

# Faith Dimensions of a Jesuit, Catholic Education

BY RON BIEGANOWSKI, SJ

## *Dear Sue and Richard,*

As you prepare Matt and yourselves for his first year away at college, I can't help but imagine some of the questions you must be asking yourself: Who's his roommate? Will they get along together? How will he get his laundry done? What hours will he keep? Will he miss home? Will he call, text? What should you say? What will he let you say? As you know, there are many more questions.

The major part of his going to college will obviously be his studies, his classes. As you know I've lived and worked at Marquette for 35 years; I'm most familiar with the academic side — the classroom, the curriculum, the study in core requirements, major courses, and electives — the explicit content, as it were, of his education.

Because he's going to a Jesuit, Catholic school, I want to outline some characteristics to his academic work that might serve as a context for more specific uncertainties. A college education, it seems to me, includes some "faith dimensions," especially at a school such as Marquette, which help shape students' experiences as well as those of faculty and even of parents.

Some years ago at an alumni meeting in Los Angeles, a Marquette graduate asked, "In my firm, there are a number of us who graduated from Catholic colleges. I proudly display my Marquette banner, but, of course, take a lot of kidding from others, especially from some Notre Dame grads in the office. Now I know that my Marquette experience was special, but I can't really identify what made it so for me. What's special about a Jesuit, Catholic education?"

In my years of teaching English, I have been trying to identify for at least myself what distinguishes a Jesuit, Catholic education. The



**Fr. Bieganski is an associate professor at Marquette University and says, "Teaching undergraduates at Marquette has been my major work since 1976: it's been a wonderful experience."**

**He wrote this piece on the value of a Jesuit education to friends as they embarked on the fearful journey of sending their son off to college. It holds true for not only Marquette, but also Creighton University in Omaha and the other 26 Jesuit colleges and universities in the United States.**

roots of such an education, it seems to me, lie with Ignatius Loyola, founder of the Society of Jesus, specifically with some distinctive traits of his spirituality and with his own educational experience.

## *I. Spirituality*

The single, most accessible expression of his spirituality, Ignatius' book *The Spiritual Exercises*, contains a sequence of prayers with a progression of ever more engaging themes. Framing the core of the book are two separate presentations that address the same vision: "The First Principle and Foundation" opens the series of exercises and "The Contemplation on the Love of God" closes them, but each helps lead one's prayer to the grace of "finding God in all things."

Part of what Ignatius proposes in the "First Principle" reads: "All things in this world are gifts of God, created for us, to be the



Fr. Timothy Lannon, SJ, celebrated during the Mass of the Holy Spirit as the new president of Creighton University.

means by which we can come to know him better, love him more surely, and serve him more faithfully.” Ignatius has the retreatant begin *The Spiritual Exercises* by focusing on such fundamental truths concerning the world and one’s existence. That particular world vision operates as the foundation or first principle for all of one’s prayer throughout the retreat. Subsequent considerations and meditations sharpen the focus on the individual and a person’s relationship with God, especially with Jesus Christ in the mysteries of His life, death, and resurrection. The final exercise, “The Contemplation on the Love of God,” returns to a sweeping, cosmic vision of all reality as not only having been created by God, but as being actively sustained by the presence of God. The heart of this prayer can be glimpsed in the grace sought from doing this contemplation:

*I want to have an intimate understanding of myself and my life as gift, and all my world as gift, so that I will be incandescent with gratitude, and then go beyond that to love the Giver of all this, who loves me vastly in deed and in sharing.*

These snippets from *The Spiritual Exercises* highlight an important, recurrent motif in Ignatian spirituality, a grace that seems to have characterized Ignatius’ own personal prayer, namely a facility of finding God, of becoming aware of God’s presence, in

**“All things in this world are gifts of God, created for us, to be the means by which we can come to know him better, love him more surely, and serve him more faithfully.”**

– St. Ignatius of Loyola

his every day, ordinary experiences. Because all reality is God’s on-going creative gift, the most commonplace things become expressions of that divine love in the eyes of the faithful.

