-Christian cultures in India and China because back home their confreres were teaching the pre-Christian classics of Greece and Rome. Cicero and Virgil, even Horace and Ovid (without the racy sections) were all part of the detailed course of studies prescribed for all Jesuit schools and eventually codified in the *Ratio Studiorum*.

Within 25 years of their approval as an order, Jesuits were staffing schools from Portugal to Poland, teaching not only Catholic doctrine but grammar, philosophy and the humanities. As John O'Malley, S.J., writes in The First Jesuits, the Jesuits "glided" into school work without initially taking much account of it. Education of youth was only one of several Jesuit ministries at first, but it soon became the dominant one, once again because of their humanism.

Because of their Renaissance culture and upbringing, Ignatius and the early Jesuits believed in the power of education, or "good letters" as they put it. Ever since Petrarch it had been a commonplace assumption of the humanists that good literature led to virtue. Cicero provided not only a model for eloquence but religious and moral inspiration. Studying the so-called pagan classics made one a better person.

When the Jesuits opened their first school, it was to teach "all the disciplines" except law and medicine. Soon enough that led to Jesuits' teaching not only the humanities but mathematics and the natural sciences as well. When Pope Gregory XIII needed advice on how to revise the Julian calendar back in 1582, he turned to the Jesuit mathematician Christopher Clavius. Clavius came up with a formula that required the suppression of 10 days. Protestants proclaimed the

whole idea a "Jesuit plot," but the formula worked, and the Gregorian calendar has come into general use virtually everywhere. Clavius enjoys little celebrity these days, except for the honor of having a crater on the moon named after him. It is a distinction, however, that he enjoys with some 30 other Jesuit scientists and mathematicians.

Engagement with the secular sciences eventually became a hallmark of the Jesuits, so that even missionaries saw themselves as having a cultural as well as religious calling. George Kamel, a Czech Jesuit, worked as both a missionary and a pharmacist in the Philippines. He would send specimens of plants peculiar to the Orient back to Europe so they could be studied and compared. His contributions won him the honor of having a plant named after him. But who outside of a few Jesuits knows that the camellia was named after George Kamel? Or that the bark of the cinchona tree, sent back by missionaries for its remarkable ability to bring down fever, was once known as "Jesuit bark." We just call it quinine.

It is also fair to say that, were it not for the research and writing of early Jesuit missionaries, geography and ethnography would not have become serious branches of study as early as they did. Jesuits were the first explorers with higher educations, the first Europeans altogether to venture into the interiors of Mexico, Mongolia and the Amazon. Jesuits were the first Europeans to study Sanskrit in India and to write grammars in Chinese. They did the same with the native languages of Brazil. In fact, Jesuits have been credited with doing the foundational work for the grammars and dictionaries of 95 languages.

I could go on about Jesuits and the Baroque ("Jesuit architecture" the Italians called it). Or Jesuits and theater. (The school pageant is one of their more dubious though lasting contributions to modern civilization.) Would you believe that a Jesuit wrote the first serious treatise on ballet? My intention, however, is not to write a paean but to argue a point. Jesuits have been from their very beginnings at the center of the dialogue between science and religion, at the intersection of secular culture with faith. They found themselves there because of their spiritual humanism. It put them at a boundary that allowed them to speak in a worldly way about piety and piously about the world.

Jesuits obviously could not and did not always live up to the ideals of their origins, but they did it often enough to find themselves in the middle of any number of cross-fires. Their less accommodating Catholic critics viewed Jesuit affirmation of non-Christian cultures as toleration of idolatry and a betrayal of the Christian heritage. For anti-clerical humanists like Diderot and Voltaire, the Jesuits were too spiritual. Because of their humanism, Blaise Pascal and the Jansenists found them too lax.

But the Jesuits have a knack of outliving their enemies, so that even the word Jesuitical has virtually died out of the English language. Thanks to the Second

Vatican Council and Jesuit theologians like Karl Rahner, Jesuit spirituality has become mainstream Catholic thinking. Rahner's concept of the "anonymous Christian" was, as he himself admitted, a less than felicitous phrase, but it sought to express the Ignatian conviction that the world is infused with God's presence. Similarly the council described the church as symbolizing a grace that extends far beyond its visible confines. It implied that non-Catholics, non-Christians, even non-believers, conceptual agnostics and atheists can be living in the divine presence and serving as instruments of grace. Reaching out for and being touched by sacred mystery does not require having correct ideas about God.

For only the 34th time in their more than 450-year history, Jesuit delegates from all over the world are now gathered in Rome for a general congregation. It is only the eighth time a congregation was called not just to elect a new superior general but to consider other substantial matters, in this instance, how the Society of Jesus plans to meet the challenges it faces as it enters the third millennium. According to one of those delegates, Vincent T. O'Keefe, S.J., writing in *Company* (Winter, 1994), one of the "crucial" topics to be addressed at the congregation is to define how Jesuits can enter into fuller, more formal collaboration with the laity and their non-Jesuit colleagues in their ministries.

I hope the *patres congregati* think to include in their deliberations not just Roman Catholic laity and Episcopal bishops but Protestants, Jews and even agnostics. Their spiritual humanism is more attractive than they may realize. It is not just for (Roman) Catholics anymore.

~~~~~~~~

By RONALD MODRAS

RONALD MODRAS is a professor of theological studies at Saint Louis University. His most recent book is The Catholic Church and Antisemitism: Poland, 1933-1939 (Harwood, 1994).
~~~~~~~~