THE ROOTS OF INTELLECTUAL EXPERIENCE:

THE VALUE AND LIMITATION OF ACADEMIC STUDY

By JAMES McPOLIN

'THE ENTIRE religious life of the members should be imbued with an apostolic spirit. . . . These institutes should adjust their observances and customs to the needs of their particular apostolate'.[1] In these words, Vatican II invited apostolic religious to face the consequences of what it means to be an apostolic group today. The invigorating effects and the tensions of renewal have made it dawn on us how radical was this invitation. In emerging from the quasi-monastic isolation which characterized their life-style before the Council, many apostolic groups, in varying degrees, have come to understand themselves as apostolic communities. A growing apostolic consciousness has affected other key areas: for example, the understanding of a celibacy and a spirituality that are apostolic.

How does this 'apostolic spirit' affect intellectual training for today's priesthood and apostolic life? What are the benefits and demands of integrating academic study with apostolic life in community, with the life of faith and personal growth? These are the actual questions at present, especially for seminaries, divinity schools and centres of theological education. For example, Dr TeSelle, dean of Vanderbilt University's divinity school, summarizes the challenge of the moment with the question: 'How does a whole person, preparing for religious leadership, become prepared and formed in his or her wholeness and totality?'[2]

Intellectual training and its relationship to the apostolic life has been a preoccupation and source of tension among Jesuits before, during and even after their 32nd General Congregation. The basic reason for this tension was the need to direct the studies required of a Jesuit towards the demands of today's apostolate, and the concern that the maintenance of intellectual standards should not dominate

[1] *Perfectae Caritatis*, 8.

[2] TeSelle, S. McFague: 'Between Athens and Jerusalem: the Seminary in tension', in *Christian Century* (February 1976).

the Society to the detriment of other fundamental values. The Congregation took a new look at the quality and aims of the Jesuit's intellectual experience today. The motivating force of this experience is now the apostolic life, in particular the promotion of justice and the service of the faith. Training for this apostolate demands a more serious reflection on the radical problems of human living and on christian faith. A professor of theology commented during the discussions: 'In the past, Jesuits who wished to undertake a directly intellectual apostolate had always received special encouragement in contrast to those who hadn't leanings that way'. 'Study' for the apostolic life cannot be viewed as a purely intellectual experience. One aspect of the integration of study with the apostolic life is that 'apostolic experiences . . . lead to a deeper level of spiritual and intellectual reflection'.[3] Both learning and maturity in faith are acquired through a dialectic of experience and reflection.

In order to gear itself to a more apostolic involvement in the hard, everyday consequences of people's lives, the Society had to learn from the good and bad experiences of intellectual training in the past. Some Jesuits, in emerging from a long and sometimes grinding experience of study, had felt that now their intellectual training was complete. Today the apostolic person has constantly to feel the pulse of the changing world. Knowledge evolves so fast that an intellectual training of ten years ago is inadequate to sensitize him to the problems that are born often after he has been taught. The wear and tear of today's apostolic life, the shifting sands underlying every apostolate, call for continued learning and retraining. Maybe there was a time when someone felt that he was able to speak with some authority on a wide range of topics out of his store of wisdom accumulated in the past over a long career of study. The model which predominated in jesuit intellectual formation for a long time was the classical, renaissance ideal of the *homo universalis,* the man who can turn his hand to anything.[4] He was trained in one type of philosophy and theology. This was presented as a compact and secure guide for reflection on the issues of the day.

The mushrooming of human knowledge, the tendency to specialization, an accelerating pace of life which constantly raises new questions, the diversification of types of philosophy and

[3] *Documents of the Thirty-second General Congregation of the Society of Jesus: The Education and Apostolic Formation of Jesuits,* in *Supplement to The Way,* no 29/30 (Spring, 1977), 47, p 51.
[4] 'The Response of the Jesuit, as Priest and Apostle, in the Modern World', by B. Lonergan, in *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits,* vol II, no 3 (St Louis, 1970), pp 105-09.

theology: all these factors show that the end product of any formation programme is unfinished. Inherent to the intellectual experience of the apostolic religious is the disposition, the realization that he can and must go on learning till the end of his life. If he has this openness to further learning and change, then experience of the apostolic life motivates him to continue his own intellectual growth as well as his job training and spiritual renewal.