## II. Education

The growth of Ignatius’ conversion and spiritual life, which *The Spiritual Exercises* recorded in basic outline, led him to seek formal education which he began in his early 30s at Barcelona, then Alcala and Salamanca, and which culminated in his years at the University of Paris (1528-1535) where he graduated as a Master of the University. Paris, at the time, was the leading university in Europe, representing the height of medieval schooling and feeling the impact of Renaissance humanism. That education influenced Ignatius and later Jesuits: several of his last years Ignatius spent writing the Constitutions of the Society of Jesus, of which Part IV (the longest part)

addresses colleges and universities. The Constitutions directed that a detailed outline be prepared after more years of experience: the Ratio Studiorum, a basic plan of studies for Jesuit schools, was the result.

So Ignatius’ spirituality and education represent two important dimensions to Jesuit education. That influence struck a 1974 graduate from Marquette’s College of Engineering after some background reading on Ignatius for an alumni committee. The graduate wrote:



New Marquette University President Fr. Scott Pillarz chats with students on campus.

*While reading the articles, I started thinking about what a Jesuit education meant to me. There is something special about a Jesuit education, especially when one compares it to the other opportunities that exist for individuals to attend Catholic universities. The materials that you forwarded, specifically describing the life of Ignatius of Loyola, really got me thinking as to what was special about my Jesuit education experience.*

Ignatius' spiritual development and his own education at some of the leading universities of his time shaped his vision of schooling. To understand that vision, we need to consider the heart of such schooling, the focus of a curriculum based in the humanities.

### *III. Humanities*

The humanities were the core of the medieval schools, of the University of Paris when Ignatius was a student there. And study of the humanities regularly distinguishes Jesuit education and helps define the core requirements at a place like Marquette. At the center of such a curriculum are History, Theology, Philosophy, and English (Rhetoric) which had served at Paris as the foundation and stepping stones for the sciences. As part of such a curriculum, the humanities, if not all disciplines, ultimately try to answer two recurring questions:

What does it mean to be human?

How do we shape our lives in response to such an understanding?

So in very broad strokes, History says, "If you want to know what it means to be human, you have to look at the record of how humans have conducted themselves over the centuries and across the world." The accumulation of data across time can begin to help us recognize patterns in human behavior which can help answer this question.

Theology says, "to understand what it means to be human we

need to look at what faith, at what our relation with the supreme being, with God, tells us about the human condition." As we come to know God through faith and revelation, we gain fuller understanding of our own humanity.

Philosophy tells us, "to know what it means to be human, we must first understand what 'to know' means, what 'mean' means. We need to define the terms of the question." Philosophy most appropriately asks the most abstract questions to get at the truth of their answer.

And for us in English we ask, "You want to know what it means to be human?" Our answer is, "So let me tell you a story." Chaucer and Shakespeare, Dickinson and Baldwin show us characters searching for their own answers.

This basic question can play out across the academic disciplines, especially for a faculty and a university committed to a curriculum with a strong core of requirements in the humanities. This question can give a focus for ultimate values to the natural sciences and social sciences in a college of Arts and Sciences, but this inquiry through the humanities courses can also articulate some of the same dimensions to a college of Business or of Engineering or of Nursing. What I have outlined here, of course, can apply to any school with a significant commitment to an education based on the humanities. What of the Catholic, Jesuit institution?

### *IV. Catholic*

A Catholic education, it seems to me, extends the questioning, the pursuit of knowledge to the realm of the Spirit, from the seen to the unseen. With the eyes of faith, a Catholic institution puts before its students the whole of reality, the visible and invisible, matter and spirit, as the full and proper object of study.

