

The Document That Got Specific About Jesuit Education: The Great Ratio at 400

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On January 8, 1599, Father General Claudio Aquaviva formally promulgated the *Ratio atque Institutio Studiorum Societatis Iesu* (*The Official Plan and Directives of Jesuit Education*). This modest sheaf of pages, later referred to as "*The Great Ratio*," turned out to be the most significant single document in Jesuit educational history. It became the instrument that made the Jesuits, even in the eyes of their opponents, "the schoolmasters of Europe." They used the document in such a way that it lifted the mediocre to the level of the good, and the good to the level of the excellent. For four centuries, the *Ratio* impacted not just the Church, but the world. Never before or since have we seen such a comprehensive and effective universal educational program.

This success was even longer in the making than at first appears. It emerged from half a century of continuous experience and collaboration, but it was rooted in a far older, far wider web of evolving educational techniques and enterprises: the teaching style that Ignatius had found at the University of Paris, the Renaissance humanist movement, high medieval scholasticism, and earlier medieval training in manners at cathedral schools. There was also a definite classical background, namely, that ancient rhetorical training of Greco-Roman culture, especially as it had been systematized by the Latin-Spanish author Quintilian. But the *Ratio* did not, for all its pedigree, stand far from a rather large fund of contemporary common-sense and experience and practical wisdom. When the Society of Jesus added to this mixture a powerful evangelical orientation to final ends and a rapidly expanding international corporate effort, it transformed the entire pedagogical universe of early modernity.

The document is a curious phenomenon. It could be called a "hidden classic." Anyone who competently studies the history of Western education must hear something about it. Yet translations of the *Ratio* are hard to come by; only a few have access to it. And only a few of that small group have sat down to read it. Furthermore, once read, it is a type of document that is all too easily shelved--for who can be inspired by the pedestrian prose of administrative regulations? Yes, it was not written to hold the reader's interest, but to establish a New World. Our eyes will naturally drift back toward that world's many-colored, fresh, abundant distractions rather than dwell upon the set of apparently culture-bound rules that made that world possible.

There is no denying that the *Ratio* and its effects have filtered into our cultural universe to such an extent that we have long since taken it all for granted. Precisely for that reason, some might argue, we need not return to that past moment: we've moved on. Joining them will be those who are constitutionally unimpressed by moments of historical greatness: Why should we bother to celebrate the 400th anniversary of this relic? Could it mean any more to us than the first Model-T, the first printing press, the first airplane? Does it deserve any more than a flashing Sunday-afternoon museum-glance on our speedy dash elsewhere?

Those who know about the *Ratio* could not be tepid about it. They would rather propose that its all-too-bland surface ushers us into the presence of ever-relevant modes of educational thinking and practice where we can discover a wide range of practical wisdom that maintains an authority beyond its particular sixteenth-century expression. And, truth be told, practically everyone today will admit that we need a good bit more educational wisdom than we are using at present. We could probably not twist a similar type of wisdom from the archetypes of car, press, or plane. But from our contemplation of the *Ratio*, great things can still come.

Part of the reason for this richness is that reading the *Ratio* involves us in much more than the bare document. One can not understand the full meaning of this text merely by commenting on its words. As the culminating expression of a larger effort, the *Ratio* is based upon many assumptions that were sometimes articulated only in earlier versions and in subsidiary communications. There had actually been a whole series of earlier efforts to synthesize directives for running schools. These included both major undertakings, like the *Ratio of 1586* and the *Ratio of 1591*, and more compendious efforts, like the rules dating back to the governance of the first Jesuit school at Messina. Once we let the totality of this story come alive for us again, after we begin to understand how powerful an achievement the *Great Ratio* is, we will find a good number of reasons for celebrating it, as well as for returning to it for direction. A few points can orient us.

(1) The *Ratio* is rooted in Ignatius's own intentions and spirituality.

Intentions. It is clear that Ignatius was enthusiastic about the previously unforeseen rapid development of the Jesuit apostolic effort in education. Not only was he himself as much a student as a pilgrim in his own saintly career, but he also lived long enough to put a clear and distinct blessing on the academic apostolate. Despite its relatively late date, forty-three years after Ignatius's death, the *Ratio* is an important part of the Society's foundations. Fr. George Ganss traces the *Great Ratio* back to the words that Ignatius carefully placed into the *Constitutions*:

Concerning the hours of the lectures, their order, and their method, and concerning the exercises both in compositions (which ought to be corrected by the teachers) and in disputations within all the faculties, and in delivering orations and reading verses in public--all this will be treated in detail in a separate treatise [approved by the General]. This present Constitution refers the reader to it, with the remark that it ought to be adapted to places, times, and persons, even though it would be desirable to reach that order as far as this is possible.

