

CHARLES S. WEISS

# Sustaining Institutional Mission through “Pilgrimage”

I HAVE SPENT THIRTY-FOUR years at the College of the Holy Cross as a professor and administrator. My current responsibilities include foundation and corporate giving, so I talk and write about the mission and identity of Holy Cross literally every day. I have studied faculty development throughout my tenure, written grants for such programs, and trumpeted the positive outcomes. Further, I am an enthusiastic proponent of Jesuit education (I spent my undergraduate years at another Jesuit institution, the University of Scranton) and have witnessed firsthand how students and faculty can flourish intellectually in a community like ours.

Despite having such strong and established connections with Holy Cross, I never expected to come to a *fuller* understanding of institutional mission while standing with my colleagues on a mountaintop in northeastern Spain during a pilgrimage. Nor would I have imagined that our time together would lead to a crystallized view of a new academic program for our first-year students. But now I know better. My colleagues and I—all senior administrators at the college—returned from this trip profoundly changed, with new respect for what can emerge from intentional work to sustain institutional mission.

First, a bit of background.

Holy Cross is not alone in having been established by founders with specific objectives and beliefs. Indeed, among the distinguishing characteristics of higher education in the United States is the stunning range of founding belief systems and missions. Many of our nation’s colleges and universities were created out of passion to educate women, ministers, African Americans, immigrants, the rural poor; to advance causes, to educate within a particular religious framework, to teach in new ways. Today, at some of these very same institutions—particularly, but not limited to, religiously affiliated colleges like Holy Cross, which was founded by the Jesuits in 1843 in part to educate the sons of poor Irish immigrants in central New England—dramatic changes in student and faculty populations have sparked serious and exciting explorations into how to reconnect administrators, professors, students, and staff with the institution’s mission.

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Mountains of Montserrat

Here's how that process has unfolded over the years at Holy Cross. Forty years ago, nearly all of the Holy Cross faculty were Jesuit priests and they had a deeply personal and unique understanding of the College's mission. As classroom teachers, administrators, and residence hall prefects, the Jesuits were at the center of educational, spiritual, and social experiences at Holy Cross. They embodied the Jesuit tradition in all of their daily interactions and truly "lived the mission" by emphasizing open inquiry, a sense of purpose, and service to others. This was true of lay faculty as well, many of whom had earned their degrees at Jesuit colleges and universities.

It's a different story today. Only a handful of our 262 faculty members are Jesuit priests. Over the past ten years, longtime lay faculty members have retired—taking with them a special spirit, knowledge, and commitment to Jesuit identity. Our younger lay faculty—all top scholars in their fields—have had fewer natural opportunities to work with Jesuit colleagues and simply have not had exposure to their predecessors' personal familiarity with Jesuit traditions and ideals. While most of our students today identify themselves as Catholic, others are Protestant, Jewish, and Muslim. The campus is increasingly diverse: 21 percent of the first-year class are students of color.

Given these demographics and the changes in our teaching faculty, several years ago Holy Cross looked critically at the impact Jesuit identity has on the culture and curriculum at the college. Could the essence of Jesuit education continue to permeate the classroom? Would students be encouraged to engage in open dialogue about life's fundamental questions in the same way they had in the past? Would they demonstrate a commitment to human rights and social justice? Would they be given opportunities not only for intellectual development, but also for the moral and spiritual growth that defines Jesuit education? In short, how could we continue to "live the mission"?

#### **The Ignatian Pilgrimage**

In response to these questions and conversations about sustaining mission, Holy Cross President Rev. Michael C. McFarland, S.J., encouraged me and several others to read

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(many of us for the first time) the autobiography of St. Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuit order. We emerged from our reading with a new appreciation for the college's mission, and recognized how a deeper understanding of St. Ignatius' life could benefit

faculty and enrich the student experience.

After further study of this issue, in 2004, I helped write a grant proposal titled "Sharing the Journey of Ignatius of Loyola: A National Faculty and Curriculum Development Project." With funding from several sources secured, Holy Cross developed a guided travel and study pilgrimage for lay faculty at Jesuit colleges and universities across the country.

Designed to deepen faculty members' understanding of their institutions' earliest Jesuit origins, and lead them to use this new level of discernment to enrich the curricula, the pilgrimage begins on campus during the spring semester with three half-day seminars on Ignatius and the early Jesuits. Readings, including Ignatius's autobiography and the *Spiritual Exercises* and John O'Malley's *The First Jesuits*, serve as the basis for conversation, and participants engage in discussions about the cultures, religions, politics, arts, and local customs of Ignatius's time.

In early summer, participants set off on a ten-day pilgrimage to sites in Spain and Rome that were important in the life of St. Ignatius, including Azpeitia in the Basque country of northern Spain, the place of St. Ignatius's birth and conversion; Xavier Castle, birthplace of St. Francis Xavier, an early Jesuit missionary; Montserrat, where Ignatius laid down his sword and began a new life devoted to study, teaching, service, faith, and purpose; Manresa, where Ignatius wrote the *Spiritual Exercises*; and Rome, where Ignatius built the headquarters of the Jesuit order and is buried.

