

A Fellowship Founded on Truth: The History of the Saint Ignatius Institute

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At the climactic moment of the great German war film *Das Boot*, the submarine is under attack, as it tries to run the Straits of Gibraltar on the surface. Its captain gives the desperate order to dive, as the only means of saving it from being destroyed. The submarine goes into an uncontrolled descent and ends on the bottom of the Mediterranean, with its engines severely damaged. As they work against time to fix it, the submarine slowly fills with their carbon dioxide, and the captain finally despairs of being able to get off the bottom. At that very moment, the Chief Engineer comes to make his report: the engines have been fixed. The submarine is still on the bottom, and we remain uncertain as to whether it can rise again, but there is hope. The captain talks softly to himself: "*Gute leute muss man immer haben. Gute leute*" ("One must always have good people. Good people."). Indeed, this we have already seen in the film: what makes the submarine so powerful, and so successful, is not so much its state-of-the-art metal hull, but the crew within her.

On January 19th of 2001, the Saint Ignatius Institute at the University of San Francisco came under attack. It, too, lies submerged. Like that of the German U-Boat, its secret lay in its personnel. Certainly, it had a unique and distinguished program of Catholic higher education. But it was the people involved in it that made it especially great. In this essay, and in honor

of its glorious 25 years, I wish to tell its story. In addition to its curriculum—an exemplary model of Catholic higher education—it was also an example of what Maritain speaks about in his essay, “Truth and Human Fellowship:” “the basis of good fellowship among men of different creeds is not of the order of the intellect and ideas, but of the heart and love. It ... is not a fellowship of beliefs, but the fellowship of men who believe.”¹ I will tell the story, first of its program and personnel, and then of the mortal attack it has sustained.

I remember well my first experience of the Institute. I had just graduated with a Ph.D. in Systematic and Philosophical Theology. I was in the midst of my first teaching assignment, a one year sabbatical replacement, and in search of work. I had applied to teach part-time in the program in the following year, had sent in my Curriculum Vitae, and was now coming for an interview. As I entered the office, Raymond Dennehy was in the midst of telling a sparkling joke. As he finished, Erasmo Leiva started howling with his wonderful laugh, one which erupts from deep within and makes anyone who hears it glad. Such was my first taste of what had been advertised to me as an “up-tight” conservative program. To my delight, I found instead that I was on a Chaucerian pilgrimage.

My next surprise came soon after. I expected to have a polite interview, and be told that they would get back to me (and I’d probably never hear from them again). Instead, the Associate who was then in charge—John Galten, another layman—began talking to me as though I were obviously going to be teaching for them in the Fall. This turned out to be the case: they were already ready to hire me, sight unseen. I wondered at this for quite a while, and one day received my answer. One of the people I had put down as a referent was deeply respected by John Galten. His word was enough. The Institute was looking for people, not credentials. Who I was counted for more than what I had or, at this early stage of my career, had not accomplished. My degree and background were important, but my person and my likely effect upon undergraduates in the classroom were far more important to them than my professional academic success.

I realized with something of a shock that I was here encountering a different understanding of undergraduate education, one that used to be quite common in Catholic colleges and universities, but that had become virtually obsolete. The Institute was unpretentious. It knew it was in the business of teaching undergraduates. It was seeking to give young men

1. Jacques Maritain, “Truth and Human Fellowship,” *On the Use of Philosophy* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1961), reprint. Atheneum Press, (New York, 1969), p. 35.

and women a formation for life, not for a profession. It was thus looking for teachers who would inspire them with a love of the truth, and a conviction that finding it was not an impossible task. It knew that its education was for the student's whole person, including his or her faith; it likewise understood quite clearly that this commitment yielded a very different set of priorities than educating for a profession.

My final surprise came when I encountered the "dread director," one Fr. Joseph Fessio, S.J. What quickly endeared him to me was his humanity. Although he, too, enjoyed laughing, he also did not mind acknowledging that he had causes, books, and people that he particularly loved. He had the sobriety common to many Jesuits—a virtue I have only slowly come to admire—but it was not excessively controlled nor unduly rational, but balanced by his own temperament, personality, and courage. I also was delighted to learn that he was not overbearingly authoritarian. Every Institute teacher was free to teach as he or she saw fit. I never once was told how or what to teach. The clear principle at work was the teacher's integrity and a commitment to the program's vision.

