JESUIT MISSION IN A DIVIDED SUPERPOWER

By DAVID S. TOOLAN

AFFLUENCE IN A PLANET WHERE a quarter of the population goes to bed hungry every night can be an embarrassment. Among other things, it may account for the curious fact that you do not hear many American Jesuits boasting about their work in the globe's sole remaining superpower. Visiting provincial superiors, at least in my neck of the woods, reflect the general mood in preferring to speak of the challenges and heroism of our brothers and sisters engaged in the liberation dramas of the Third-World Church. The stories of what is happening over there – say in Nigeria, El Salvador or Indonesia – possess an electricity, not to say romance, that the stories of what is happening here at home – in Europe or North America – do not.

One might surmise, of course, that thus it has always been: seventeenth-century schoolmasters and preachers in Messina, Vienna and Prague probably counted the 'giants' overseas – the work of Claver, de Nobili, Ricci and Marquette – as having a better claim to the 'greater glory of God' than their own paltry efforts. But today, when Eurocentrism and white European males are under assault from every side, First-World Jesuits may incline to defer even more to the culturally 'other'. Up to a point, no doubt, a good thing. And yet I have to confess that this situation – the reticence about our mission here at home, its virtual invisibility – disturbs me. The impression given is that we do not appreciate what we are doing in our own front yard.

I suspect this impression disturbs me just because the reasons for it are so understandable. Over the last decade or so, we have been digging ourselves out of a pit – in any case, renegotiating our role in an advanced technological society – and as yet our foothold on the shifting tectonic plates of upper earth is unsure. (I will confine these remarks to the Society in the United States.) The complexities of a mixed market economy and a pluralistic culture – with all the attendant systemic inequities and 'cultural wars' about what the good life means – have proved nearly overwhelming. Nonetheless, my intuition tells me that lately we have recovered somewhat from the malaise of the 1970s. We seem less prone to beat ourselves up about what we are or are not doing, readier to take initiatives and to fail in trying. Morale is pretty good, and

things are happening in our schools, parishes and retreat centres that are worth celebrating. In what follows, I want to reflect on some examples of this new vigour – a kind of testimony that a field of dead bones can rise, put on flesh. To be sure, we have no master-plan for tackling the problems of the First World; local adaptation rather than master-plans, in fact, have always been our style.

I. Background/setting

But first a word about the pit and climbing out. In the 1960s, we were shocked to find that the very success of our educational enterprise (twenty-eight colleges and universities, over fifty high schools) had very nearly done us out of a job. The universities had grown big, bureaucratic and to a great extent out of our control; and our former immigrant clientele, now educated and affluent, no longer needed us as it once had. At the same time, we found that the 'eternal verities' of our own rather defensive, antimodernist education did not equip us with the professional skills needed to deal with a host of new economic and social realities. The shock of these recognitions, exacerbated by the 'open window' of Vatican II and the cultural turmoil of the 1960s, threw us into a slough of despond. 'For a time,' as Peter McDonough writes in his history of this period, *Men astutely trained*, 'not only did Jesuits not know what they were doing – they didn't know who they were.'[1] We are only just beginning to recover, still a bit dazed. The 32nd General Congregation (1974–75), under the leadership of Pedro Arrupe, put us on a new track – 'the service of faith, of which the promotion of justice is an absolute requirement' (4.2). It is no exaggeration, I think, to speak of that formula of our mission (later reiterated by the 33rd Congregation in 1983) as a necessary 'refounding' of the Society.

Just what, in the concrete, did that awkward formula mean for First-World apostolates? For starters, I think, it meant that we had to shake out some of the other-worldly aestheticism from our spirituality and recover its more earthy Jewish roots. We had to rediscover that orthodoxy, as G. K. Chesterton knew, gives us a God who 'is a boast for all insurgents for ever', who is 'rebel as well as king'. And we had to see that God's unconditional promise to the people of Israel – and ultimately to us all – had to do with all that is implied by the phrase 'life in abundance'. That is, it had to do, not simply with everlasting life, but with tangible things like food and shelter, land and love and freedom of movement (and their metaphorical extensions) – things that a great part of our society cannot call its own. The sudden appearance of the homeless on our streets in the 1980s reminded us that the gap between

rich and poor has grown alarmingly in recent years. The Third World, we began to see, is just down the block – and, day by day, the nation takes on the seediness of a 'banana republic'.

