



## SOURCES

### The Apostolate of Education (1927)

Włodimir Ledóchowski, S.J.

*Jesuit Curia, Society of Jesus, Rome, Italy*

[Editorial Note: Włodimir Ledóchowski's (1866–1942) letter to the Spanish Provincials (December 17, 1927) offers an articulation of the Society of Jesus's educational mission amid the political and ideological upheavals of the early twentieth century. Ledóchowski, who served as Superior General from 1915 to 1942, viewed the primary aim of Jesuit education in continuity with its foundational tradition: to provide a Christian formative education that would produce intellectually capable and morally sound future leaders. His appeal to the Spanish Provincials was part of a broader effort to consolidate Jesuit educational practice in the face of mounting political and spiritual challenges—especially in Europe where, in his eyes, communism presented a coherent and aggressive alternative to Catholic pedagogy.]

Within this historical context, the letter identifies four central areas of educational concern: the primacy of spiritual and religious instruction; the continuous intellectual development of teachers; the “rule of touch” and gentleness guiding those in charge of overseeing student discipline (including prefects of discipline and temporal coadjutors); and the careful, strategic selection of students. These themes reflect Ledóchowski's conviction that Jesuit schools must serve as explicitly formative environments—spaces in which religious doctrine, moral character, and intellectual engagement are mutually reinforcing.

Notably, in terms of the Jesuit pedagogical tradition, the figure of the Spiritual Father (i.e., the Spiritual Prefect) occupies a central place in Ledóchowski's recommendations. This role is presented as essential to the entire educational enterprise, ensuring that students are not only guided intellectually, but are also accompanied in their interior life and ethical discernment. Yet the Spiritual Father is just one among several adult figures entrusted with the

holistic formation of youth. The letter delineates the distinct responsibilities of confessors, academic and religious instructors, prefects and sub-prefects of discipline, and temporal coadjutors, projecting an image of Jesuit education as a complex, coordinated endeavor rooted in personal relationships and moral exemplarity.

Ledóchowski calls on teachers to reject mediocrity and embrace lifelong learning, on confessors to orient students toward higher spiritual ends, and on catechists to communicate the significance of their teachings through subtlety rather than overt insistence. Following longstanding tradition in Jesuit pedagogy, he also stresses that disciplinary roles must be exercised with gentleness and care. In his fourth and final point, he underscores the importance of stringent admissions policies, urging that schools consider both the religious background of students' families and the personal character each student brings to the academic community.

For contemporary educators in Jesuit institutions, Ledóchowski's letter offers a blend of enduring insights and historically situated limitations. Its emphasis on rigorous teacher preparation, high intellectual standards, and the spiritual responsibility of forming young people remains relevant for institutions committed to Jesuit formative education. At the same time, the letter reflects a pivotal historical moment in which Jesuit schools consciously positioned themselves as alternatives to ideological materialism and collectivism. Significantly, Ledóchowski acknowledged that these competing systems—particularly communist models—offered learning points for the Society itself. He observed, with some paradox, that modern pedagogical theories were beginning to recognize the formative importance of spiritual and character education—an emphasis the Jesuits had long championed. Furthermore, he cautioned Jesuits not to dismiss the zeal and holistic view on education of their ideological adversaries, noting that communists were, in fact, redoubling their efforts in the very domain Jesuits had historically claimed as their own.

Some other aspects of the letter—such as its endorsement of exclusionary admissions practices or the assumption of a uniform religious culture—may not seem to align with contemporary values shaped by pluralism, inclusion, and intercultural dialogue. Nevertheless, its central insight endures: that education, in the Jesuit tradition, is a deeply apostolic act—a means of cultural formation and spiritual cultivation that must be continually reimagined in response to the demands and challenges of each new generation. The present source has been maintained in its original form with added footnotes.]

Source: *Selected Writings of Father Ledóchowski* (Chicago: The American Assistancy of the Society of Jesus, 1947), 643–46. The original in Latin was published in *Acta Romana Societatis Iesu*, 6, no. 1 (1928): 105–9.

## To the Superiors of the Spanish Provinces

Dear Reverend Fathers in Christ,  
Pax Christi.

I have often written, as you well know, on the ministry of training youth in the colleges, always one of the primary ministries of the Society, often praised by the Sovereign Pontiffs, and a conspicuous source of the Society's own growth and of fruit for souls.<sup>1</sup> In these times especially this ministry will be judged to be of greater moment, particularly if we look to the end which our Holy Father Ignatius proposed to himself, namely the formation of youth in doctrine and character, so that excellent candidates may thus be prepared who would enter the Society from the colleges.<sup>2</sup>

The excellence of this ministry, therefore, leads me to make certain recommendations to you on the subject, such as I judge most important in themselves, drawn, I do not hesitate to say, from the depth of my heart, that you may communicate them in turn to the rectors of colleges.