[*Constitutions*, IV.13.n2, A; see *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus and Their Complementary Norms: A Complete English Translation of the Official Latin Texts* (Saint Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996), p. 180.]

Ignatius does not simply say "The details will be treated elsewhere." He pointedly refers to the various features that will need attention: the hours, the lectures, the order, the method, the writing and speaking exercises. The further notes of practicality are struck, but the idealism remains as well: "Adapt to situations, of course!" Ignatius in effect says. "But remember that we should want to get as close as possible to what has been decided upon as the best."

Spirituality. To the extent that we have an interest in Ignatian spirituality, we should also come to grips with the way it was practically lived out, and with the concrete expressions of that spirituality's orientation to formational questions, to pragmatic directives for apostolic action, and to the attentive elaboration of details. Ignatius's spirituality does not typically lead people to wander off into introspective self-absorption. Rather it invites them to pass through a kind of

intensified self-scrutiny and to finally turn toward larger, corporate purposes that intend the salvation of one's neighbor and the service of the Church as well. The *Ratio* helps to show how this in fact happened in the history of Ignatius's own spiritual journey. This document makes clear how the journey led beyond Iñigo's interior life to institutional action for the spread of the Gospel. Ignatian spirituality yields, in one momentously important line of evolutionary growth, to Jesuit spirituality. It is a part of the story that no one should by-pass.

(2) The *Ratio* has been vital for identity and mission.

It has helped to found and to shape a major, distinctive, long-lasting apostolic effort in education, a work approved not only by Ignatius, but by the Society of Jesus and the Church throughout the last four-hundred years. If we are going to go back to founding documents and be re-activated by them, as Vatican II would have us, then the *Ratio* is one of the most important of such documents. The renewed attention people have given to the Spiritual Exercises and to the Constitutions calls for a parallel effort regarding the *Ratio*. The possible payoff puts the best lotteries to shame: first, fresh readings of what authentically Catholic educational institutions might be today; second, apostolic effectiveness; third, astutely-trained men and women whose transformed religious consciousness can feed and clothe a needy world and pass on to it that most precious gift of the Gospel.

(3) The *Ratio* embodies and can spark a desperately needed wisdom.

Collaborative Agency. The undertaking represented by the *Ratio* models sustained, authentic, collaborative apostolic reflection. It is an example of how groups might work together to achieve much more than any individual can do, provided that properly disposed individuals are willing to co-ordinate their energies and, with some flexibility, "agree to agree" with the deliberated outcomes under the guidance of an Institute. This is an aspect of the genius of Ignatius and the early companions: the *Ratio* was not a document conceived by a single master-planner imposing his ideas either by force or by persuasion. The point was letting the will of God emerge and meeting its emergence with the spirit of the magis--a hunger for and commitment to ever more effective co-operation with that will. The writing of the *Ratio* helped the Society to find the will of God through a long-labored process of experience, reflection, conversation, and transformative decision. In a concrete way, the *Ratio*'s genesis symbolizes that patient, co-operative endurance in action that we need today.

Educational Order. The *Ratio* illustrates an effective approach to the question of educational order. It provides for the ranking of subjects, for the disposition of curricular activities, for the layout of linked and progressively greater formational achievements in the course of studies, for the clear conception of a guiding ideal. Given the basic principle that a society's education tends to reflect its culture, we can easily understand how avalanche of cultural change in this century has left education in a quandary. Our times abound in subject-matter, in resources for research, and in technological apparatus, but we are also increasingly in need of better order and direction in our academic programs. We are seeking clarity about how to best apply our many available resources for the more effective achievement of larger purposes. The *Ratio* is counter-culturally disposed not only towards a finely-tuned, religiously-adept education, but also towards precisely that kind of architectonic thinking that might bring a meaningful order without rigidity to our curricular planning. By probing the wisdom of this document, we can perhaps hit upon analogous solutions for our own day. Such questions are not merely "academic": millions of lives are affected. In fact, culture itself can be totally reshaped by the thinking that takes place along these

lines. Hence the old Jesuit saying that "the education of the young is the transformation of the world."

