Catherine O’Donnell


Catherine O’Donnell has made a distinct contribution to Jesuit studies by her succinct but nuanced survey of the history of the Society of Jesus in the United States from its multi-national colonial origins to the present day. Well-grounded in current scholarship, O’Donnell is sensitive to the ever-changing international context within which the Jesuit experience in North America developed.

As a historian of the colonial and early national eras, O’Donnell is at her best in depicting the Society’s experience from the 1630s to the 1830s. She particularly excels in her examination of the church-state relations that made the Jesuit missionaries in New France, New Spain, and British America both evangelizers and agents of empire. Equally impressive is her comparative treatment of the Jesuits’ efforts in North America to integrate Christianity and European culture within the cultures of the tribes they were evangelizing. Disease, weapons, settlements, and plants were all part of the European baggage that radically disrupted traditional native life. As O’Donnell notes, “misunderstanding, conflict, resistance, and tragedy” were inevitable consequences (7). She astutely uses individual experiences to illuminate larger development, as the influence that Marie Accault had upon the distinctive evangelization practices that Jesuits came to exercise in the Illinois territory in the eighteenth century.

In four brief chapters O’Donnell provides a superb summary of the Jesuit experience in colonial Maryland. Suppression in 1773 brought an abrupt end to the Society of Jesus in British America. It also caused John Carroll, a Maryland Jesuit teaching in the Jesuit college at Bruges, to return to North America in 1774, after nearly thirty years. Within two years, he reluctantly became part of
a delegation that attempted, in vain, to persuade Canadians to join the revolution that their American brethren were making against the British crown.

In the aftermath of independence, Carroll organized the ex-Jesuit clergy as a republican body that chose representatives to govern the church and its property until such time as the Society of Jesus would be restored. To provide future clergy for the Catholic community in the new nation, Carroll founded Georgetown College and St. Mary’s Seminary (Baltimore). The full restoration did not come until 1814. By that time six former Jesuits in the United States had rejoined the Russian Province of the Society that had survived because Catherine the Great valued the colleges that Jesuits conducted in her empire. That began the great migration of Jesuits from European countries that, over the course of the nineteenth century, enabled the Society to greatly expand its colleges, parishes, and missions, particularly to native Americans, across an expanding United States.

The immigrants, often refugees from liberal revolutions in Europe, brought anti-republican, Rome-centric leanings that displaced the Maryland tradition that John Carroll had epitomized. Houses of formation, beginning with Woodstock College (Maryland) in 1869, were located in remote rural areas to insulate Jesuit scholastics from the “acids of modernity.”

By the early twentieth century, the Society had, in its institutions of higher learning, a veritable educational empire, as the Jesuits increasingly focused its manpower, energies, and investment into that apostolate. Minor commitments were to the giving of missions, or Catholic revivals, as Jay Dolan termed them, which dated back to the mid-nineteenth century. This work, which began as a peripatetic activity became more institutionalized with the establishment of retreat houses in the early twentieth century.

The educational institutions experienced an exponential growth during the first half of the twentieth century. By 1954, there were over 120,000 students. In the second half of the century, student populations continued to expand, as they became more diverse in race, gender, and religion. The institutions themselves became modernized, with the professionalization of a faculty decreasingly Jesuit and increasing non-Catholic. Meanwhile, from the 1930s on, Jesuits increasingly became involved in social reform work, beginning with the Labor Institutes.

The American Jesuit experience had begun in the seventeenth century as a mission of Europe and well into the nineteenth century Jesuit provinces were heavily dependent upon immigrants. By the twentieth century, these US provinces had a sufficient surplus of members to begin sending missionaries around
the globe, beginning with the Maryland-New York mission to the Philippines in the wake of the Spanish American War.

The Sixties touched off an upheaval that rocked the American Jesuits as much as it did the larger church and society. O’Donnell packs into a relatively few pages a shrewd examination of the disruptive forces that closed institutions, led to mass departures from Jesuit ranks, and revolutionized attitudes toward church and society, as well as the Society’s complex response to them.

Some will find too much coverage of the East Coast Society at the expense of other portions, particularly those in the Far West. Others will perhaps object that the extensive American Jesuit foreign missions get barely a mention. Still others will find the emergence of a social activism within the Society, from the Sixties on, deserves fuller treatment (although the author’s emblematic section on Dan Berrigan works very well). Yet others will note the omission of the influence of the general congregations on developments within the American Society in the post-Vatican II era. In such a brief overview of the Society’s experience in what is now the United States, there has to be choices made over focus and inclusion. In general, O’Donnell gets high marks for hers.

As a greatly reduced Society of Jesus in the United States (down from nine provinces to four) enters the third decade of the twenty-first century, it confronts a troubled church in a turbulent nation wracked by related disasters: a pandemic projected to kill a half million Americans and a presidential assault against the very fabric of the democracy, which has distinguished the United States since its inception. How the Society will negotiate the treacherous terrain exposed by these twin crises is still playing itself out, although it was heartening to see the noted Jesuit author, James Martin, deliver an invocation at the Democratic National Convention. O’Donnell closes her survey with the comment: “It is not clear what the future holds; throughout the long history of Jesuits in the colonies and the United States, it never has been” (106). True enough, but O’Donnell’s recapitulation of that experience provides a rich array of benchmarks for judging what should shape it.

Robert Emmett Curran
Emeritus, Georgetown University, History Department, Georgetown, DC, USA
rcurran072@roadrunner.com
DOI:10.1163/22141332-0802P011-01