Consistently since its inception, the Ignatian Pilgrimage has provided faculty with deeper understanding of our institution's fundamental principles, and encouraged us to incorporate that understanding into relationships with colleagues and students, into what we teach and how we teach it. Upon returning from the pilgrimage, faculty develop new courses and enhance existing ones, according to their newfound understanding of the Jesuit

The family home of St. Ignatius in Loyola, Spain. It is now surrounded by the Basilica of Loyola and a spirituality center.



mission, new relationships with colleagues, and new perspectives of their disciplines. We are seeing professors explore more critically how the Jesuits embraced global traditions and cross-cultural engagements from the order's inception. New courses are focusing on the idea of "pilgrimage" in classic and contemporary literature and in Christian social thought and practice in the twentieth century.

I heard all about the good outcomes of the Ignatian pilgrimage for years, but had not yet been on the trip when Fr. McFarland asked senior administrators to join him. I am a Jew, and despite having been part of this project's origins and planning, the thought that I was embarking on a Catholic pilgrimage was a bit discomfoting.

While I'm not ready to say I had a "religious experience," I can tell you that I returned to United States a changed man. The experience of being at Montserrat, a place of astounding physical beauty and religious significance, was a particularly transformative one for my colleagues and me—regardless of age, discipline,

position at the college, or religion. After coming to internalize the importance of this place in the history of Holy Cross, hearing Fr. McFarland's homily at Mass that day, and having time to reflect on the beauty of nature that existed before me, I was overcome with existential questions that I could not ignore. What was my value as a teacher? What was my value to Holy Cross? To others? What kind of person have I become? Have I done anything of meaning? These are questions I continue to struggle with, and ones I address daily through my interactions as a teacher, administrator, husband, and father.

#### **A renewed commitment to mission and identity**

Beyond my personal experience, the time spent in this environment helped transform our curriculum, and thus our students' experiences. Our group returned to campus with important new insight for one of Holy Cross's most significant curricular initiatives in years, a program designed to enhance the academic, cocurricular, and residential experiences of

first-year students. It was literally in the mountains in Spain that the name of the program, Montserrat, was chosen when, as a group, we realized that what we were experiencing on Montserrat—becoming open to explorations of the self, the natural world, spirituality, the larger world, and fundamental human questions—was exactly what we wanted our first-year students to have the opportunity to discover.

Through Montserrat—which began in the fall of 2008 and is now an integral part of the Holy Cross experience—first-year students are immediately immersed in all aspects of life at Holy Cross, particularly the rigorous academic experience. They participate in small, full-year seminar courses and cocurricular programs, such as on- and off-campus events, guest lectures, discussion groups, and social activities, all of which are designed to engage students in both critical inquiry and consideration of deep questions about meaning, value, and ethics.

Early reports indicate that Montserrat is achieving its goals of integrating the “learning-living-doing” aspects of college life and fostering personal, intellectual, and spiritual growth. Anecdotal reviews are overwhelmingly positive—and all of this has increased excitement among faculty. They are not only exploring new areas of thinking, they are also partnering with colleagues in unique ways to create interdisciplinary seminars and experiences beyond the classroom.

These opportunities to enhance teaching and intellectual exploration through Montserrat and participation in the Ignatian Pilgrimage are among the ways to ensure our faculty continue to carry out the mission of the college with even greater understanding and commitment. Building bridges and forging close personal, curricular, and teaching relationships among faculty members are widely recognized as critical

lasting effects of the pilgrimage. As one English professor said,

The most valuable outcome of the Ignatian Pilgrimage for me has been a new type of relationship with colleagues. Given that many of this year’s participants belong to my own department, and others I knew from committees, this came as a surprise. Travel exposes aspects of a person not visible in usual professional settings. Removed from college politics, we watched each other respond to landscapes, art, ideas, new people, good food, exhausting days, and the experience of being away from loved ones. The trust and respect I developed for many of my fellow pilgrims gives a new texture to my commitment to the Holy Cross community.

As of today, a total of sixty-five faculty members and administrators from Holy Cross have participated in six Ignatian Pilgrimages, walking in the footsteps of the man who established the principles of Jesuit education. By inviting individual members of our college community to combine reading, preparation, and conversation with the visceral experience of travel and reflection, we are strengthening our collective commitment to Jesuit mission and identity. As pilgrims—both on the journey and when we return to campus—we end up thinking more deeply about the significance of the mission of Holy Cross and about our own calling as teachers and members of a community. That thinking turns into actions—great and small, immediate and long lasting, in and out of the classroom—that foster ongoing efforts to ensure that our founding core identity is evident, alive, internalized, and sustained. □

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