

## Notes on the Jesuit Tradition

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By the time the Society of Jesus was suppressed by the Pope in 1773, it was the largest religious order in the world. The Jesuits were missionaries, educators, political advisors, and scientists, but above all they were masters of communication. In these brief remarks, I want to suggest that their religious program—in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and in our own day—was spread through many different media adaptations of the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola: poetry, architecture, and music. Their educational mission, from the beginning until now, has always relied on the skillful use of the media. The Jesuits have always been both universal and local, forging a distinctive international style but adapting to local cultures. They have also been both communal and personal, developing modes of religious devotion at once public and private. They established churches throughout the world, adapting to local conditions the model they pioneered in their home church in Rome, the Gesu. Although they were—are still are—noted for adapting to local cultures, it is possible to describe certain consistent features of the Jesuit intellectual tradition. “The Jesuit style” of media was driven by an intellectual, spiritual vision: initially, to win Europe back from the Protestant Reformers by overwhelming visual, aesthetic, rhetorical force. In years when a public function of art is suspect and private expression celebrated, the Jesuit program is regarded with indifference or even hostility. Jacob Burkhardt, for example, writing in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, spoke for many when he criticized Jesuit art and architecture as ‘insincere.’ Two recent books take a more

sympathetic view. James Chipp Smith, in *Sensuous Worship* (2002), describes in detail St. Michael's Church in Munich. Evonne Levy, in *Propaganda and the Jesuit Baroque* (2004), analyzes other Jesuit churches. Both scholars have been praised for rethinking the Jesuit program of the arts.

The foundation of the Jesuit intellectual tradition is the great work of Ignatius Loyola, the *Spiritual Exercises*. This guide to devotion outlines a strict method of spiritual growth, guiding the individual person through a month of specific meditations. The first week of meditations are purgative, centering on sin and hell; the second focus on events from the Birth of Christ through Palm Sunday; the third with Christ's Passion and Death; and the fourth with events from the Resurrection to the Ascension. The exercises are performed five times a day for periods of one hour each. The remainder of the day is devoted to preparation and reflection on the meditations. This procedure is designed to marshal all the senses, emotions, and intellect in order to reach an intense intimacy, or "colloquy," with God. Each exercise begins with a "composition of place," in which the Jesuit can join a historical moment (for example, participating in the scene of Christ's birth—feeling the hay, the rough wood, the moist breath of the stable animals) or, alternatively, can imagine the historical moment in the present, or (and this is the most difficult) can imagine the event occurring within one's own heart. The next step in the meditation is a petition to God, defining the goal of the meditation. The center of the meditation is the attempt to bring the memory, understanding, and will—the three faculties of the soul—into intensive harmony, permitting the final colloquy in which the soul speaks to God and God in turn can be heard.

The program of the Spiritual Exercises, mandatory for every Jesuit, spread like wildfire across Europe, disseminated by dozens of Jesuit treatises. The Ignatian model of meditation became not only a specific devotional practice but a model for religious poetry as well. Ignatian techniques influenced poets in Spain, France, and Italy, Protestants as well as Catholics. Louis Martz, in *The Poetry of Meditation* (1954), shows how Robert Southwell, an English Jesuit, brought these techniques into English religious poetry, and how John Donne (whose uncle was an important English Jesuit), George Herbert, and Richard Crashaw, among others, relied on Ignatian models to structure their poetry of religious struggle. The Counter Reformation, Martz argues, “penetrated to English literature through methods of religious meditation” (13).

The Ignatian model, outlined in many popular treatises for non-Jesuits, was modified for flexibility. Someone could enter the program of meditation at any point, choosing a new topic or repeating and modifying a prior meditation. The Jesuit program was intended to foster personal spiritual growth. However, as a specific prescribed method, it required submission to a framework beyond the self—thereby fostering a sense of membership in a community of people who shared religious faith, goals, and values. Presumably, the discipline of the method would also prevent personal error and excessive idiosyncrasy. The effect was, therefore, at once personal and public, designed to bring the personal needs of each soul into renewed harmony with the institutional Church.

That double function of religious practice is especially evident in Jesuit churches. As James Chipp Smith shows in his analysis of St. Michael’s Church, the Jesuit church pioneered coherence. Unlike other grand European churches, in which the elements were

a hodge-podge designed to suit the wishes of individual patrons, groups, or powerful clergy, St. Michael's is entirely cohesive. Each part of the church contributes to the religious idea. The church can be read as a multi-media text, with all its parts (the paintings, sculpture, spaces, and form) carefully planned to shape the worshiper's religious experience. As Smith argues, the interior of St. Michael's Church was designed, like the Spiritual Exercises, to initiate "a dialogue with God" (79). The framework is based upon the Spiritual Exercises, which would be especially appropriate because St. Michael's was a 'teaching church' for the college community in Munich, supporters of the Jesuits, and the Jesuits themselves. Each artistic element inside the church is part of a sequence, and the worshipper could proceed at an individual pace, visiting and revisiting specific images, through a religious journey of self-examination, illumination, and union with God (79). From the entrance, with its monumental statue of St. Michael conquering Lucifer to the high altar with its painting celebrating the same theme, the art of the building celebrates St. Michael as the patron saint of Munich. Those entering the Church would see, in addition, a sculpture of the Infant Christ; the six side altars would each give the worshipper an opportunity to meditate on the life of repentance (Mary Magdalen) and purity (St. Ursula) and on episodes in the life of Christ, culminating in the Tabernacle at the High Altar, sign of Christ's sacrificial gift of Himself. To celebrate the consecration of St. Michael's Church, the Jesuits staged an epic drama, *The Triumph of St. Michael*, with a cast of 900. The drama was supplemented by extensive choral music. The drama engaged the public, both as actors and as audience; the light-filled church engaged the private devotion of each person in a community of worship.