The story of that vision—what the Saint Ignatius Institute was and how it came into being—touches in many ways on the history of Catholic education in the last quarter century. It used to be that every student of most American Catholic colleges and universities was required to minor in Thomistic Philosophy. There was a set of seven or eight required courses—on average, one a semester—and there was a comparable number of courses required in Catholic Theology. This was the formative element of the students' General Education, and the goal was frankly apologetic: it prepared them to appropriate their Catholic Tradition and to be an active participant in an Enlightenment and Protestant culture that was perceived as broadly hostile to it.

At the Jesuit University of San Francisco and elsewhere, that tradition of Catholic education began to change in the 1960s. Such a heavy dose of Philosophy and Theology was judged excessive and unduly defensive. The general requirements in these subjects were halved, to four each. Then, in 1970s, these requirements were halved again. Students were required to take only two courses in Philosophy and two in Theology. These courses thus became part of a General Education "grid" that featured a similar number of requirements in other subjects of the undergraduate curriculum. They ceased to be the *formative* element of a student's education.

As this was occurring, a group of teachers at The University of San Francisco—mostly lay men and women, but some Jesuits—decided that what was best in the older *ratio studiorum* ought to be preserved ...

specifically, the traditional requirements in Philosophy and Theology. After much talk and prayer (and a memorable pilgrimage to Our Lady of Guadalupe), Fr. Joseph Fessio, S.J., put together a first blueprint of the idea, one which was then duly approved by the university's Curriculum Committee. Thus was the Saint Ignatius Institute conceived and brought forth.

From its inception, the program was original and innovative in at least two respects. First, it was a program that fulfilled the student's General Education requirements; it was not a Major. Thus, students—on average about 40 in each entering class—came from all majors and schools: pre-med Chemistry majors and nurses, those seeking a degree in business, and those in more typical liberal arts majors: English, History, Philosophy. Its students were not isolated from the rest of the University, and they partook of all its offerings and rich diversity. Second, the Institute chose to combine the Jesuit *ratio studiorum* with Great Books seminars, modeled on Great Books programs that were in place at St. Mary's College (just twenty miles away, across the San Francisco Bay), at St. John's University in Maryland, and at the University of Notre Dame. The program was organized historically: students moved through four periods, Ancient, Medieval, Modern, and Contemporary. There was a seminar in each semester, with an equal number devoted to literature, philosophy, and theology.

Another unique feature was the way these seminars were paired with lecture courses. As examples, the freshman seminar on ancient philosophy was paired with a lecture course on ethics, and a junior seminar on medieval philosophy and theology was paired with a lecture course on metaphysics. The program uniquely and consciously combined the pedagogies appropriate to each type of education. Thus, students were free to range through the great classics of the Western (and later, in the senior year, the Eastern) Tradition: the accent in the seminars was on their own interpretation, discussion, and personal appropriation of the texts. The lectures then balanced this more subjective accent with a systematic and objective development of their chosen subject matter. Thus, the Institute maintained something of the "apologetic" spirit that had shaped the earlier *ratio studiorum*, but it balanced this with the more "open and diverse" spirit proper to Great Books seminars. This balance was unique and crucial to its success.

The aim of the entire program was to place the riches of Catholic faith and culture into positive conversation with the rational and scientific spirit of the West, and with the complexities of contemporary life. It maintained the centrality of philosophy and theology in the Catholic tradi-

tion. In philosophy, it was committed to the tradition of Thomistic realism. In theology, it was expressly and staunchly supportive of the authority of the ordinary *Magisterium*, as a crucial and necessary touchstone for interpreting Scripture and the whole Tradition. Thus, one of its first public acts was to sponsor a conference in 1978 celebrating the tenth anniversary of *Humanae Vitae*: an action that, in those heady “days of dissent,” was quite counter-cultural.

