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Jesuit History: A New Hot Topic

The reasons for this change are difficult to pinpoint. Surely one factor has been a growing awareness that the Jesuits, in their manifold activities, provide windows onto extremely important though often neglected aspects of Western history. And because the network of the Society's institutions is international, these are windows onto the relationship of the West to the rest of the globe. This has resulted in a tendency to move the Jesuits as a topic of study beyond the confines of "church history" into broader perspectives.

In addition, a shift has taken place from an almost exclusively European perspective to a multicultural approach. "Mission history" was practically an airtight category, isolated from the broader picture and segregated from it. Scholarship on the Jesuit experiment in China, has become a booming industry, whose areas of study include the impact of Europe on the experiment, of the experiment on Europe, of the Jesuits on China and, perhaps most interesting, of China on the Jesuits.

The upshot of this revolution is that the Jesuits of the old Society (that is, before the suppression of the order in 1773) are emerging with a new profile. But they were something more. They were "learned clerics," like many others of their day, but their learning was somehow broader, their enterprise less traditionally clerical. They had a systemic commitment to culture that was more expansive than that of any other cohesive religious group, Catholic or Protestant. I would go so far as to say that integrated into their pastoral, ecclesial and religious mission was a cultural and civic mission.

Perhaps most fundamentally, the Jesuits engaged in a relationship with culture that was new for clerics. They spent many more hours in the classroom than in the sacristy. Furthermore, in those classrooms they were not teaching clerics, nor were they for the most part teaching the traditional clerical subjects of "philosophy" and theology. They were teaching poetry, history, oratory, drama and other works of literature.

The most basic purpose of the schools was to instill the virtue of *pietas*—that is, to help students develop into upright Christians with a commitment to the common good. As Ignatius's secretary, put it in 1551: "Those who are now only students will grow up to be pastors, civic officials, administrators of justice, and will fill other important posts to everybody's profit and advantage."

How was this goal to be accomplished? It was accomplished in part by what we would call extracurriculars—school plays, sports, production of religious spectacles. Activities like these helped lead Jesuits into new and important relationships to music, dance and art. But the classroom was as always the center of the school, and there the pagans reigned. Demosthenes, Sophocles, Livy, Virgil and their beloved Cicero. The Jesuits taught these authors not simply as models of eloquence but as thinkers with ethical and spiritual relevance.

The upright living that the texts held forth as an ideal had a strong civic orientation, especially notable in Cicero. The virtuous person was virtuous especially by contributing to the common good, which was not something abstract but the moral and cultural good of the city in which the person lived. This orientation in fact corresponded to the

reality of the Jesuit schools, which were founded, as Polanco implied, to perform a civic function.

They were also cultural institutions. How otherwise can we explain their promotion of six or seven choirs and a corresponding number of musicians at purely academic functions in some of their colleges? Is it not easier to see ballet at the Jesuit college in Paris, which King Louis XIV sometimes attended, as a more cultural function than a religious one? Why is it that most books produced at that time on the history and theory of dance were by Jesuits? The plays produced at the Jesuit schools drew large audiences from the local population; and in an era before there were public libraries, the often magnificent libraries of the Jesuit schools sometimes performed precisely that function.

What does this have to do with Jesuit spirituality? Most Jesuits taught the classical texts (almost no matter where they were in the world) for at least a few years of their lives, sometimes for their whole lives. They knew their Cicero better than they knew their Bible. Most of them, even when engaged in other ministries, lived in the school communities and from there often helped orchestrate great civic celebrations that entailed music, dance, poetry, plays and elaborate parades. Did this not get into their souls?

Usually, when we study spirituality, we turn to "spiritual" texts—writings about prayer, union with God, devotions and similar matters. To study Jesuit spirituality we go to the *Spiritual Exercises*, to Ignatius' so-called autobiography, and to his other

writings. Then we might go to the writings of other "great masters of the spiritual life." Well and good, but does not this method need to be expanded? What about taking into account also what the recent scholarship is making so vivid for us? Do we not need to add, for instance, a civic and cultural dimension to Jesuit spirituality?

—John W. O'Malley, "Jesuit History: A New Hot Topic," *America Magazine*, May 9, 2005



About the author: John W. O'Malley, S. J., is a historian who specializes in the religious culture of early modern Europe. Although he has published important works on subjects as diverse as Erasmus, the Sistine Chapel, Vatican Council II, and a history of the popes, his best known work is *The First Jesuits* (Harvard University Press, 1993), which received two prestigious best-book awards and has been translated into ten languages. On the Jesuits he has edited two influential volumes, *The Jesuits: Cultures, Sciences, and the Arts, 1540-1773* (University of Toronto Press 1999 and 2006). In collaboration with Saint Joseph's University Press (2005), he and Gauvin Alexander Bailey produced the monumental volume, *The Jesuits and the Arts, 1540-1773*.

John O'Malley is past-president of the American Catholic Historical Association and of the Renaissance Society of America. In 1995 he was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, in 1997 to the American Philosophical Society, and in 2001 to the Accademia di San Carlo, Ambrosian Library, Milan, Italy. He holds, besides fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, the American Council of Learned Societies, and the National Endowment for the Humanities, lifetime achievement awards from the Renaissance Society of America and from the Society for Italian Historical Studies.

Historians are a cautious lot and do not use the word revolution lightly. But that is the right word to describe what has been happening in the study of the history of the Society of Jesus. All at once the Jesuits have become a hot topic—indeed, one of the hottest—in the field of early modern history.

What is happening? First of all, the number of scholars publishing on the history of the Society of Jesus has expanded almost exponentially. Books—good books—are rolling off the presses, with France, Italy and North America leading the pack. The Institute of Jesuit Sources in St. Louis continues to publish fine translations of important texts. The most prestigious university presses—Princeton, Harvard, Stanford and Toronto, for example—also publish on Jesuit history, a venture almost unheard of before.

Second, the status of scholars has changed radically. Until a few years ago, Jesuits wrote about the Jesuits, with all the advantages and disadvantages that in-house scholarship entails. Today the vast majority of those writing about the Society are not Jesuits. Indeed many, or maybe most, of them are not Roman Catholics or even Christians.