According to the US Census Bureau, over the last decade the wealthiest one per cent of American families doubled their income, while the poorest fifth, with reduced government assistance during the Reagan and Bush years, lost income. More than thirty-three million people – approximately one person out of seven – presently fall below the official 'poverty line'. By the mid-1980s, while the US was experiencing more steady economic growth and lower unemployment rates than most western industrial nations, our poverty rate was double that of every continental European country. One child out of five under the age of eighteen (and nearly one in four under the age of six) lives in a family officially classified as poor, while nearly one in three lives in a family bordering the poverty line. What such figures portend is evident from a recent US Department of Education study, which reported that already some eighty million, one half of the adult population, cannot read a newspaper, bus schedule or map, much less calculate what they spend at a supermarket.[2]

The question is, how do you bring this functionally illiterate other half of America into the act – ultimately God's act – of creating a society where love and justice flourish? Well, of course, you might begin by teaching them to read and write and add and subtract – which is precisely what, according to all the studies, inner-city Catholic parochial schools (which are closing at a rapid rate) do so much better these days than the public schools. Then you might ask your university think tanks (if you had any influence with them) to critique the structural defects of our capitalist system, look for intermediate institutions and social policies that support families, industrial polices that bring employment, and so on. But when, in the early 1970s, many university-based Jesuits first heard the 32nd Congregation's mission statement – or the more succinct 'faith that does justice' – they mistakenly took it as traducing the traditional Jesuit commitment to the intellectual apostolate, and they resisted. On the other hand, when activist Jesuits of my generation heard those words, we thought we knew what they meant: 'To the barricades!' We were equally mistaken.

For once the Vietnam war wound down, the barricades looked like discard furniture. (Frankly, leaping to them had never appealed to my middle-class sense of propriety!) At which point, guilt-ridden by new formulas like the 'preferential option for the poor', the inadequacy of our intellectual preparation for what lay ahead became embarrassing.

Our classic humanistic education offered few handles for dealing with 'structural sin': the de-industrialization of America, the feminization of poverty and a growing underclass of unemployable males. Nor did it equip us to come up with viable proposals to solve the complex questions of corporate 'junk bond' buy-outs, free-trade pacts and health-care reform, overpopulation and environmental destruction, or Third-World debt. No, for the most part our education did not make us policy experts, nor did it give us tools for the social and structural analysis of a free-market, shopping-mall culture that was being called for. At this point, many young (and older) Jesuits, examining what our colleges, high schools, retreat houses and parishes were doing to address such questions, found the picture discouraging – and decided that these institutions were part of the problem, not the solution. The slogan then became: 'To the barrios!'

But soup kitchens would not be enough. Nor, on the 'culture wars' front, would it do – in Nancy Reagan's forgettable phrase – to 'simply say no' to abortion, racism, the new sexual freedom of our therapeutic culture, the feminist movement, the epidemic of drugs, the gay rights movement or the 'political correctness' of multiculturalism.

No one, of course, thought that translating the theory of a 'faith that does justice' into programme was going to be easy. In the first instance, we had to convince ourselves that the formula made intellectual sense. Then, if and when it did, we began to see the enormity of the project and that it required specialized competences that few of us, at least of my generation, possessed. On top of that, there was the need to face the fact of diminishing manpower; the projection is that over the next two decades, our numbers will drop by half (from 4,480 in 1992 to 2,400 in 2010). The point, I suppose, is that if the next generation of Jesuits is not to be overwhelmed by a sense of shrinking numbers over against the size of the task, they will need not less spiritual depth and intellectual range, but more of both.

