

Living Competence, Conscience, and Compassion

**THE *RATIO STUDIORUM* -
FOUR CENTURIES ON***by Ross Jones, SJ*

- Ignatian Network introduces the twelfth in a series of briefing papers entitled *Living Competence, Conscience and Compassion* that highlight different aspects of the Ignatian School Renewal. The briefing papers will appear from time to time as a stimulus to principals and teachers.

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INTRODUCTION

Not long after beginning a teaching career at one of our schools, my curiosity regarding the notion of "Jesuit Education" was aroused. It was a pervasive concept, often spoken of, but at the same time a very nebulous issue. Ask a Jesuit and you soon had them groping for descriptions. A few standard phrases were offered - "a liberal education", "the formation of an articulate person", "excellence" and "the influential leader" were some. Reference was invariably made to the *Ratio Studiorum*, which, so I was assured, would have all the answers. Alas, most of my Jesuit colleagues had never read it, nor even seen a copy. In fact, I would be surprised if there were more than a few copies in the Province today.

Looking back, it did not really matter that a *Ratio* was not to come my way for it would not have been immediately helpful. The *Ratio* is not a philosophical or pedagogical treatise on Jesuit education. It does not discuss principles. It is a collection of rules, a practical handbook in educational method, as well as school and class management. Any underlying principles can only be inferred from the *Ratio*.

Why then explore the *Ratio*? Perhaps for these reasons:

1. In our school circles it is an often referred to, but little understood work.
2. It can, by inference, tell us something about the goals and nature of Jesuit education.

3. It provides insights into school life in the early Society.
4. 1999 year marks the four-hundredth anniversary of the definitive edition of the Ratio.

BACKGROUND

Ignatius' written legacy concerning Jesuit ministry, including the educational apostolate, consists of the Constitutions, the Spiritual Exercises and many letters. Although Part IV of the Constitutions has much to say about the broad organisation of studies, Ignatius left the finer details to be treated separately in a certain treatise to be approved by the Superior General - giving, however, this admonition: that these matters ought to be accommodated to the times, places and persons (Cons n.455).

In 1583, the fourth General, Claude Aquaviva, was able at last to attend to the matter. He set up a commission of six Jesuits of different nationalities, each one with considerable educational expertise. They examined all the documents related to education, along with many other writings dealing with pedagogical method and school administration. They worked in Rome, uninterrupted, for three years, producing the first edition of the Ratio Studiorum (or "Plan of Studies").

The 1586 text was by far the most interesting of the three editions of the Ratio for it incorporated many explanations, defences of proposals, digressions and occasional witticisms. Later editions would eliminate all these so as to make a briefer handbook for busy schoolmen. It provided a vivid picture of the actual world in which the authors lived and wrote. Twenty-seven essays in the text enquire into the conduct of classes, repetitions and disputations (teaching activities), teacher formation, arrangement of curriculum, vacations, timetables, prizes and degrees.

The first edition was circulated to the Society's twenty Provinces for comment. Reflections came back to Rome. Five years later the more concrete and practical 1591 edition was released for a three year trial period. Many revisions ensued before the definitive third edition of 1599 appeared - the Ratio atque Institutio Studiorum Societatis. It was sixteen years after Aquaviva's first commission (of whom only two of the originals were still living). And we think the Society moves cautiously today!

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RATIO

What, then, was the significance of issuing the Ratio? A Jesuit historian, George Ganss, has suggested that it created the first school system that the world had seen - a system that spread through Europe, the Americas and parts of Asia. It formed, he says, an organisation of individual schools in close contact with one another, deliberately reviewing and evaluating experience, both classroom and administrative, on a large scale, and sharing teachers who move around as their own capabilities and needs, and needs of the institution, demand and permit.

The strength of the system lay not so much in the quality of the individual school, but in shared experience and common orientation. Before long Jesuit educators were being hailed as "the schoolmasters of Europe" and "the masters of the method".

THE CONTENT OF THE RATIO

Administrative handbooks are, almost without exception, rather boring works - to be consulted only when compelled. Yet in order to flesh out this text a little, it is worthwhile to highlight something of its

more pertinent, illuminating or even curious content.

1. GOALS

Many times through the document, the goal of the educational apostolate is stated. Invariably it is two-pronged: uprightness of life with liberal arts formation; letters with worthy Christian habits; virtue and integrity with literature and learning. Unquestionably, intellectual and aesthetic values are esteemed in the Ratio as intrinsically valuable, for schools have an undeniable academic function. All the elements of the curriculum and the school life, however, are seen ultimately as instrumental. They are not themselves the final goals, but tools for perfecting the true Christian whose love of God will be translated into the service of others.

2. CURRICULUM AND ORGANISATION

In regard to content, the Ratio of 1586 was markedly original and progressive in two important areas, namely in vindicating the status of the humanities and in defining a position for Greek in the curriculum. The humanistic revival of the Renaissance had often turned into bitter invective against theology and philosophy. Hence ecclesiastics were suspicious of teachers of the humanities, who were often seen as fomenters of heresy. Defence of the classics in the Ratio was certainly a courageous move. The teaching of Greek in school was, likewise, an important departure from the practice of the time. The lesson for today, then: if there is a compelling case for restructuring curriculum - be daring.

