



INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED JESUIT STUDIES
BOSTON COLLEGE

JESUIT SOURCES

International Symposia on Jesuit Studies

ISSN: 2766-0664

Two Perspectives

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Source: *The Jesuits and the Church in History*
(Proceedings of the Symposium held at Boston College, August 1-4, 2022)

Edited by: Barton Geger, S.J., Robert Gerlich, S.J., and Claude N. Pavur, S.J.

ISBN: 978-1-947617-19-3

Published by: Institute of Jesuit Sources

Originally Published: November 30, 2023

<https://doi.org/10.51238/ISJS.2022.06>

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Two Perspectives

JOHN W. O'MALLEY, S.J.

Dear Colleagues and Friends,

I deeply regret not being with you in person, as I had fully intended. As it turned out, I could not make the trip. I send, however, this version of what I planned to say.

Our session is supposed to deal with perspectives on the Jesuits' relationship with the church. I will focus on two very broad perspectives on that relationship. They are both sweeping in their scope, so I advise you to heed the warning of Bette Davis, "Fasten your seat belts. It's going to be a bumpy ride."

But first, what aspect of the church will I be dealing with? In my first perspective, I will focus almost exclusively on the church as an institution. In the second, my main focus will be the church as the People of God, but it will also touch on the relationship to the papacy.

I want, first of all, therefore, to place the Society of Jesus in the large perspective of the history of religious life and its development regarding ministry and hierarchy. As we all know, religious life began in the East in the fourth century, after Constantine's (r.306–37) recognition of the church and his favoring it with all sorts of benefits. A few devout Christians were appalled at these developments and "fled the world" to the countryside. They really were fleeing the church. The writings of John Cassian, also known as John the Ascetic, became the standard text in East and West for monastic communities. John counseled them to "flee the company of women—and flee the company of bishops."

Saint Benedict in his Rule told his monks to be wary of admitting priests into their communities, which was an oblique way of avoiding hierarchy. As we know, however, monks bit by bit began to be ordained, and Celtic monks became missionaries to parts of northern Europe, of which Saint Boniface is the best known example. Even where the population was already Christian, monasteries became centers of devotion for nearby populations. In time, monks began to venture from the monasteries to celebrate Mass and other rituals for the people. Canon 16 of the First Lateran Council (1123), however, forbade them to do so. The tension between religious life and the institutional church was, therefore, a two-way street.

But things began to move rapidly in the twelfth century. Cities were well on the way to revival, which almost perforce entailed a revival of parish life and the authority of bishops, who are essentially urban figures. By the second half of the century, monasticism began to lose its hegemony as the center of Christian life. At the same time, a quest for the *vita apostolica* (apostolic life) began to take hold in some segments of society. The "apostolic life" included a new realization that the apostles were preachers. In this strange way, a persuasion grew that ritual performance was only one aspect of

the Christian life. Preaching was also integral to it. Thus, a modest but unstoppable revival of preaching began, a ministry that had been eclipsed almost to extinction in many places during the feudal period.

Almost inseparable from cathedral life was the role of canons, beneficed clergy who gathered several times a day to chant the divine office. Even among these local clergy, the lure of religious life was strong. In places, this developed into those strange creatures, the “canons regular,” that is, local clergy who bound themselves to observe a “rule” that entailed certain features of monastic life. They combined that with the pastoral duties of the secular clergy.

Saint Dominic was a canon regular, and with him, the great turning point had arrived. Dominic gathered around himself a group of priests to preach against the Albigensians or Cathars in southern France. They centered themselves in Toulouse. They were to preach to the heretics but do so in poverty—*praedicare in paupertate*—in order to combat the heavy criticism of the heretics against the wealth and worldliness of the clergy. Zeal for poverty was at the same time a feature of the “apostolic life,” the grass-roots movement so widespread at the time. In any case, when the Dominicans received papal approval in 1216, they wanted to be known as the Order of Preachers, a designation we should not take lightly because it suggests so much about the ground-breaking development in Christian life of the era that was the revival of preaching. As the order developed, Dominic very much favored settling near universities, which were a new kind of school, a spectacular cultural development that is with us still.