What the 32nd Congregation of the Society of Jesus says about 'integration' puts academic study in its proper perspective.[5] Study, prayer, community and personal growth are not separate areas of formation. Growth in personal faith, intellectual and affective development are to keep pace with one another so that all find their unity in apostolic service of the Lord. Studies are 'integrated' into the apostolic life: 'Our mission today consists in the proclamation of faith in Jesus Christ, and is inextricably involved with the promotion of justice. This is the end and purpose of our studies'.[6] The Congregation's statements disclose only the tip of an iceberg. The Council's call to apostolic religious to emerge more into the apostolic scene helped to open the doors of many houses of study. Many Jesuits in study moved from remote areas where they had been insulated from the culture and real issues of their people. They came to live and study where there is more contact with others, with teachers and students of other religious groups and Churches. 'We are not raising a hothouse Jesuit', Fr Arrupe wrote in 1967, 'to wither when brought into the open, but training men of strength able to reshape themselves, to persevere and by ceaseless renewal make progress in all the varied circumstances of the world and its many enticements and threats'.[7]

The exodus from the 'hothouse' is the odyssey of a man who is struggling to become an integrated person for today's apostolic life. The change affected the whole life, including the intellectual experience, of the jesuit teacher and student in houses of study, particularly in institutes of philosophy and theology. In an enclosed and tightly run house of study, a predominantly academic atmosphere might favour the gifted intellectual or a shy student. But he might lag behind in other areas of his growth, for example, in authentic faith, personal responsibility and affective development. The tension

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[5] Cf *The Education and Apostolic Formation of Jesuits, loc. cit.*, p 45ff.

[6] *Ibid.*, 24, p 45.

[7] *Instruction on the Spiritual Training of a Jesuit* (Rome, 1967).

experienced within the Congregation of bringing seemingly diverse areas into harmony for the apostolic service of the Lord was a significant even though pale reflection of what has been happening throughout the world in seminaries, divinity schools and in all centres of learning concerned with formation for the apostolic life. The final statement about formation has given some the impression that it intends to pile on the pressure in every aspect of training. In fact, it has one *leitmotif,* 'integration'. There is no question of a possible disintegration of studies and standards or of a lessening in regard for academic study and research.

Recent facts and figures point to this need for integration. For example, it is striking, at least statistically, that between 1970 and 1974 among those Jesuits who left the priesthood or who applied to leave within those years, about forty-five per cent worked in a directly intellectual apostolate (i.e. teaching in universities or in jesuit houses of study). These figures are real when one thinks of many fellow-students in post-graduate work who left the priesthood. Besides, during the Congregation an experienced director of tertianship (a period of renewal after ordination and studies) remarked that among the Jesuits he had directed in recent years, those undergoing the greatest stress and doubt in their vocation were engaged in higher studies. Sometimes those responsible for formation have had to learn through painful hindsight what chinks and difficulties passed unnoticed in those who had distinguished themselves in study, and left the priesthood soon after ordination.

It is not possible to generalize about these situations. Each case-history is individual and complex. But a man who achieves in study and whose achievements have been supported by an academic environment may suddenly, in a changed situation, show signs of non-growth into a mature adult. These signs are more likely to appear in a climate which encourages freedom, a personalized experience of faith, friendship in community and a certain exposure to contemporary apostolic situations; one which acknowledges that 'non-intellectual' experiences, such as feelings, have a value for his own human growth and his experience of God. Such an atmosphere is necessary for any person who wishes to make a commitment to priesthood and the apostolic life today.

Emphasis on these values concerns not only those engaged in study. There are some men who have lived in religious life for many years, and show signs of non-growth into mature adults. This is evidenced by their difficulties in relationships, in discussion, in acceptance of

change. For various reasons, sometimes because of more permissive attitudes around them, they suddenly become more aware of their own affective and sexual immaturity. Sometimes they feel they have never made a personal commitment to celibacy. If their growth as mature adults has been inhibited in this area, then the reality of their prayer life is likely to be impaired. When a crisis occurs, they find that they have not been praying realistically for years, and do not feel in any way capable of doing so now. Their problem is often developmental impairment or lack of integration. Sometimes with a new self-knowledge they are able to readjust and make a positive commitment, almost a first one, to their religious life.