The so-called Abecedarium (ie, ABC or primary classes) were excluded by the Ratio. The Society is still seldom involved in primary or elementary education today. The tradition in this and the English and Irish Provinces is somewhat uncharacteristic.

The organisation of the each school was prescribed - five grades of lower classes (equivalent to our secondary), comprising three of grammar followed by a year each of humanities and rhetoric. The upper classes (which we would call tertiary) were in philosophy and theology. In treating the lower and upper classes, the Ratio describes a very hierarchical structure. Details of exam format and administration occupy many paragraphs. It reflects, I think, the *modus Parisiensis* (the model of the University of Paris) which earlier had impressed Ignatius so much, for it was not uncommon in schools or universities of the day to enter studies at any level or to be promoted without mastery or without satisfying any standards - with obvious consequences.

Not only through exams, but in many other strategies, was school life made fairly competitive. Emulation was the tactic employed. Masters were to spur on pupils by awards and symbols of victory. Each pupil was assigned an *aemulus*, a rival, who corrected his mistakes and offered competition. The classes were divided into two camps with Praetors, Tribunes, Senators, Chief Magistrates and Decuriae or platoons of ten students with Officers and privates. The equivalent of today's humble class captain was then public Censor or even Emperor, invested almost with plenipotentiary power (PLS n.37). Higher tanks were achieved on merit and competition was strong. "Honourable rivalry. . . is a great incentive to studies" advised the authors of the Ratio (PLC n.31).

Now if that all seems rather cut-throat, there is also a more humane side to the handbook. "Industry of youths is weakened by nothing more than overwork" it cautions (PLC n.24). There is a sensitivity displayed in assessing weak students - extra attention here is required of the Prefect of Lower Studies (PLS n.23). In a 1926 Latin version of the Ratio I have, there is a delightful marginal comment inscribed

by a now anonymous Prefect of Studies against this rule: "plodders promote". Plodders may not easily survive in our Colleges today when schools are locked into an externally-influenced race for marks.

3. THE TEACHERS

Some issues in schools seem perennial. The Ratio made allowances for masters to be relieved from teaching for a year or two in the case of "excessive fatigue i.e. today's burnout" (RP n.25). Monthly staff meetings were already a trial to be endured. And in case one might imagine that dodging a school regency is a recent phenomenon among scholastics, it should be noted that "the Provincial shall not exempt our scholastics from teaching grammar and humanities" (RP n.36).

In an age where there were many bogus and wandering pedagogues, and any number of schools of dubious value, there are several references here to our teachers being prepared in an Academy of some sort before being let loose on the pupils (RP n.30).

Extern or lay masters had little role in Jesuit schools. Though they might lecture in Jesuit universities, in schools they could only be employed in the office of Corrector. Both the Constitutions and the Ratio forbade Jesuits to administer corporal punishment. (Cons n.395; PLS n.38). This was the special brief of the Corrector. As one would expect, it was not an enviable office to hold, nor a very satisfactory approach to maintaining discipline. Correctors were sometimes waylaid out of school and assaulted. Where schools had limited funds, they sometimes invited parents to volunteer for the position (like canteen duty!). Understandably, the office eventually fell into disuse.

Perhaps we have the impression that all pre-twentieth century education was harsh and cruel. But consider this extract:

- Let there be no haste in punishing, nor too much accusing; let the master rather dissimulate when he can without hurt to anyone (i.e. pretend not to have heard or felt something); and let him abstain entirely from injury in word or attack in deed; let him not call anyone by any name other than his own or his surname. (PLC n.40).

Whilst the phrase *cura personalis* (care of the individual person) – so much used as a descriptor of Jesuit education today – is not found in the Ratio, the notion of such care is clearly evident in the text. A pastoral interest by the teacher in the intellectual, moral and spiritual development in each of his students is demanded – a knowledge of their limitations, needs and concerns. More than ever now, it is a principle to be pursued when our campuses can number more than one thousand pupils. What better example of individual concern than this very touching detail to be found, "Let [the professor] often pray to God for his pupils" (PLCn.10)

The present General of the Society, Fr Peter Hans Kolvenbach, referred recently to the 1891 version of the Ratio:

- It again reflects the place of *cura personalis* which insists that teachers first need to know their students. It recommends that the masters study their pupils at length and reflect upon their aptitudes, their defects and the implications of their classroom behaviour. And at least some of the teachers, it remarks, ought to be well acquainted with the students' home background. Teachers are always to respect the dignity and personality of the pupils. In the classroom, the Ratio advises, teachers should be patient with boys and know how to overlook certain mistakes or put off their correction until the apt psychological moment, should be much readier with praise than blame, and if correction is required it should be made without bitterness. The friendly spirit which is

nourished by frequent, casual counselling of the students, perhaps outside class hours, will greatly help this aim along.

