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WEEK IN REVIEW DESK

Jesuits Show Strength, Even as Their Numbers Shrink

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THE lofty status of the Jesuits in the Catholic firmament has always been supported by their remarkable universities -- a sprawling network set on such prime real estate that it is often lampooned (typically by Jesuits themselves) with the old quip about a seminary candidate who is given a tour of a beautiful campus as an enticement to join the order.

"If this is what you do with poverty," the wide-eyed prospect says as he gazes at the campus, "I can't wait to see what you do with chastity!"

The joke may pack even more punch after last week's announcement that the Jesuit-run Boston College was in talks to bring the prestigious Weston Jesuit School of Theology, in Cambridge, Mass., under its wing. Such a merger would further Boston College's quest to become the nation's Catholic intellectual powerhouse. More importantly, it would signal that the Jesuit order, despite sharp declines in the number of priests in recent decades, is very much a player in the battle over the future of the Catholic Church.

"If we move, they would become the center for the study of Roman Catholic theology in the United States," the Rev. Robert Manning, president of Weston, said of Boston College.

This ambitious agenda is confounding the order's many conservative critics, who have been writing the Jesuits' obituary for years. These critics like to trace the Jesuits' declining numbers of priests and brothers in the United States -- from 8,400 in 1965 to 3,200 today -- to what they see as an overemphasis on social justice and wishy-washy theology, at the expense of the rigorous devotion and vigorous evangelizing that are the order's reasons for being.

Indeed, under Pope John Paul II, conservatives in the church have scored important gains, with small but vibrant seminaries and colleges and new religious orders that promote Catholic orthodoxy, challenging the Jesuits at every turn.

But the vacuum created by the recent church scandals has given the Jesuits an opening. With the Boston archdiocese's finances stretched to the breaking point by the large settlements paid in sex-abuse cases, the Jesuits, backed by longstanding endowments, have been able to buy up properties that the archdiocese is selling.

"Particularly in Boston, it's almost as if the Jesuits have set up a parallel authority structure," said Philip Lawler, editor of the conservative Catholic World Report, who questions Boston College's Catholic bona fides. "It is ironic, in a way, that you have this nose-dive by the Jesuits at the same time that Boston College is growing."

The Jesuits' efforts can be seen elsewhere as well. At Fordham University in the Bronx, for example, the new president, the Rev. Joseph M. McShane, has pledged to turn the university into a leading center of Catholic intellectual and cultural life.

From a historical perspective, the Jesuits would say they are only doing what they have always done -- rescuing the Catholic church in a crisis. The brainchild of Ignatius Loyola, a 16th-century Basque soldier who underwent a spiritual transformation while recuperating from battle wounds, the order provided the "shock troops" to help stanch the Protestant Reformation. The Jesuits, with their passion for intellectual inquiry and profound spirituality, became the "confessors to kings" in Europe and self-sacrificing missionaries elsewhere.

They have also been a lightning rod for controversy. As far back as the 18th century, the Vatican suppressed the Society of Jesus, as the order is formally known, over some unorthodox stands. In the early 1980's, Pope John Paul II intervened in the selection of the order's leader in an effort to rein in the Jesuits' activist ways, especially their involvement with the Marxist-tinged liberation theology movement in Latin America. In recent years, conservatives in the church have blasted prominent Jesuits for their views on issues like the role of women in the church, and have accused the order of being too tolerant of homosexuals in its ranks.

Whatever the criticisms or official rebukes, the Jesuits have always rebounded. Yet today the situation is different in a crucial way: While it remains the largest Catholic order in the world, with 20,000 priests and brothers in 112 countries, the Jesuits' ranks are stretched thinner than ever. In 2001, for the first time, a layman was named president of Georgetown University, the nation's most famous Jesuit school.

The move sparked heated debate, even among Jesuits who knew such a development was inevitable. But it also reflected what seems to be an emerging reality: that even as Jesuits themselves are declining in numbers, their traditions remain an engine for intellectual and spiritual renewal.

In addition to the resurgence of Jesuit universities, the order is adapting Ignatius' demanding 30-day retreat to the needs of busy laypeople who want the spiritual direction but can't spare the time. Indeed, the Jesuits' fastest-growing ministries include the Jesuit

Volunteer Corps for recent college graduates and the Ignatian Lay Volunteer Corps for retired people.

"It's about finding God in all things," said the Rev. James Martin, the associate editor of *America*, a Catholic magazine. "That is the great gift of St. Ignatius to the church, even more than buildings and institutions."

Though the order attracted more novices this year than last, no one expects a miraculous end to the priest drought.

"It is certainly the case that we are getting smaller, but I see it as the religious life being restored to its proper minority status within the church," said Father Manning of the Weston School. "We were always meant to be a model, a sign to people, not the dominant model of religious life."

Photo: St. Ignatius Loyola, the order's founder.