These experiences point out the need for integrating academic study with other areas of development for the apostolic life. They also raise the question whether long years of study and even houses of study are the most suitable preparation and setting for training for priesthood and the apostolic life. When the structures and ethos of a house are geared to intellectual activity, it is possible, as experience has proved, for a man well-trained in theology to give intellectual assent to priesthood and to an apostolic commitment in celibacy without having deeply personalized his relationship with Christ or with his fellowmen. Without conscious integration there are special hazards for the man gifted intellectually and highly trained in study: faith seeking understanding can become the intellectualizing of faith; logic and reason seek to control human situations, relationships, one's own feelings as well as the feeling of others; sharing can become discussion or even a lecture! Years ago a friend remarked to me: 'I'd love to be present at one of your community recreations — with such a long training in study you Jesuits must always have wonderful intellectual conversations with one another'.

St Ignatius prescribed that a Jesuit, after years of intense study, should spend a period in what he called 'the school of the heart'. For him a Jesuit should be an integrated person in whom action, the life of the spirit and intellectual work come together and find their unity in his apostolic service of the Lord. Nowadays, in view of the demands and stress of the apostolic life, this integration must be developed earlier, during the years of study. A more favourable setting for this integration may be provided within small communities outside the house of study. If a man is to commit himself to priesthood or the apostolic life in celibacy, he has to say 'yes' with his whole being from where he is. This 'yes' is not only based on a suitable academic training; it also emerges from an experience of himself in

his relationship with Christ, in his affective growth. This 'whole' person realizes, too, that he is still growing; he knows uncertainty and yet trusts in the strength of God. He gives himself to the incomprehensibility and insecurity of his future in the priesthood and apostolic life.

The Council's call for more apostolic involvement and the exposure to a world in rapid evolution has transformed the intellectual experience of the person engaged in the academic apostolate. He faces new crises. But every crisis is a turning point and, depending on how he takes the turn, he discovers opportunities in which he can touch contemporary man more effectively in his mission than perhaps ever before. In the conflict of change, even the word 'academic' has become ambivalent for some. It can be a label for the man whose learning is out of touch with the concerns of society, who constantly intellectualizes faith and feelings, or who has difficulty in communicating his knowledge and integrating his life. However, the changing face of today's academic is often a highly respected image.

The new *milieu* creates challenges which can make the academic feel that he is on the move and that he can contribute to the life of his apostolic group. It can test and enrich his intellectual powers as well as his apostolic effectiveness, his own life of faith and personal growth. Looking, for example, at the experience of the jesuit teaching in a faculty of philosophy or theology, some of these new opportunities are: rising standards of education in the world at large; specialization in every human skill and science; a worldwide interest in man's religious experience; the diversification of types of philosophy and theology. The media have brought scholars and experts into an open forum. It is now easier to have communication with fellow-scholars, men and women, of other Churches and religions, and inter-disciplinary co-operation in common projects which affect human society (e.g. between those who have concrete experience of poverty and the theoreticians).

These developments at the very roots of the academic's intellectual experience call for a radical degree of honesty, openness and faith. The era of the uniform system of philosophy and theology is over. A static methodology is exposed at a time of new questions and open controversy. The disciple of one master may become guilty of intellectual intolerance. Yet the academic cannot be a nimble, trendy eclectic who never stops in his tracks to assess. He is no longer the *homo universalis,* trained for everything, who can direct the acumen

of his scholastically trained mind on any problem, on any situation anywhere.

He now experiences himself as one who has to go on learning in his own specialized field, and to listen to those who have existential acquaintance with the realities about which he theorizes. Even if he does manage to keep up with developments in his own field, he is aware that it is a small area, quite dependent on other disciplines. This is illustrated by an introductory remark to a recent book on John's Gospel: 'To labour in the field of johannine studies and to work through the plethora of accompanying literature is certainly . . . a humbling and exacting experience'.[8] Research and experimentaton in the field of education now render it impossible to teach students in the way in which the academic once learned himself. Intellectual standards are not so much measured by what a curriculum looks like on paper as by the quality and processes of teaching, learning, communication, the motivations to study within each one's experience. The media, the open questioning of faith, the public controversy show up not only bad communication but also any lack of honesty, even lack of scholarship. The academic sometimes feels like a young bird being pushed out of his nest; he is caught up, too, like any other apostolic religious in a world of change, confusion and uncertainty. He is no longer sure of an approving audience or sure of himself.