Re-discovering the *Ratio*

Those who are now eager to read the original text should prepare themselves for a surprise. They will find in the document no theoretical exposition of an educational vision, no great pedagogical debate or manifesto, and not even much of a "mission statement" beyond the opening, which reads

One of the foundational ministries of our Society is to pass on all training in keeping with our Institute, so that from these there may well up a knowledge and love of our Creator and Redeemer. Therefore the provincial should consider it his special obligation to assure that our especially varied effort abundantly produce in return the fruit that our vocation demands.

In the original Latin, the first half of this citation is actually a subordinate clause: "Since one of the foundational ministries..." Everything is oriented not toward an explanation of purpose or goals--those are assumed to be familiar to the readers--but rather toward the precise kinds of actions that various individuals are to undertake for the sake of a greater co-ordination that will lead to the best results.

The entire body of the *Ratio* consist of a series of rules (*regulae*) to guide teachers, administrators, and Society officials in their oversight of the educational project. At the beginning, the general arrangement is top-down by office: What should the Provincial do? What should the Rector, the Prefect of Studies, the Professors of Theology, Philosophy, Mathematics, Rhetoric, Humanities? But interspersed are sections and directives that indicate a care for procedures: certain rules are given for written exams, for prizes, for student behavior, and for the conduct of classes. Some paragraphs outline matters relating to student and faculty life. On the way, very specific recommendations are given. For example, one might find something like "Use this book up to this chapter in this year. Do not adopt that text." The authors had learned by experience what worked and what did not. Educational wisdom had been allowed to accumulate. Wheels were well-used, not re-invented--and that is one reason why this education was such a remarkable success.

A second one emerges with the larger picture that comes through all the details of the *Ratio*. It is an image of an energetic "exercise-oriented," interactive education, full of pre-lection, repetition, disputation, and public examination. Outcomes were constantly assessed. If you had not mastered letters, you could hardly be expected to do philosophy. This education is one that knows where it starts, where it must pass, and where it must finally arrive. The curriculum takes the students to an active mastery of language arts, through an exposure to and imitation of the best poetry and history and oratory, to a philosophical understanding, into expansive theological horizons. Even if only relatively few arrived at the theological course, the religious horizon indicated by this goal permeated the educational vision. The final ends were ever-present, and ever-felt, putting earlier work in a special light and endowing it with both a greater significance and a deeper appeal.

What then shall we do with this document in an age whose tastes and institutions are so different? Of course, the greatest tribute to the *Ratio* will be educational thinking done in its spirit with its high standards and purified intentions. The task calls for a special creative insight that will probably take many minds and more than a single generation. But, because this classic moment has been so hidden from view for so long, a rediscovery of the original achievement might be just the prelude that we need in order to begin the reshaping of the educational apostolate for the 21st

century. Toward such an end, plans are presently underway at Saint Louis University to set up a program of seminars, presentations, and lectures, beginning with the annual Dean's Seminar in February of 1999 and lasting at least through spring semester of 2000. The Institute of Jesuit Sources at Saint Louis University is also preparing to involve itself through various publications of relevant texts, translations, and commentaries. Elsewhere, the quadricentennial will not pass unnoticed. St. Joseph's University will host a conference on "The Future of Jesuit Education" in late June of 1999. The provinces of Austria and Germany will devote two years to various explorations on Jesuit teaching. In July of 1999, Columbia's Universidad Javeriana (Cali) will be the site of a seminar on the 400 years of the *Ratio*. And Brazil's Universidade do Vale do Rio do Sinos will conduct a meeting on "Theological Grounding for Humanistic and Christian Formation in Jesuit Educational Institutions."

Where to learn more about the *Ratio* and Jesuit education:

1. Donohue, John W., S.J. *Jesuit Education: An Essay on the Foundation of Its Idea*. New York: Fordham UP, 1963.
2. Farrell, Alan Peter, S.J. *The Jesuit Code of Liberal Education; Development and Scope of the Ratio Studiorum*. Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Co., 1938.
3. Ganss, George, S.J. *Saint Ignatius' Idea of the Jesuit University*. Milwaukee: Marquette UP, 1954.
4. Scaglione, Aldo. *The Liberal Arts and the Jesuit College System*. Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1986.