The balance of public and private can be seen in the contemporary Jesuit patronage of the arts and architecture. A prominent example is the new Chapel of St. Ignatius at Seattle University designed by Steven Holl. The chapel has none of the Baroque ornate formality and exhilarating interplay of forms and colors that marks St. Michael's church. Instead, the small chapel seems plain, even stark—until one settles into its serenity, its harmony of forms, and its constant shifting play of light. Holl based his idea on the Ignatian vision of spiritual life as light and dark, consolation and desolation. The Chapel is designed as “seven bottles of light in a stone box,” each emphasizing an element of worship. Every element in the chapel—the concealed light wells and windows, the subtle colors, the simple altar, the startling statue of the Madonna overflowing with milk, even the cracks that have begun to appear in the outside wall—invites meditation. Every element matters, both in itself and as part of a whole. So, too, the worshipper is both an individual and part of a whole. The architect has designed a cohesive church that offers opportunities to meditate on surface and depth, sameness and difference, constancy and change, unity and division. Like the Church of St. Michael, moreover, the Chapel of St. Ignatius is both a refuge from the outside world and a significant part of that world. It is at once a private space and a public space, claiming a role for worship at once personal and communal. While designed to serve the needs of people at prayer, the chapel at night becomes a beacon of light to the campus and the surrounding city.

Like Jesuit architecture, Jesuit music also results from an Ignatian vision. Although it was said that “Jesuits don't sing,” in the German College in Rome (where Jesuit priests prepared for ministries in Germany) noted composers and musicians were

renowned for their contributions to liturgical worship. After Vatican II, it was a group of men known as “the St. Louis Jesuits” who developed popular hymns to suit the new English vernacular liturgy. They moved beyond the simplistic, sentimental, even “frivolous” methods of 1960s “folk mass” music to compose hymns immersed in the interpretation of Scripture. In a recent article in *America*, one of these composers insists that their work is modeled on the Spiritual Exercises: “All our Jesuit prayer was built around Scripture. Take a couple of words, or take a line, imagine yourself in a passage—that’s where our own prayer was coming from.” (May 30, 2005) These new Jesuit composers recorded more than 130 songs in six albums, and have recently (for the first time in 15 years) reunited to record a CD of new songs. Just as Jesuit Baroque architecture was derided as insincere, so the music of the St. Louis Jesuits has been lumped together with the “folk mass” excesses that followed Vatican II. However, these men were serious musicians with a serious liturgical program for the modern “cultural ear.” In its adaptation to modern culture, their work is clearly in the Jesuit tradition and, like the work of their Baroque predecessors, can justly be called “Ignatian music.”

The Jesuit tradition of meditation and architecture was above all directed toward education, and the *Ratio Studiorum*, a document outlining Jesuit educational practice, made it clear that all media were to be used. Private reading and writing, as well as public theatre, were embraced as tools for Jesuit schools. But whatever the device, the method of intense reflection that derived from the Spiritual Exercises remained at the heart of Jesuit practice.

Jesuit universities today, as in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, emphasize several common goals. One goal is the *magis*—the idea of MORE—referring not to a piling on

of information but rather an ability to become more focused, more intense, and more complex in thought and experience. It is an ethic of constantly striving for greater excellence, to *be* more. Another important term is *cura personalis*—care for the whole person. At the same time, the Jesuit educational tradition channels personal growth into *service for others*—for the benefit of the larger human community and its needs. These ideals support the belief that intellectual work is meaningful in itself. Students and faculty work not to get gold stars on their foreheads, but because learning has intrinsic moral value for the individual person and for human society.

Just as Jesuit architecture from St. Michael's to the Chapel of St. Ignatius and Jesuit music from the Baroque German College to modern-day St. Louis are the product of a continuous intellectual and media tradition, so also, I suggest, the Chapel of St. Ignatius has much in common with the best music of the St. Louis Jesuits. The architect, like the composers, sought a form that could realize the ideals of Vatican II, a task that required recognition of tension, conflict, and disharmony rather than simplistic “feel good” songs. If the Jesuit tradition has always privileged both personal and communal goals, it is often pressured by conflicts between self and community. The tension and energy of Jesuit Baroque architecture figures forth the tension and energy of Jesuit education, then and now. At its best, the tradition embraces tension and conflict as the road to truth. When Jesuit architecture and music fall short, it is because tension is absent or denied. In the years since Vatican II, the Jesuits have struggled, like the rest of the Catholic Church, to define the role of faith in the modern world. The Jesuits, especially in the Americas, have been leaders of the ‘liberal’ wing in the Church, and have struggled with the Vatican to shape their mission and their lives, both personal and communal. In

the days before DNA and RNA, life was defined as ‘matter in motion.’ I would suggest that education will always be *matters*—ideas—in motion, as personal and communal needs and understanding change. The Jesuit tradition of education, in its meditative practices, church architecture, and music, has always been a multi-media event, drawing on every available resource to enrich spiritual experience and growth.