Besides Great Books seminars, and courses in philosophy and theology, the program included courses in history, science, and fine arts that fulfilled the university’s General Education requirements. It also included electives that enriched its offerings: a course on Catholic spirituality, another on the Catholic literary revival of the 20th century, and, most recently, a course on Pope John Paul II’s view of marriage and the family. Faculty frequently offered reading courses and even organized a summer tour of Europe.

Since the Institute’s aim was to educate the whole person, it expressly combined its intellectual program with matters social and religious. As freshmen and sophomores, students lived on common floors in the dormitories. There was an orientation retreat for freshmen at the start of the year, and social activities planned throughout its course. There was daily Mass, First Friday nights of adoration, and Ignatian retreats each semester. Students were actively engaged in the campus newspaper, in social outreach to the city’s poor, and in the pro-life movement. Yet all these activities were entirely optional. Since there were always a certain number of non-Catholic students in the program (a percentage that grew with the passing years), students participated as they judged best.

Those who put together this program recognized that the pluralism of the American scene tended to produce students who were not only tolerant, but skeptical or relativistic in their basic outlook, especially when it came to matters of faith and morals. It sought deliberately to counter this spirit with the one that Maritain advocates in his essay: “there is a real and genuine tolerance only when a man is firmly and absolutely convinced of a truth or of what he holds to be true, and when he at the same time recognizes the right of those who deny this truth to exist and to contradict him and to speak their own mind.”²

Having taught for 17 years in the program, I can claim with certainty that it bore rich fruit in the lives of its students. The Institute did what Catholic education had commonly sought to do: it gave students an intellectual formation for life based upon the integration of faith and reason, a

2. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

cornerstone of the proud history of Catholic education. It gave them a way of appropriating for themselves the riches of the Catholic Tradition and of bringing together the life of faith and the life of the mind. This was not to occur in any one course, but was to be the cumulative effect of many courses and professors, all co-operating in a common project, with a common, shared vision for it. It worked. Evidence of this can be found in the vocations to which it gave rise: numerous priests, numerous sisters. This was due, more than anything else, to the spirit that pervaded the program: the love of Christ and His Church, and the conviction that in it was to be found the plenitude of God's grace. Its love of learning produced as many Ph.D.s as it did priests. And it also led to a number of Catholic marriages and families. The Spirit was palpably at work in the hearts of so many of its students!

It is important to note that the Institute was the creation of faculty, not the administration. Indeed, it was conceived as an *alternative* to the General Education that the administration was sponsoring and that most of the University's faculty supported. It remained committed to a more traditional educational program and vision, in the face of a growing liberal and pluralistic culture that characterized the University of San Francisco.³ Here, again, the Institute succeeded in finding a solution to the difficult problem of unity and diversity. While it frankly recognized that it could not maintain itself unless a crucial core of faculty "owned" its whole vision, especially in philosophy and theology, it was happy to welcome others of different views and faiths as colleagues. Thus, for example, last year it could count Protestant, Jewish, Hindu, and non-believing faculty members, as well as non-practicing Catholics. The only requirement was that faculty had a recognition of and a respect for what the Institute was centrally about; that they had a willingness not to oppose or attempt to undermine its vision. It in fact attracted some of the best non-Catholic faculty, for they could see it *stood* for something—that it was *serious* about its educational ideal and *forthright* in its defense of that ideal ... and that it attracted some of the University's finest students. Besides, it is just hard to pass up an opportunity to be part of a Chaucerian pilgrimage!

3. That tendency has continued at the University of San Francisco, so that its latest proposed General Education curriculum reduces Philosophy and Theology to one course each (plus Ethics), and its latest Mission Statement drops all reference to God, Christ, or the Church. The 1992 Mission Statement included declarations such as these: "As Catholic, the University affirms its close relationship and commitment to the educational mission of the Roman Catholic Church...[it]affirms the ultimate grandeur of the world as created, loved, and redeemed by God." (*University of San Francisco General Catalogue*, 1991-1993, p. 2). A decade later, all such references—to God, redemption, or the Church—were deliberately dropped.