They are mainly four, and of these the first place is due to that which regards the spiritual and religious instruction of the students. Everyone knows that this is, so to speak, the foundation and controlling principle of everything else in our schools, in which such a mode of procedure should obtain that the students be well instructed in the subjects pertaining to Christian doctrine, and while being trained in letters also, above all form habits of character worthy of Christians.<sup>3</sup>

---

1 See Wictor Gramatowski, S.J., "Ledóchowski, Włodzimierz," in *Diccionario histórico de la Compañía de Jesús*, ed. Charles E. O'Neill, S.J. and Joaquín M.<sup>a</sup> Domínguez, S.J., 2 (Rome/Madrid: Institutum Historicum Societatis Iesu/Universidad Pontificia Comillas 2001), 1687–90. Official acts and writings on education by Ledóchowski can be found in the volumes 2–10 of the *Acta Romana Societatis Iesu* series (Rome: Curia Praepositi Generali, 1915–46) corresponding to Ledóchowski's generalate. A selection of these writings can be found in *Selected Writings of Father Ledóchowski* (Chicago: The American Assistancy of the Society of Jesus, 1947), 643–58.

2 In a letter dated in 1551, Ignatius of Loyola outlined several reasons why the Society of Jesus should engage in educational work. Among the points concerning the Society as a religious order, he wrote: "Although no one may urge the students, particularly young boys, to enter the Society, nevertheless, through good example and personal contact, as well as the Latin declamations on the virtues held on Sundays, young men are spontaneously attracted, and many laborers can be won for the vineyard of Christ Our Lord." Cristiano Casalini and Claude N. Pavur, S.J., eds., *Jesuit Pedagogy (1540-1616): A Reader* (Chestnut Hill, MA: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2016), 58.

3 *Constitutions*, P. IV, c. 7, n. 2. [original note from the *Acta Romana* edition of

Not without justice do parents demand this effort of us, to whom they commit their sons to be educated. To this end all who are engaged in the colleges, Superiors, teachers, Prefects of Discipline, must look.<sup>4</sup> Above all Spiritual Fathers must be appointed who are eminently qualified for this position, men, that is to say, persuaded of the excellence and singular importance of their office and gifted with the requisite ability for dealing with the young and leading them in the ways of perfection.<sup>5</sup>

By all means, dear Fathers, unless we wish to eliminate the colleges altogether, let us maintain the ancient traditions of the Society, of which we have outstanding documents, describing both the necessity of this office and the qualities of the one who is to fulfill it.<sup>6</sup> Let us on no account suffer

---

this letter]. See *Constitutions of the Society of Jesus: A Critical Edition with the Complementary Norms*, ed. Barton T. Geger, S.J. (Chestnut Hill, MA: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2024), 208, where it says: “In these schools, measures should be taken that extern students are well instructed in matters of Christian doctrine, go to confession every month if possible, attend the sermons, and, in sum, acquire along with their letters the habits of conduct worthy of a Christian.”

- 4 While discipline was always a concern in Jesuit pedagogy—the *Ratio studiorum* includes several rules on how to administer it—the title of *Prefect of Discipline* was adopted inconsistently over the centuries. Matters of discipline were often handled by the Prefect of Studies or by individual teachers. Over time, however, Prefects of Discipline began to be appointed, and the diversity of practices across schools within the same province prompted local superiors to seek guidance and greater uniformity. In response, General Congregation 23 (September 15–October 23, 1883) issued a decree (Decree 25) addressing these requests. While it rejected the idea of establishing fixed and general rules, it required provinces to submit their local regulations to the Superior General for approval. See John W. Padberg, S.J., Martin D. O’Keefe, S.J., and John L. McCarthy, S.J., eds., *For Matters of Greater Moment: The First Thirty Jesuit General Congregations* (St. Louis, MO: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1994), 471.
- 5 This passage refers to the *Praefectus rerum spiritualium*, or Spiritual Prefect. In Jesuit communities, this role was typically held by a Jesuit who served as the spiritual director, responsible for overseeing matters of spiritual formation. Although the *Ratio studiorum* does not mention the position explicitly, it alludes to its function within school life in the rules for the Rector. There, it is recommended that the Rector either deliver exhortations himself or delegate the task to “some respected father,” while also offering occasional advice that is “helpful and appropriate for the boys, class by class.” See *The Jesuit Ratio Studiorum: The Official Plan for Jesuit Education*, ed. Claude N. Pavur, S.J., (St. Louis, MO: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2005), 37. In combination with the Jesuits assigned to lead the activities of the sodalities, and other functions related to the cultivation of devotion, religious, and spiritual life, the function of the prefects of spirituality became increasingly relevant in Jesuit schools and colleges.
- 6 Ledóchowski likely refers to the three volumes of the *Institutum Societatis Iesu*, a collection of foundational documents of the Society of Jesus printed in Rome

that it lose among us anything of its importance or of the regard in which it is held now that its supreme necessity is recognized by modern educators and, under the lessons of experience, by the civil authorities, so that it is introduced even in the secular schools themselves.<sup>7</sup>