II. Variations on a theme

Experience of the last two decades tells us that the mandate of a 'faith that does justice' does not require us to jump out of our skins – say by all becoming policy pundits or social workers. It merely requires someone with imagination – and a great deal of faith in his collaborators – who can amplify and adapt what we have done well in the past in a new set of circumstances. Credit should be given here to our free-lancers – anti-nuclear prophets like Daniel Berrigan or one-man catechetical tornados like Mark Link – and to those who first laid the groundwork for the Jesuit

Volunteer Corps in the 1950s. But consider the following sketches of more pedestrian creativity:

- St Leo's Parish in a blue-colour section of Tacoma, Washington, pastored by L. Patrick Carroll SJ and assisted by a mostly lay staff of eight. This is a parish whose rites of thanksgiving are built around each member's sense of calling to serve the local community. Every fall, after a Mass of the Holy Spirit, a two-week 'ministry fair' provides parishioners, many of them professionals from outside the neighbourhood, with the opportunity 1) simply to name (and celebrate) the work they already do through their jobs or professions; 2) to sign up for a parish activity: the greeting committee at the church door (children as well as adults), the choir and orchestra, the RCIA programme, youth and adult education, Annotation Nineteen retreats in daily life programme; 3) or to volunteer for one of a staggering range of outreach services: twelve-step support groups, soup kitchen, day care centre for poor children, emergency shelter for the homeless, rehabilitating and managing housing for the poor, a L'Arche community for the handicapped, and neighbourhood health clinic.

Like the Delores Mission in inner-city Los Angeles or Holy Name Church in the Puerto Rican section of Camden, New Jersey – which runs a law office and a health clinic staffed by two Jesuit physicians – St Leo's offers a much amplified model of what a parish can be and mean for impoverished America. After a visit to the stunning Easter liturgy there several years ago, one of my New York Jesuit friends remarked in awe: 'They have a different kind of Christianity working out there!'

- Nativity Mission Center, New York City, directed now by John J. Podsiadlo SJ, on Manhattan's lower east side, serves as a good example of 'empowering' the poor. Originally designed for parish youth work, in 1971 the Center opened a middle school (grades 6–8) to counteract the destructive pressure of the area's crime and drug culture. It also runs a summer leadership camp in the Adirondak mountains and an after-school tutorial/recreation support programme for public grammar-schoolers and high school students. The secret of the school's success at sports as well as academics lies in its dedicated staff of eight, the individual attention allowed by its small size (about fifty students), its extended day (a vital athletics programme and supervised evening study hall mean that many boys do not leave the premises until 9.15 p.m.), its extended year (the summer camp) and follow-through support for its graduates in high school. Admittedly a drop in the bucket when one considers the nation's massive illiteracy problem, nonetheless, for its Hispanic students (ninety-eight per cent of whom come from families

below the poverty line, sixty-five per cent from single-parent families) who have gone on to Cornell, Fordham and Amherst, Nativity has been a saving grace. The model is now being replicated at Jesuit-sponsored schools in Boston and Baltimore; a third is in the works in Milwaukee, and the religious of the Holy Child Jesus are planning a sister school for girls on New York's lower east side.

• Georgetown University's intellectual quality is public knowledge (seventeenth in Newsweek's list of the top twenty American universities). That the Spirit moves in this academic grove may be less known. The director of its campus ministry retreat programme, William M. Watson SJ, oversees a varied menu for all comers – Catholics, Orthodox, Protestants and Jews. This includes weekend Christian retreats (that since 1987, have drawn 1,000 students), a five-day Ignatian retreat for upper-class students, faculty and alumni (600 participants since 1988), and highly successful nondenominational retreats for undergraduate freshmen – which this year will involve 650, one half of the entire class. As a measure of the university's commitment, the policy (new as of this year) is that the chaplain's office can now solicit funds to be applied directly to the endowment of these retreat programmes. (Those who know university budgetary politics – and development offices – will appreciate how many arms had to be twisted to put this new policy into effect.)