Thus, in relatively short order, five groundbreaking developments had taken place. First, religious life now had a clear and unchallenged relationship to ministry, confirmed by the papacy. Second, the Dominicans and other new religious orders would have a new relationship to the papacy, upon whose approval their very life depended. They needed this relationship because their ministries transcended the bounds of a specific diocese and thus put the orders beyond the jurisdiction of the bishops.

Third, the Dominicans probably more than any other group secured the ministry of preaching as integral and basic to Christian ministry. Fourth, the Dominicans established a firm relationship between themselves and the theological learning of the universities, which was radically intellectual and doctrinal. Finally, in granting permission to the mendicants for the exercise of ministry virtually independent of the local episcopacy, the church for the first time created two independent systems of ministry in the church, one of which was the traditional system in which the bishops were responsible for ministry in their dioceses and the other completely independent of bishops and completely dependent on the authority of the papacy. Thus, the church now had two corps of ministers, a unique feature of Catholicism down to this day. The arrangement gave Catholic ministry a special richness, especially as the orders developed ministries different from those normally pursued by the local clergy. But it also led to many serious conflicts.

Saint Francis had received papal approval for his followers in 1209, years before Dominic. Whereas Dominic sought it to confirm the right to pursue ministries beyond diocesan bounds, Francis needed approval to establish his group’s orthodoxy

and distinguish it from seemingly similar groups such as the Waldensians. True, the Franciscan Rule contained a provision for the friars to preach but to preach moralistic sermons, as their Rule says, “virtues and vices, punishment and reward.” Such sermons befitted what was at this stage an essentially lay organization, many of whose members opposed a relationship of the friars to book learning, especially to that of the universities.

In time, however, the Franciscans began in many ways to follow the patterns established by the Dominicans. The same was true for the three other mendicant orders that came into being in the thirteenth century—the Augustinians, Carmelites, and Servites.

When the papacy found itself under attack, as in the Conciliarist crisis, the orders, especially the Dominicans, rushed to its defense and thus forged an even stronger bond. The papacy responded by showering upon the mendicants even more pastoral privileges, almost completely sidelining the bishops.

The bishops reacted in force at the Fifth Lateran Council (1512–17) and seemed to threaten the very existence of the orders, who were saved only by a strong intervention on their behalf by Pope Leo X (r.1513–21). Some thirty years later, at the third period of the Council of Trent (1545–63), the orders were spared principally because of their efforts against the Reformation.

In this first perspective, I have tried to provide the heritage that allowed the Society of Jesus to assume the contours it did. We read a lot about the context of Renaissance, Reformation, and Counter Reformation into which the Society was born but hardly ever about the context of religious life that helped make it what it was.

None of the ten hot-shot graduates of the University of Paris that gathered in Rome in 1539 to decide their future had had any direct experience of religious life. As they in that gathering tried to work out the kind of order they wanted to found, they implicitly and probably unconsciously had the Dominicans in mind, and they accepted without question many of the features that that order had pioneered, including utter dependence upon the papacy for its existence and its charter to do ministry in the Catholic Church.

Nonetheless, these first Jesuits designed together an order that would have distinctive features, which brings me to my second perspective on them. They had a book called *The Spiritual Exercises* that was integrated into the ethos of the order, unlike anything the other orders had. They would not recite or chant the divine office in common. Like the Dominicans, they would be utterly devoted to ministry, but with their special “fourth vow” to be missionaries, they went a step further in underlining that devotion. They would be a radically missionary order, “on the move.” The list of the Society’s special features could go on.

In their missionary vow, they specified the pope as the agent who would send them on mission. To some extent, this was a practical measure because, as they themselves explained, they came from a wide variety of countries and dioceses and could not claim another superior. Especially as a result of their early experience in defending the papacy against the attacks of the Protestants, their bond with that institution grew ever stronger.

All this we know and acknowledge. Is there, however, a further perspective on the Jesuits' relationship to the church to which we need to pay attention? I think there is, something hidden in plain sight, something distinctive of the Jesuits that goes to the very heart of the role they have played in history, something that touches on the Jesuits' relationship to the church as the People of God as well as to the church as an institution. It has its origins with Saint Ignatius's decision as superior general to send a team of his best men, which included Jerónimo Nadal and Peter Canisius, to found the school in Messina.

