

Moral Education in Ignatius and the Early Jesuits

An essay written after the G.U.Choice decision

at the request of the Ignatian Society

The Jesuits were already involved in lay education when St. Ignatius Loyola wrote the Jesuit Constitutions (the content of the Constitutions is entirely his; they were drafted largely by his secretary, Polanco [D,43]). So Ignatius included an extended section (Part IV - more than 200 paragraphs) on the education policies of Jesuit schools. Part IV contains abundant references to moral development: externs seeking training in letters "are to receive training both in letters and good morals;" care should be taken that "they absorb (hauriant) along with their letters the morals worthy of a Christian;" "very special care should be taken that those who come to the universities of the Society to acquire letters should learn along with them good and Christian morals" (G,308,329).

It is this development in "letters" and "morals" (character) together that became distinctive of Jesuit education. That is, the young people who were attracted by the Renaissance ideal of literary excellence would also develop as moral persons. For this emphasis on moral education the early Jesuits were both praised and blamed - but none doubted this two-fold development characterized Jesuit education. George Ganss, S.J., sums up his reflection on the Fourth Part of the Constitutions: "There is constant encouragement of the student not only to moral and

sacramental living but also to the exercise of all the supernatural virtues which lead to the highest union with God" (G,176).

Part IV of the Jesuit Constitutions does not assign much class time for moral instruction. Ignatius, in using the word "hauriant", was affirming that the whole context in which the students develop their minds is the real source from which they "absorb" or "imbibe" (hauriant) moral values. Thus morality was formed primarily by what today we would call "Student Life"; morality comes from the milieu within which one lives and grows intellectually. The Jesuits often ran what they called "colleges," but in many of these the Jesuits did not lecture - this happened at the nearby University. The "college" was simply a residence hall where a group of students lived (G,31); while living and studying there they took university classes that were apart from Jesuit control. But in controlling the moral tone of the residence hall the Jesuits were able to form the students in the Christian virtues.

John W. Donohue, S.J., a contemporary scholar of Jesuit education, would see Ignatius making the school "a protected milieu" (D,173) - for one's living milieu shaped one's morality. Ignatius specified the writings of St. Thomas in his schools; and in considering moral education Thomas did not use "docere" (to teach) but "assuescere" (to be accustomed to) as the way of promoting virtue. (D,163) One became "accustomed to" moral living through life in the "college" - the dormitory and study hall. Apart from what occurred or did not occur in the

classroom, Ignatius specified that for "the improvement of morals" each week "one of the students will deliver a declamation about a subject that will give edification to those present and lead them to a desire to grow in all purity and virtue."

(G,330) By such student activities the Jesuits were setting the tone of "student life"; this was Ignatius' method of moral education. He seemed to believe that character and values were developed primarily by example (teachers, administrators and peers) and even talks of fellow students, rather than from the classroom and academic debate.

Christian morality was central to the concerns of Ignatius even before he founded the Jesuits. At the time of his conversion in 1521 he had little education, yet he gathered some friends to join with him in street-preaching in Salamanca. Soon he was brought before the Inquisition. After an extended hearing he and his friends were allowed to continue preaching, "provided that they did not define what was mortal and what was venial sin." Ignatius felt he could not work with such a restriction, so he left the area. Soon he realized that to preach Christian morality he would have to spend many years in systematic studies. He attended the University of Paris, where his moral commitment remained. An early Jesuit (Ribadaneira) tells of Ignatius standing in a freezing pond awaiting a particular man to pass on his way to an assignation. Ignatius believed that by his personal penance he might persuade the man to change his intent. When Ignatius settled in Rome he lost no time setting up a residence for women abandoned on the street or caught in

prostitution. When told he was wasting his time he explained,

I would consider no labor too much if by my exertions I were able to prevent one soul from sinning for even one night for the sake of my Lord Jesus Christ, and even if I knew that immediately afterwards the sinner would return to the paths of sin (P,341).

This is the Ignatius that reformed the education of Europe; good morality was at the heart of his message. In writing The Spiritual Exercises - a four-week set of meditations - he explained the First Week was devoted to "the consideration and contemplation of sin" (Annotation #4). The personal Examination of Conscience became central to his understanding of prayer and he required the Examen of his fellow Jesuits even when they did not have time for other prayer (L,240,241,268). Ignatius might rightly be known as the one who reformed the education of Europe, but intellectual development was not his own priority. He stated his belief succinctly in a letter of May 1547 to the Jesuits studying at Coimbra:

Great learning and great virtue are to be sought after, and perfection to be looked for in both, yet to virtue must always be given the preference (D,43 and Donc,91).

When Ignatius decided to start the first Jesuit school that would be open to externs (in Messina, Sicily), he sent his close associate Polanco who would announce that all Jesuit schools would be such that "in studiis pietas primum locum obtineat." In 1555 when Ignatius sent Perpignan to Coimbra to assume Jesuit charge of the University there Perpignan announced that Jesuit

education was aimed at "the inculcation of Christian virtue" (F,113). These statements of the primacy of the moral offer a theme present in all the early Jesuit documents on education (the texts of Ledesma and the "Ratios" of 1586, 1591 and 1599). In today's world many of the elements of these ancient documents would seem to be dated, for the world has changed. But John W. Donohue, S.J. (quoted above) would see several convictions about education from the Constitutions that would outlast any Ratio: "The first of these is the Ignatian belief in the primacy of the moral over the intellectual virtues" (D,46). This is the heritage that Ignatius has left his followers.

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References:

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