To use an analogy from optics, faith can act as a Polaroid lens. For instance, some years ago before digital cameras when I wanted to photograph a deep hole on a favorite trout stream, the surface of the water reflected back the bright sun and blue sky,

the lighting though brilliant also blocked out any perspective of the stream's bottom. But looking through the Polaroid lens, I was able to see below the surface, to the depths of the pool. A faith vision allows us to get beyond superficial shine and secular glitter to the ultimate questions, to ask for spiritual, religious answers to who are we as human beings, what is the final truth about the world in which we live? The Catholic Church and its tradition offer some specific answers to such questions. And so a Catholic university pursues such questions to the farthest reaches of human, faith-filled reflection.

### V. Jesuit

If the teaching and tradition of the Catholic faith extend the search to the ultimate dimensions of all reality, the Jesuit heritage of education builds on Ignatius' spirituality to help discern particular features of the world surrounding us. Certain notes emerge from *The Spiritual Exercises* that highlight

a particular set of colors, as it were, recurring in the world and in one's experience. To use another analogy from optics, much as a red filter highlights the range of red colors for the photographer, so Ignatian spirituality helps focus an individual's awareness in pursuing the questions of human meaning.

Three major Ignatian notes, it seems to me, come immediately to bear in a humanities based, Catholic education: a sacramental awareness, a sense of gratitude, and a readiness for action. To find God in all things expresses in practical language the view that all of reality has been radically changed because of the Incarnation, because the Son of God became a man and walked the earth as a human being. "The world is charged with the grandeur of God," as Gerard Manley Hopkins writes. And so the study of all things, of any thing, can ultimately lead in some fashion to awareness of the divine. All things and the whole of existence stand as the handiwork of God offered as gift to us humans.

As the first and most fitting response to such a vision of the human within the divine, Ignatius suggests that one pray for a sense of gratitude. Part of the culminating grace of *The Spiritual Exercises* is to pray to be entirely grateful, to be filled with gratitude. The central prayer of the Catholic Church is, as was for Ignatius himself, the Eucharist, its supreme prayer of thanksgiving.

And the fulfillment of gratitude for Ignatius is a readiness for action because God acts for me. Ignatius completes *The Spiritual Exercises* by directing the retreatant to prayerfully consider "what on my side I ought to offer and give." And so, awareness of God



### *Pied Beauty*

*Glory be to God for dappled things –  
For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow;  
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;  
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;  
Landscape plotted and pieced – fold, fallow, and plough;  
And a'll tra'des, their gear and tackle and trim.  
All things counter, original, spare, strange;  
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)  
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;  
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:  
Praise him.*

being present and working for me leads to gratitude which finds fullest expression in service. Ignatius would have each of us do in our own lives what salvation history shows most clearly: love expresses itself in deeds.

### VI. Conclusion

Such faith dimensions to a Jesuit, Catholic education help identify the specialness of the experience and perhaps contribute to its lasting effect. Faith shapes an individual's education as it nurtures one's inquiry. The graduate quoted above concluded his letter:

*While attending Marquette, and even for years thereafter, it was difficult for me to really put my finger on what was Jesuit about my Marquette education. I now know and it feels great. The pursuit of excellence opens an individual's eyes to the glory of God as seen in the wonders around us.*

With a Catholic, Jesuit education, faith ratifies the urge to look for meaning in what one

learns, for significance in one's individual experience. A person of faith believes that there are answers to such questions. A humanities focused education grounds such questioning in very immediate, human realities that surround us. As faith encourages students in their questioning, so faith continues in graduates as they reflect on their experiences, looking for ultimate meaning in their lives.

The very asking of the first question, what does it mean to be human, becomes, of course, part of the answer to the second question, how does such understanding shape one's own life. And certainly pursuing such questions helps integrate one's intellectual and moral formation.

That can be the journey Matt begins in the midst of worries about roommates and checking accounts and allergy medicine. In the process he'll also learn more about believing in himself as well as in others, even in his parents! That is certainly some of the way you yourselves have traveled as graduates. And your faith continues in trusting Matt, in trusting what you tried to do as parents. All this returns, finally, to where we begin: God belief.

This poem is another way of saying this, Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins' way.

All my love,  
Ron 