The decision did not derogate from the Society's commitment to be roving preachers of the Word but imbued it with a distinctiveness. The Jesuits, nonetheless, had become school masters. There was, we must realize, a spectacular ramification to the decision: the Jesuits became systemically and unwaveringly committed to the cultivation of secular learning, unlike any other clergy, secular or religious.

In opening the school at Messina, the Jesuits adopted almost without qualification the curriculum promoted by Renaissance humanists such as Erasmus. The curriculum consisted almost exclusively in the literary classics of Greek and Roman antiquity. These were pagan texts. To us today, this does not seem remarkable, but we need to recognize what a remarkable innovation it was for a religious order. At some point, for instance, the Dominicans forbade members to read that literature without special permission, and some Dominican preachers railed against the revival of that literature in the Renaissance.

The overriding reality of the school at Messina, moreover, was that its student body was lay students. The Dominicans and other orders had almost from their beginning operated schools for the training of their own members, with a curriculum of the two clerical subjects, philosophy and theology. The Jesuit schools were thus radically different. Once the Jesuits began to train their own members, the curriculum in those schools began with the ancient classics before it moved to the clerical subjects of philosophy and theology.

Philosophy had an impact on the curriculum of some of their schools for the laity, but theology was taught only in their universities, where it was intended exclusively for their own members and possibly other clerical students. These schools were a relatively small minority in the ever-expanding Jesuit network.

The picture is more complicated for philosophy, and some of the schools introduced it, at first in modest measure. But the aspect of philosophy lay students were interested in was "natural philosophy," not metaphysics.

Natural philosophy tended to be a rather sprawling field that included not only Aristotle's works on *The Animals* and *The Heavens* but the works of Ptolemy, Euclid, and others. Before the sixteenth century was over, Christopher Clavius taught mathematics, which included optics and acoustics, at the Roman College, where one of his students was Matteo Ricci. Clavius was perhaps the most respected astronomer in Europe before Galileo. As Antonella Romano showed some years ago, many Jesuit schools soon developed highly respected programs in mathematics and its related subjects.

The Jesuits were on their way to becoming hybrid priests, with one foot planted in

the church and the other in the world. They became first-rate cartographers, and in the early eighteenth century, a team of French Jesuits under the aegis of the Ming emperor drew a map for him of his sprawling empire, by far the most extensive cartographic undertaking the world had ever seen. On their plantations in South America, some Jesuits worked as hydraulic engineers. In some large and medium-sized European cities, they operated pharmacies specializing in natural remedies such as quinine discovered by their missionaries.

Meanwhile, the Jesuits managed to attract to their ranks as temporal coadjutors an impressive number of accomplished architects, painters, and similar professionals. No less a person than Sir Christopher Wren, for instance, wrote the preface to the English translation of Brother Andrea Pozzo's classic book on perspective, and the distinguished Jesuit painter and sculptor at the Ming court, Brother Giuseppe Castiglione, saw to the book's translation into Chinese.

Let me illustrate this phenomenon in the modern period by a look at the pontificate of Pius IX (r.1846–78). When under Marconi's direction the pope created Vatican Radio, he almost as a matter of course assigned its management to the Jesuits. He gave enthusiastic support to the Jesuit astronomers at the papal observatory at Castel Gandolfo. For his extremely important social encyclical, *Quadragesimo anno*, the first since Leo XIII's (r.1878–1903) groundbreaking *Rerum novarum*, he chose as its principal author the German Jesuit Oswald von Nell-Breuning. That Jesuit has been described as "the prophet of contemporary economics and finance."

To conclude: I have tried to present two perspectives on the Jesuits' relationship to the church. In the first, I have described the Jesuits' situation in the church in the perspective of the previous history of religious life, especially regarding ministry and connection to the papacy. In the second, I have presented a perspective on the Jesuits' distinctive relationship to secular learning and its impact on their ministries and service to the church. This relationship to secular knowledge was not casual or occasional but integral to the Jesuit system and way of proceeding. Much, much more could be said on both these sweeping subjects, especially on the latter. I hope, however, I have said enough to convince you of the importance of these two perspectives for a full understanding of the Society of Jesus and its relationship to the church. Thank you.

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