The central core of the Institute was truly one of what Maritain calls "little teams and small flocks,"⁴ and, overall, it was an incarnation of that ideal of truth and human fellowship to which he gave eloquent testament. Above all, it was characterized by friendship. When faculty members were of diverse faiths, that friendship might not be entirely "comfortable," but it was authentic and good. From its inception, the Institute was blessed with a faculty that not only enjoyed intellectual exchange and the shared life of faith, but also the pleasures of life. It had a markedly Chestertonian spirit.

Unfortunately, as Maritain reminds us, "truth always makes trouble,"⁵ and the Institute was a living testament to that rule. From its inception, it was a "sign of contradiction" and met with strong opposition, since its vision of Catholic intellectual life and theology was more traditional than what suited many members of the Theology Department. The Institute had insisted that good theological method required assent to the acknowledged authorities of its field, and in particular to the authority of the ordinary *Magisterium*. Thus, it opposed public dissent to that authority. It also insisted that Catholic theologians who thought differently, and who could not support its staunch defense of that *Magisterium*, did not share the Institute's vision and thus should not teach in it. Predictably, this stand angered its opponents.

When the challenge came, it came swiftly and violently. A liberal Jesuit theologian demanded to teach a course in his field of Catholic spirituality. When the Director refused, the theologian brought suit against the University, on the ground that its programs had to employ full-time faculty over the part-time faculty that were being used. On contractual grounds, he won his suit. The Director, however, went out and hired Fr. Louis Bouyer, C.O., a renowned expert, to teach this course, and so the suit went nowhere.

This outcome, however, only served to embitter its liberal opponents, and their efforts to torpedo the program never ceased. They regarded the Institute's insistence that its theology professors share its position of support for the teaching of the *Magisterium* as narrow-spirited and an insult to the professional competence of its tenured theologians. In the words of one of its most embittered members, the Theology Faculty needed "to continually apply to teach SII courses until it had control"⁶ of its theological

4. Jacques Maritain, *The Peasant of the Garonne* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968) pp. 170-73.

5. Maritain, "Truth and Human Fellowship," p. 21.

6. Francis Buckley, S.J., then Chair of the Theology Department, as quoted in the Official Minutes of the Theology Department Meeting, November 16, 1994.

vision. For them, and for many Jesuits of the California Province, the Institute represented a fifth column. It was a thorn in their side and an embarrassment. They had the Institute subjected to outside reviews, but these tended to laud the program, rather than criticize it.⁷ The pressure on the program to alter its character nevertheless remained unrelenting. The first Director was ultimately fired and his replacement (another Jesuit) finally grew weary of the tension with his brother Jesuits and resigned. Intolerant liberals in my experience are more persistent than their conservative counterparts, for they are most unwilling to recognize that they are sinning against their own self-defining virtue of tolerance.

In the Fall of 2001, the University of San Francisco acquired a new President, a Jesuit who was known to be a committed opponent of the Institute. He was swift to take action against it. He first quietly secured the Trustees' support, and then he summarily fired the directors, one of whom (John Galten) had worked for the University for twenty-five years, and both of whom were in their early sixties. They were told to clear their desks and be off campus at the end of the next working day. In their place, he put an untenured faculty member who had twice taught one course in the program. He did this without consulting either the Institute's faculty or Advisory Board. When asked why he did not consult with either of these groups, or why he did not appoint a senior faculty member with more experience of and commitment to the program, he said they would not have shared his vision of where he wished the program to go.⁸ Also, there

7. The first report (to the President) was assigned to Michael Scriven—an agnostic philosopher then Director of the Evaluation Institute in the University's School of Education. Here is a rather telling excerpt from his report: "SII does not represent itself as a theology department or a department of religious studies. Those areas are already covered on campus. Is there to be no room for an Asian Culture department or center which treats of Eastern religions, even advocates them, on the USF campus? Is USF tied by charter to "liberal" Catholicism? It is obvious that the answer is negative in each case, and the position of the critics (on this point) is, as far as we could discover, far more narrow-minded than that they project onto SII. An outsider might have wondered whether USF needed an enclave of "conservative" theology until one saw the attacks on SII (over this point) which showed more clearly than catalogs that liberalism has become the new orthodoxy and hence that a stronger foundation for presenting the alternative was indeed desirable." (Michael Scriven, *The St. Ignatius Institute: A Report to the President of the University of San Francisco*, September, 1979, Section 6.7, p. 18).