'The outstanding jesuit intellectuals of the past were great individualists', somebody remarked to me recently. 'Now that you Jesuits have become involved in this "community thing" you are much less effective'. His image of a jesuit intellectual monad does not square with today's view of the apostolic religious. 'The unity of the brethren', the Council says, 'is a source of great apostolic power'.[9] The way we tackle some of the problems we face today, for example, war, hunger, injustice, the break-up of family life, racial discrimination, depends on our answer to the question: how can men get together and work together for the advancement of the whole world community? This ability to get together in a way that will last does not flow automatically from intellectual power or technical advance. These are capable of either separating men from one another or meeting them. Everything depends on man's own determination to seek out and meet his brother in the effort to share with him. Today the trend

[8] Appold, M. L.: *The Oneness motif in the Fourth Gospel* (Tübingen, 1976), p 2.

[9] *Perfectae Caritatis*, 15.

in our lives is to stress the team. Many achievements in the apostolate and in modern technology are the co-operative venture of a group or a pastoral team.

The community in which the academic lives is a co-operative sharing in the apostolic life. It needs the co-operation of researchers, professors and experts, men equipped with a gift for synthesis that inclines towards those global, deep and unified solutions demanded by the great human problems. In this co-operative apostolate the academic is stimulated to more profound reflection by the apostolic experience of his brothers. The growing awareness of the inter-relatedness of man and the need of international co-operation in tackling the world's problems on all levels through inter-disciplinary work has sometimes turned the academic into a kind of globe-trotter. He feels he is needed and enriched through this experience of the community of man. The man whose faith and commitment are questioned, who has to remind himself of the relationship between his work and the service of faith, needs support for his own faith within an apostolic group. If he takes courageous stands in controverted matters, particularly in those related to faith, he needs their support. He receives it in proportion to his own willingness to share his views with his brothers and to have them tested and, maybe, refined by them.

The clerical student's changing world in the late 1960's is sketched by Henri Nouwen in his essay 'Depression in the Seminary'. 'Whereas we tended to think of the seminary as a place with joyful, self-confident people, now a visitor might find it to be a place with troubled, doubting people, pervaded with a general atmosphere of depression'.[10] But integration rather than depression may be the key question. Depression comes for all with change and personal growth; it is one of the costs of the life of faith and perseverance in extended study for the priesthood and apostolic life. It is aggravated when the situation in which the student finds himself does not encourage integrated training. The starting-point of an intellectual training within the apostolic group is an experiential awareness of the type of young person to be trained, and of the contemporary world which has influenced him.

Often young people are attracted to an apostolic religious group when they see it is engaged in effective and worthwhile apostolates. Within a deeply personalized relationship with Christ, they have

[10] *Intimacy: Pastoral Psychological Essays* (Indiana, 1970), pp 93-119.

discovered the attraction of a life for others in apostolic service. They have a strong sense of what is personal. They are generous when they see the value of devoting their gifts and energies to certain objectives. They demand honesty and sincerity. They want to know about themselves and the world about them. Identification is still the main process by which a man finds and grows in his vocation. Convincing personalities who give an attractive visibility to their way of life are powerful influences on a young man's intellectual development. Who wants to become a priest or apostolic religious if he lives with priests who question the foundations of their commitment, who are alienated from the renewal within their own apostolic group, or who in word or attitude are bitter about the students for whom they are responsible? It is not sufficient to communicate to the young person in studies the goals of a certain period of study or to point out the need for perseverance and the importance of study. The learner has to be involved at the level of conviction and action, and guided by certain aids along the way to persevere and to see in some real way the value of devoting his energy and gifts to a particular form of study. Some helps are: contact with fellow-religious or priests who are 'using' studies in an effective apostolate and who still go on learning, and the example of their teachers who persevere in their study. Students identify more with the teacher who tries to lead an integrated life, because they themselves are struggling to integrate a life of study with their growth in faith, with affective growth and with the seemingly remote apostolic goal of their studies.

Today's student on the way to the priesthood is sometimes caricatured not as a depressive but as a restless activist in search of new apostolic experiences and of knowledge that is immediately 'relevant' for his latest enterprise. But there is a legitimate student-quest for 'relevance'. In a world of developing standards in education, he is open to and capable of academic work. He seeks a more profound understanding of God and man which is related to the real questions of his own day and culture, and also to his own questionings of faith. When the language of theology does not echo contemporary life, the gulf widens between his own experience and his theological education. The study of religion and theological education are not the same thing. A study of theology, which is necessary today for all those being trained for the apostolic life, is not to be equated with a series of courses or the communication of a body of knowledge. It touches the whole person. Because its subject matter concerns existential

problems, fundamental issues of life and death, it affects the student on many levels: his vocation, his intellectual, ethical, spiritual and emotional life. When it touches him on these levels it is 'relevant'.