Contemplation expresses itself in action. The university's community service programmes – approximately 150 of them, organized by undergraduate and professional school students, faculty and administrators – range from tutoring and rehabilitating housing to staffing legal and medical clinics throughout the Washington D.C. area and abroad (at least one programme sends students to work with the poor in Peru and Nicaragua). According to a 1989 Senior Survey, sixty-six per cent of all undergraduate seniors participated in community service during their four years at the school. (This is all a very American tradition: as sociologist Robert Wuthnow points out, one half of the adult population does volunteer work – twenty billion hours of it each year, five hours on average a week. Americans are both self-preoccupied and compassionate.)[3] Georgetown now stands fourth in the nation, behind UC Berkeley, Yale and Michigan, in supplying volunteers for 'Teach America', a government programme that assigns recent graduates to two years of service in poor inner-city public schools.

• The Jesuit Renewal Center, Milford, Ohio, offers an environment where the largely middle-class clientele – pastoral ministers, teachers, nurses, psychologists, married couples, clergy and religious – are

encouraged to 'respect the polarities in which we all live – body–spirit, masculine–feminine, personal–political, human–divine' – and explore their story and calling 'in the light of the Gospel and the stories and symbols that form our Christian tradition'. For some fifteen years under the direction of Richard Bollam SJ (he has recently moved), JRC has trained a generation of spiritual directors for the Ignatian Exercises. In addition, it sponsors an innovative training programme for 'spiritual companions' and a variety of experiments in 'holistic' retreats that attempt to integrate the Christian contemplative and ritual traditions with the best of contemporary psychology, the arts, body work, good nutrition and eastern methods of meditation. The latter project, which employs a mostly lay 'team' of ten, represents an effort to address the spiritual style of the baby-boom generation (born between 1946 and 1964), whose belief and practice, sociologists tell us, is 'multilayered', a blend of traditions old and new, East and West.[4] A constant theme in the staff critiques of these and other retreats is the need to do more to integrate inner work with the gospel's call to justice. It is a topic, I believe, that preoccupies the staffs of many Jesuit retreat houses these days – a healthy sign.

III. Random reflections

Other equally deserving examples of creative ministry will occur to most American Jesuit readers. I pick the above because I am personally familiar with the charismatic Jesuits behind each of them, and because most Jesuits will recognize these works as variations of what they themselves are about – and in continuity with what the Order has been about since the outset. Yet some comment is due.

I began my list of examples with a socially active liturgical community, and close the circle, as it were, with a retreat centre, in order to reaffirm our primary Godsend and 'service of faith'. The most important justice Jesuits do, as has always been the case, is to open another's heart to an immediate experience of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. And in this regard, nothing that has happened in the last thirty years is of greater significance than our retrieval of the Spiritual Exercises in the original, one-on-one form in which they were originally given. I say this as personal testimony – that to taste and touch the Spirit moving in one's swampy soul, and to lay open a way for others to have such an experience first hand, is like nothing else. Without the gift of that experience – and the consequent trust that the Spirit will speak directly to the individual – nothing else we do will matter much; with it, we will always find useful employment.

Implicit in all the above works is a partial answer to our numbers deficit. For they are all strikingly collaborative. They may have been initiated and still may be orchestrated by a Jesuit, but by necessity they depend on the inspiration, dedication and energy of others, and principally lay people – who often have gifts, skills and professional competence that we do not. Rule of thumb: those apostolates – schools, parishes, journals, magazines – that perforce have upped lay participation are generally the better for it (e.g. look at the Australian province's new journal, *Eureka Street*).

With the Nativity model in mind, a word about the importance of literacy in the current context. Jesuits have always recognized secondary and higher education as a value for faith. What the current crisis of illiteracy demands is that we recognize the theological value of education at a far more incipient level.

