

# Partners in Ministry

## *The role of women in Jesuit education*

BY AMALEE MEEHAN

**T**HE YEAR IS 1522, just outside the town of Manresa in northeastern Spain. A pilgrim clothed in sackcloth seeks the assistance of a well-dressed woman of wealthy background. Arrested by the singular conviction yet warmth in his eyes, Inés Pascual offers the pilgrim food, lodging and compassion. Her offer leads to a friendship that will stretch over time and distance to support not only the man, Inigo de Loyola, but his future companions. So begins the story of the first benefactor and friend of the Society of Jesus.

Currently in the field of Jesuit education, a Jesuit/lay partnership has become a new paradigm for schools and universities in the Western world. A relatively new phenomenon, it is a partnership anticipated by the Second Vatican Council, welcomed by most Jesuits since that time and explicitly affirmed by the general congregations of the Society of Jesus held in 1983 and 1995.

The extent to which this Jesuit/lay partnership depends on a partnership with women goes back to the earliest days of the Jesuit order. Although intimately involved in the formation of the fledgling Society of Jesus since the 1520s, women, for particular historical reasons, were not associated with the Jesuit ministry of education in its origins. Today, however, women participate in Jesuit education not only as students and teachers but increasingly in designated positions of leadership. A review of the history of why women played such an important role in the origins of the Society of Jesus and yet were conspicuously absent in Jesuit education may be instructive for the challenges of today.

### **Ignatius and Women**

For someone who has been perceived so often as a “man’s saint,” Ignatius was very much influenced by women. Despite the early death of his mother, women played prominent roles throughout his life. From his foster mother María Garín to the Infanta Juana of Spain, women promoted his interests, introduced him to influential people and recommended him for important positions. In turn, he

acted as spiritual director to countless women, set up houses for prostitutes and women in danger of falling victim to prostitution, and provided shelter for female victims of unhappy marriages. Ignatius was kind, understanding and active on behalf of women, and received their support in return. His *compagnia* invited women to join them, sometimes even entrusting them with responsible positions, albeit within the constraints of propriety common to 16th-century culture. One striking exception, however, was the field of education. In this ministry, which would come to characterize the new Society, women played no role. Against such a background, we can understand more easily why there are so few women in positions of leadership in Jesuit educational institutions today.

### **A Cautious Approach**

There are at least two historical reasons for the absence of women in the early history of Jesuit education. First, Ignatius the pilgrim seems to have generated both admiration and slander wherever he went. The fact that women were attracted to him was often the occasion for this mixed reaction. The same curse that undermines many radical initiatives today—poisonous tongues and gossip—followed Ignatius on his journey. He learned the price exacted in a basically medieval culture for mingling too easily in female circles. Ignatius had to defend himself, his orthodoxy and his nascent Society against many ill-founded accusations throughout his life. Although he accepted suspicion and resentment as an inevitable reaction to any kind of radical reform, even a reform modeled on the life of Christ, the waste of time spent in ecclesial wrangling left him wary of situations that could spark such suspicion, a concern that was to greatly influence his formal dealings with women.

Second, Ignatius’ refusal to allow women a role in education corresponded to the cultural norms of 16th-century Europe. When formal education did occur, boys were taught by men, and girls by women. Such norms exerted a strong governing influence on society, not least on those in religious life.

### **‘A Taste for Divine Things’**

Did this mean that Ignatius distrusted women or kept them at a distance? On the contrary: women were integral

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Students gather for a prayer service at Saint Ignatius College Prep in San Francisco.

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to the Society as patrons, pupils, partners and figures of inspiration. From the time when images of “a certain lady” bedeviled his recuperation, relationships of trust with female benefactors, members of the nobility and religious constituted a positive element of Ignatius’ life. The widows of Manresa were the first to care for him with food, lodging and laundry. Hugo Rahner, S.J., tells us women were the first to whom Ignatius spoke about the content of the Spiritual Exercises. As his first disciples, these women acquired “a deep understanding and taste for divine things.”