Training for ministry requires that intellectual knowledge be confirmed, enriched, stimulated by the apostolic experience of one's world and culture, and by one's personal faith-experience. A question that needs asking in this context is: in centres of theological education, do the teaching and learning community worship together? Current trends in education stress motivation, self-appropriation and the diversity of ways in which students learn. The ignatian principle of adjustment 'to the measure of God's grace imparted to each individual' has meaning for those who have a deep sense of what is personal, and who are to be educated according to their individual aptitudes for special future assignments in the apostolic life. This provides them with room for personal distinction and identity. In this way intellectual training can build on personalism and evoke a high quality of response in academic work. Today's student comes from a world reacting to vicious competition and mass production. He, too, reacts against that depersonalization sometimes characteristic of centres of learning. Dr TeSelle says:

> The art of ministry, formation for ministry, integration of understanding and skills, these ought to be our main concern as educators. . . . The place of practice . . . is never quite as clear as is the place of book learning. A current division in discussions on the nature of theological education is between those who adhere to an action-reflection model and those who insist on academic studies with some attempt to put these studies into practice in field settings. . . . Reflection must embrace both poles of the current discussion. . . . Some students need very practical experience in order to begin that process of integration, while others need to achieve distance from field experience through the classical disciplines.[11]

This integration cannot be achieved merely by institutional organization, course-planning or by juggling with curricula. Besides, the student himself needs a strong apostolic faith to see what is relevant. This means believing not so much that study itself is an 'apostolate' in the strict sense, but rather that later in his apostolic life he will be more present to people with and through the knowledge he acquires now. He has to know that it takes more love to accept one hour of real study than days of imagined or irrelevant tasks.

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[11] TeSelle, *art. cit.*

Today many students and teachers of theology live and work in conditions which are more open, and often provide opportunities for better academic training and a wider intellectual apostolate. A university situation or an institute distinct from their religious community can offer not only a more broadened experience of theology but also enrichment on other levels: for example, in their life of faith, in affective growth through contact with students and teachers of other religious groups and Churches. It can challenge their own commitment to priesthood and religious life.

This new situation also raises some questions about integration: is the theological education in these centres orientated to ministry and apostolic life? More fundamentally, is it theological education in the true sense, one which touches the whole person? If not, who is responsible for relating academic study to the life of faith and the apostolate, and how is that integration realized? If the theological education touches the whole person (that is, if it is more than a study of religion), and if it is formation for ministry and apostolic life (even in an ecumenical setting), who are responsible for helping the student towards personal integration? It cannot be maintained that the teacher is responsible for his intellectual training alone and a 'formation team' for other areas of growth. Theological education affects the student on more than one level.

Integrated growth is furthered in a community where the student can support others and find support in his faith, work, and affective life. An exclusively student community is deprived of the wisdom of those already trained for the apostolate and who have more experience in the religious life. A teacher-student community, drawn together by the directly intellectual apostolate, can provide much support on the work level. But it lacks close contact with those engaged in other apostolates for which the students are being trained; it also runs the risk of losing sight of key areas of development, with which academic training is to be integrated. Whatever be the form of community in which the 'trainee' lives, besides encouraging the main task of academic learning, it must provide the right setting for integration.

These reflections are based on a limited experience of working with apostolic religious in academic study for the priesthood. They do not deal with questions such as: the academic training of women for ministry and apostolic life, the relationship of studies other than philosophy and theology to the apostolate. However, some may find that questions raised within a limited area may have wider

application. For those training for the apostolic life in a more educated and specialized world, there is need for a theological education and a higher standard of intellectual formation. Also, the Council's invitation is extended to all apostolic religious. It is the call to a more integrated life.

During the recent jesuit Congregation, a well-known theologian made the comment: 'We are in danger of losing a whole generation of talented young Jesuits from the intellectual life if we do not learn to understand them, motivate them and integrate their studies into the rest of their lives'. This integration is not something that emerges from meetings and co-operative work between those responsible for the academic training and overall formation of the student. The break-through comes when all those engaged in the work of formation believe in it and recognize in word and attitudes the need for it in their own lives and in the lives of those for whom they are responsible. The value and limitation of academic study for the apostolic life is not only determined by its link with the apostolic needs of the day. What matters is the link within. Integration takes place in persons. When and where it happens is something of a mystery. It is always an affair of grace.