8. Specifically, the President is quoted as having said that the ousted directors were "not the people who are going to take the program in the direction that I want to go.... We are trying to integrate the Institute into the life of the University. It was too isolationist." (Quoted in *Campus*, the publication of the Intercollegiate Studies Institute), vol. 13, no. 1, Fall, 2001, p. 10.

was little point to consulting them, since they only would have protested, and he intended to move in his direction, regardless of what they said. Later, he indicated to students just where that direction lay: "he would no longer allow" the Institute, he told them, to "eliminate" those (liberal) theologians who opposed its vision.⁹

At the heart of the dispute between the parties in question lies precisely the issue Maritain addresses in his essay. The liberals who oppose the program favor a tolerance that requires that one not stand for any particular, defining truth. For these men, as for the President who crafted it, a Mission Statement absent any reference to God, Christ, or the Church makes sense, since it provides a "level-playing field," where all will feel equally welcome. As Maritain might have said, they are looking for a "comfortable friendship between believers of all denominations," and, to ensure this, they favor "a kind of transcendent liberal indifference with respect to any definite creed."¹⁰ The Institute, from its inception, was opposed to this position in its very soul: to undermine its theological stand was to damage irreparably its life-giving form.

For those faculty who had, for 25 years, offered an alternative to such an educational vision, it was clear that this firing of the director signaled an end to tolerating the Institute as a traditional Catholic educational program. The only recourse the senior faculty had in this situation was to resign in protest. At the lunch where this decision was reached, the sentiment was unanimous. This was even more surprising given that, for most, the Institute had been their only reason for being at the University and had been a source of unalloyed joy: a grace-filled program and academic experience.

Meanwhile, at present, the new director is going ahead with changes to the program itself. His first decision was (ironically) to require no seminar in non-Western literature. He is also revamping the program so that, as of the fall of 2002, it will include no courses in systematic (Thomistic) philosophy. Conserving these was possibly the main reason the Institute was originally founded. At the President's suggestion, he also hired an ex-priest and ex-Jesuit to teach philosophy in the spring of 2002: a bio-ethicist with liberal views on euthanasia, human cloning, and fetal-tissue banks. These changes, among others, signal the new direction the President and new director are imparting to the Institute.

Such, then, is the story of the original Saint Ignatius Institute, a program that, for 25 years, was a living instance of the ideal of which Maritain

9. These words of the President are taken from a taped interview of a conversation he had with some students on March 1, 2001.

10. Maritain, "Truth and Human Fellowship," p. 39.

spoke. As one who was given grace upon grace through it, I can bear witness not only to that ideal being good, but of its being possible. The basic model of its education can be adapted to the General Education requirements of any university. What is needed is a core faculty of good people deeply committed to maintaining its vision and an administration willing to support it, even against possible opposition. I also wish to bear witness to the need to fight for this ideal, even if it means suffering hard defeats, and even its death. We were privileged to live Maritain's ideal, and it is deeply good. The very best of God's work is great, and worth dying to defend.

In *Das Boot*, the Chief Engineer reported back to the captain that the ship was fixed. It should be ready to rise. Yet, even with that report, the crew remains in doubt. Will the system function as it was intended to? Will it truly rise from the bottom, to a new breath of fresh air? The atmosphere is thick with carbon dioxide, and time has just about run out. It had been a gallant fight to put it back into trim, even if it would not rise. A prayer was thus in every heart and on every lip of the submarine's crew; so it is with the former faculty of the Saint Ignatius Institute, "*gute leute*" all, who worked in a model program of Catholic education for the good of its students, and *ad majorem dei gloriam*.