Reading and writing have been with us for so long that we forget what these skills meant three thousand years ago, how they arrested the visual field and drew us inward, requiring solitary circumspection and introspection – and changed our psyches and the world forever. We forget, in other words, that reading and writing were, and remain, the catalysts of that sense of detachment, reflective inwardness and objectivity that led to all the great religious awakenings of the first millennium BCE – and that opened the path to our scientific culture today.[5] Indeed, without literacy and the ability it gives us to objectify the world and criticize the *status quo*, the great dreams of the Hebrew prophets and of Jesus would have no leverage on the world, would remain a dead letter. Impulse and peasant fatalism would remain all.

Those who teach reading, writing and arithmetic, then, are not simply giving people the skills necessary to compete for a job, or the capacity to see through TV commercials and political demagogues. They are granting access to the big-spirited dreams of the western religious traditions – enabling people who have been left out to participate actively in God's creative act and their own destiny. The fact that even with declining manpower we are opening middle schools on the Nativity model suggests that we recognize that nothing at the present time, not even our well-established and effective high schools, is more urgently God's work than giving young people a solid start in literacy.

What I have omitted from the above sketch of works may be even more arresting than what I have included. For instance, I neglected to cite a high school – because I have had little direct exposure to any, and because, from what I hear, they are so very effective. I also made no mention of our outstanding theological schools in Cambridge, Massa-

chusetts, and Berkeley, California – which, in addition to teaching our own men, offer advanced degrees to increasing numbers of other religious and lay people. Nor did I advert explicitly to the intellectual role of our colleges and universities. A word, then, about each of these latter two missions.

IV. Omissions, commissions and anxieties

The American Society's first priority, it would appear, is theological education. Of the ninety-eight Jesuits in graduate studies in 1992, forty-two were studying scripture, patristics, theology, church history, canon law, liturgy, ethics or religion in some form.[6] Fourteen out of this number attend a non-Catholic university, which signals an ongoing commitment to ecumenism. (One hopes that there will be at least one John Courtney Murray among them.) Eight more were involved in literary studies – and if one thinks, as I do, that the Bible's poetry is not simply decorative but the indispensable prelude to revelatory insight, then you can add those to the statement the US Society has hereby made about what it deems important for the future. The message is that we are resolved, in a special way, to sustain the Church's intellectual life. It is the least we owe a highly educated Catholic public, and it would hardly serve the cause of justice or the poor if we were to abandon this customary responsibility. Moreover, we need greatly to improve our performance in this area, for as Michael J. Lacey of The Woodrow Wilson International Center of Scholars observed in 1991, 'Catholic theology, indeed theology of any kind, has very little standing at all' in the wider world of American intellectual life.[7]

One may question, however, the balance of priorities implicit in these graduate student figures – and I do. If what I said at the outset about the need to address complex social and systemic issues is correct, then the low number of Jesuit graduate students (at most four or five) seeking advanced degrees in the social sciences other than psychology is striking. Those few also make a statement – 1) that we are not really serious about social analysis, and much less so about coming up with alternative proposals for the economy or the culture in which we live; 2) that the Jesuit course of studies as currently constituted does not elicit interest in such questions. We have apparently decided that such analysis can remain a marginal concern, or stay at the rather primitive level provided by Washington D.C.'s Jesuit-run Center of Concern or the Woodstock Center. Neither place, thus far, has produced anything with much bite to it, or of the quality, say, currently provided by the Kennedy Center of Bioethics at Georgetown or Daniel Callahan's Hastings Center.

Logically, of course, we might expect our university departments of sociology, political science and economics to offer the kind of macro-systemic and counter-proposal that our pastoral agents in the field, if they are not to go off half-cocked, require. Thus far, however, there seems to be little interface between these two levels of our institutions. The right hand proceeds as if unaware of the left, and given the cruel ironies of academic tenure, specialization and the rather reckless hiring policies of the 1970s (when prestige-PhDs were plentiful and few candidates were asked how their career goals matched up with the school's mission statement), there is little prospect that the social science departments at a Jesuit university, jealous of their autonomy as they are, will come willingly to our aid any time soon. Nor are Jesuit administrators, understandably deterred by cries of academic freedom and threats of litigation, eager to press tough questions to prospective faculty candidates or strong-arm these departments to come around.