Although women continued to exert influence, to become partners with Ignatius’ venture and to request spiritual direction from him throughout his life, not all of his dealings with women were happy. Indeed, Ignatius often demonstrated a marked ambivalence in his transactions with women. Such is the case with Isabel Roser and her two female companions who took vows as Jesuits, and the Infanta Juana of Spain who, widowed at age 19, took vows, lived and died as a Jesuit. Ignatius accepted the Infanta very reluctantly, totally anonymously and against his will. Further, after releasing Isabel and her two companions from their vows, he made it clear that admitting female members to the Society should never happen again and

successfully petitioned the pope to affirm this position.

### Women and the Society of Jesus

The question of whether Ignatius intended women to be apostolic members of his Society and ministry obscures the more fundamental issue. What is certain is that through the Spiritual Exercises, women formed a partnership with Ignatius, not so much at the apostolic level but at the deeper level of life with God. Mary Ward, for example, who founded the teaching order of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin, and Madeline Sophie Barat of the Society of the Sacred Heart, though not contemporaries of Ignatius, were much influenced by the Spiritual Exercises.

To understand the role of women in Jesuit ministries today, it is necessary to prescind from the cultural milieu of Reformation Europe and focus on the defining commitments of the early Society, grounded in the Spiritual Exercises. This also must be our point of departure as we look to the future of any Jesuit ministry, not merely education.

Although Jesuit education is associated with the curriculum and pedagogy outlined in the *Ratio Studiorum* (the official plan for Jesuit education), it is fundamentally a spiritual process. The Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius define the orientation of every Jesuit ministry. Through the experience of



the Exercises, every person can establish a profoundly personal relationship with God and discern for himself or herself the kind of Christian life to which God is calling. This was and is the radical message of the Spiritual Exercises. It is estimated that during the lifetime of Ignatius, the full four-week Exercises were given to some 1,500 women. Perhaps what attracted women to the Exercises was the focus on freedom, finding out what God—not husband, father, religious superior or bishop—wants for each person. To avoid scandal and temptation, when Jesuits gave the Exercises to women, they did so in a church, a public and open place.

### Women and Jesuit Education Today

The personal call of the Exercises is fulfilled only when a person making them becomes committed to serving others, which can include praying for others in the contemplative life. The Jesuits founded colleges to be centers of influence for all sociocultural activities, not just teaching establishments. The groups of Jesuits housed there were expected to carry out a wide variety of ministries, with the emphasis always on giving the Exercises. If the Jesuit ministry of education is rooted in Ignatian spirituality, and if women are to participate in that ministry in increasing numbers, then the relationship between Ignatian spirituality and women in Jesuit schools is a critical one. Women need to see them-


selves as full and active partners in the 21st-century version of the Jesuit educational venture and fully accept responsibility for its defining charism. The Society of Jesus must assure that women are appreciated and fully prepared to work as partners with lay men and Jesuits, by providing formation programs and making spiritual direction available for women in Jesuit schools.

It would be unreasonable to presume that all women (or men) who work in Jesuit schools share the Society's strong faith commitment. Recent studies show that teachers in Catholic schools have varied religious backgrounds. In our secular, postmodern age, it is safe to assume that some teachers in Jesuit schools may not even be religious in any formal way. Still, it is critically important that women know there is a home and always has been a home for them in Ignatian spirituality. The Exercises come directly from Ignatius' own conversion experience, which was mediated by women and can be adapted for people with a wide range of backgrounds, sensibilities and religious traditions without diluting the power of the Ignatian tradition.

### Moving Forward

There is a classic story told of Gloria Steinem, the stylish American feminist leader and editor of *Ms.* magazine. On the occasion of a significant birthday, a surprised reporter objected, "But you don't look 40," to which Ms. Steinem

retorted, "*This* is what 40 looks like!" Perhaps it is time to embrace the changing profile of Jesuit education and the expanding role of women and proudly exclaim, "Yes, *this* is what Jesuit education looks like."

Jesuit education in the future will be a two-winged bird, as Jesuits entrust women with leadership roles and women prove ready to accept such roles. While women have always been part of the Jesuit story, their place in the Jesuit ministry of education has been defined more sharply in the present historical moment. Jesuits, in their "way of proceeding," need to recognize that women are a rich and still largely untapped resource. Recalling the origins of the Society of Jesus, when Ignatius invited women to enter into the spirituality of the Exercises, will help us conserve the past while creating the future. 



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