Concerning professional development, it was common practice for the Prefect of Studies or Lower Studies to evaluate the teachers within the school and give them feedback (PS n.17; PLS n.6). And lest we are given to think also that some matters of professional behaviour and prudence are only recent concerns, this instruction for the teacher would suggest there are perennial cautions:

- Let [the teacher] not seem to be more familiar with one [student] than with another; and outside the time of class let him not speak with them except briefly and concerning serious matters and in an open place, that is, not within the classroom, but before the doors of the classroom, or in the courtyard, or at the door of the college, and only for greater edification (PLC n.47).

4. EXTERN STUDENTS

Jesuit Colleges had been admitting extern (or non-Jesuit) students for more than forty years before the first edition of the Ratio. It is revealing to compare the separate sections which treat scholastic and extern students and note what might be described as differences in calibre or expectations in each group.

Whilst the attention of the Jesuit scholastic students is drawn to purity of mind and intention, joining virtue with studies, studying under the direction of the superior, diligence, etc. (SOS n.2), these are the rules for externs:

- Let none of our pupils come to class with arms, daggers, knives, or others of such nature as are forbidden according to the custom of the place and time (EOS n.5).

Let them abstain entirely from oaths, from abusive language, from injuries, detractions, lies, forbidden games, from evil places forbidden to the scholars by the Prefect, and finally from all things which detract from morality (EOS n.6).

Let them not wander about here and there in the classrooms; but let each stay on his own bench and in his own place, quietly and in silence. . . Let them not deface or mar the benches, the chairs, the stools, the walls, the doors, the windows, or any other part by drawing, writing, with knives, or in any other way (EOS n.10).

The latter seem an ill-disciplined collection of tearaways. Or maybe nothing has changed.

5. THE BACKGROUND OF THE STUDENTS

It is apparent that the classes of the day were quite a socio-economic mix. Twice in the Ratio the professors are instructed to despise no one and view the rich and poor as equals in their studies (APHF n.20; PLC 50). Masters should not allow the students to go to any expense in class (PLC n.49). The education offered was gratis - admission was on merit, not on power to pay. The rule is clear "let no one be excluded on account of his lowly situation in life or his poverty" (PLS n.9). Eventually the scarcity of local benefactors in the form of dukes, bishops or city governors, meant that last century the necessary introduction of school fees was sanctioned by a General Congregation. To recapture something of the original intention and spirit of the schools, the provision of considerably more bursaries or scholarships than we presently do might open our schools to a broader clientele. The schools would still remain for an elite in terms of talent and potential, but not simply for an economically elite.

6. THE ROSTRUM AND THE STAGE

Such a concentrated emphasis on the study of classical authors, on prose and on eloquence, naturally resulted in a flair not only for school and public disputations between scholars, but also in plays. The performance of tragedies and comedies, in Latin and mostly on sacred and pious themes, was encouraged by the Ratio. This is worth noting because at the time theatre was despised as a profession but nevertheless was seen to have educational value. A stipulation was that female roles and/or attire were not to be introduced (RR n.13). This restriction lasted until last century, at least. Jesuit poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, whilst a scholastic at Stonyhurst, records in his journal that he had rewritten Macbeth for the annual school play, transforming Lady Macbeth into one "Uncle Donald" (with suitable textual alterations).

A sense of the dramatic also spills over into prize days - much detail is provided in the Ratio as to the manner in which the heralds are to call in each prizewinner, how they are greeted with a laudatory ode, and receive a choral acclamation, perhaps with a laurel wreath:

"To the joy and glory of the literary world, and of the students of our gymnasium, the first [prize] for the [Latin prose, Greek oration, etc] has been merited and won by [Giacomo Brightsparks]." (GA n.12)

Imagine how the 9G classics class would warm to that today.

CONCLUSION

Many other features of the Ratio could be drawn out and commented upon. In concluding, through, let me underscore what I believe to be the Ignatian leit-motiv which gave the Ratio its greatest potential. It was the freedom to adapt to different times, places and people, in spite of all the apparent detail and prescription. Thus Jesuit education up to the time of the Suppression was always free to evolve, to borrow from what was best and, so often, to take the initiative and lead the way. That is both the heritage and the challenge of the Ratio for today.

I like the way Jesuit General, Fr Pedro Arrupe once put it:

"If our schools are to perform as they should, they will live in a continual tension between the old and the new, the comfortable past and the uneasy present."

Abbreviations:

APHF- Rules Common to All the Professors of Higher Faculties

EOS - Rules for Externs of the Society

GA - Rules Governing Awards

PLS - Rules for the Prefect of Lower Studies

PLC - Rules Common to the Professors of the Lower Classes

PS - Rules for the Prefect of Studies

RP - Rules for the Provincial

RR - Rules for the Rector

SOS - Rules for the Scholastics of Our Society

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