Thus the hotly debated question: how to retrieve or maintain the Catholic identity of our colleges and universities?[8] At the moment, with the history of the secularization of Protestant institutions in the back of our minds, this question troubles both Catholic conservatives and liberals about equally. Declining Jesuit numbers simply add to the urgency, and some observers think we are asking the question too late, after the cow is already out of the barn. I hope they are wrong. In any case, I would not have cited the case of Georgetown's energetic retreat and social service programmes if I judged that this example did not offer clues as to how we might proceed in this matter. Strong-arming a faculty – or founding a new doctrinally pure, fortress-like Catholic college within or outside the boundaries of our present institutions, a path some are trying – offers no solution. Initiating faculty and students into the spiritual vision that historically grounded the institution in the first place holds more promise.

Is the intellectual life somehow naturally Catholic? Do the often disjoined lives of the mind and of faith, as we roundly say, really connect? More to the point, is it possible that the Christocentric, sacramental and communitarian vision that underlies and feeds a Catholic understanding of the intellectual life might actually appeal to the best and brightest of budding young Catholic scholars? One who imagined that this might be so is a young Jesuit scholastic, Thomas M. Landy. With Lilly Endowment funding, last spring he invited twenty-eight PhD candidates and thirty-three 'faculty fellows' from around the country to Fairfield University in Connecticut for a week of reflection and prayer on 'faith and the intellectual life'. The format itself –

alternating lecture, discussion, liturgy, personal spiritual direction and workshops on Ignatian, Benedictine, Franciscan and Christian feminist spiritualities – exemplified, and with apparent success, the notion that the scholarly and teaching life can be a spirited calling. As one initially sceptical participant, James R. Kelly, put it,

> If the Catholic tradition is right in its shaky but constant affirmations about the mutuality of faith and reason, about the interrelationships between the 'learning' and 'teaching' church, about the church's role as servant to culture and society, and about the intellectual life as a 'calling', then we should expect that these interlocking affirmations, clearly and invitingly expressed, will evoke tentative but generous responses from those on the threshold of their academic life. Why not act like we believe what we claim is the core of our traditions? . . . Invite them and they will come.[9]

If they come – or are already quietly present – then there is no reason to believe that such people cannot sustain a Catholic university – even without a large Jesuit presence. Nor is it unimaginable, in the future, that some of those students at Georgetown, and elsewhere – who have tasted inwardly the fire of a just God, and seen, firsthand, the terror of our city streets – will go on to give the Church and the world the kind of systemic analysis of the political economy that their mentors could not achieve. Surely we can invite that.

NOTES

[1] See Peter McDonough, *Men astutely trained: a history of the Jesuits in the American century* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), p 12 *et passim.*

[2] *The New York Times* (9 September 1993), p A1, 22. For poverty in the US, see T. Howland Sanks and John A. Coleman (eds), *Reading the signs of the times: resources for social and cultural analysis* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1993), pp 68–77.

[3] See Robert Wuthnow, *Acts of compassion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

[4] See Wade Clark Roof, *A generation of seekers: the spiritual journeys of the baby boom generation* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), pp 202ff.

[5] See Walter J. Ong SJ, *The presence of the word: some prolegomena for cultural and religious history* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), pp 1–53, 176–191.

[6] Cf 'Needs & Numbers' White Paper, *National Jesuit News* (November 1992). List of graduate student specialties, p 7.

[7] Michael J. Lacey, 'The backwardness of American Catholicism' in *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* (June 12–15 1991), pp 1–15.

[8] See the special issue of *America* (11 September 1993), with essays on Catholic higher education by Brian E. Daley SJ, James R. Kelly, David J. O'Brien and Michael J. Buckey SJ.

[9] *Ibid.*, Kelly, p 17.