But let the Spiritual Father be worthy of his name. Let him prepare his exhortations with painstaking care, and adapt them as perfectly as possible to the capacity and age of his hearers. By no means content with this, let him make the special direction of each one a matter of his greatest concern, and call the students individually to see him, not indeed to exact an account of conscience from them, but to offer to each pertinent advice, suited to his temperament, capacity, and inclination.<sup>8</sup>

---

between 1892 and 1894. Its second volume included the *Ratio studiorum* along with other texts—such as the *industriæ*, instructions, and similar writings—that address various aspects of Jesuit religious life, including the ministry of education. These volumes were published during the generalate of Anton Maria Anderledy, S.J. (in office, 1887–92) and completed under his successor Luis Martín, S.J. (in office, 1892–1906). Ledóchowski's comment may also allude to works on Jesuit pedagogy printed and circulated since the restoration of the Society in 1814. These volumes typically compiled excerpts from key sources in the Jesuit educational tradition, intended to guide local superiors in implementing the educational principles established by the early Society. Among these essential texts are Francesco Sacchini's (1570–1625) *Paraenesis* and *Protrepticon*, Joseph de Jouvancy's (1643–1619) *Ratio Discendi ac Docendi*, and so forth. See Francesco Sacchini, S.J., *Exhortation and Advice for the Teachers of Young Students in Jesuit Schools*, ed. Casalini and Pavur (Chestnut Hill, MA: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2021), and Joseph de Jouvancy, S.J., *The Way to Learn and the Way to Teach*, ed. Casalini and Pavur (Chestnut Hill, MA: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2020).

- 7 It is unclear whom Ledóchowski precisely had in mind when referring to “modern educators,” but the local context of his letter—namely, the Italian situation as viewed from the Jesuit Curia in Rome—seems to suggest a reference to the emphasis on the concept of *spirit* as articulated by the neo-idealist philosopher Giovanni Gentile (1875–1944) in his educational reform under the Fascist regime in Italy. If by *spiritual life* Ledóchowski meant to include aspects of character formation, this would align with a broader concern shared by various educational movements and philosophies of the time—from progressive education to Marxist-communist models—which also emphasized moral and personal development as integral to the educational process.
- 8 The qualities in Jesuit educators that Ledóchowski emphasizes had already become commonplaces within the tradition, tracing back to sources from the early generations of the Society. Benet Perera (1536–1610), a renowned professor of philosophy and theology at the Roman College, for instance, used similar language when describing the ideal educator for Jesuit schools: “The teacher should be the sort of person whom the student trusts because of his learning and ability to exercise, understands because of his skillful fluency in teaching, loves for his enthusiasm and diligence, respects for the integrity of his life, and, when the

The students' confessors can and should contribute greatly to the same end. It is their duty in confession to direct the young, to arm them against the enemies of their souls, and to lead them on toward higher things. This is what the youths themselves desire, but cannot obtain if confessors do no more than hastily hear their confessions.

Finally, the teachers themselves, in accord with the spirit of our *Ratio studiorum*, ought not to neglect occasions that frequently present themselves of attracting their students to piety, by showing them the beauty of our religion, by recalling the examples of men eminent in the sciences, and by other means.

The religious instruction of the students is directly promoted by classes in catechism for the younger ones, in apologetics for the older, classes which are held for an hour twice a week. Here the same things are to be said which I have foreshadowed above: the classes must be diligently prepared, so as to correspond to the aptitude of the students; these must be furnished with the weapons they need to overcome the perils which the passing years will surely bring and to be able to answer at least the common difficulties that are proposed against dogma. Not so much by explicit words, as by the whole method and development of the teaching, the students must be persuaded that this knowledge is going to be of greatest service to them, so that they may be impelled to absorb it with alacrity. Certainly this result will not be obtained if they see that this class is more easily omitted than the others, or that there is no regularity in assigning the two hours a week to it, or that a less favorable time is scheduled, or that in any way whatsoever this subject is held of small account.

My second recommendation is concerned with promoting the best possible training of teachers. Good character must be acquired by the students, but along *with letters*; both make up the integral end of the colleges. Now surely the better informed teachers are in their subject, the better able they will be to inform their pupils. No teacher who has learned the matter assigned him middling well or even well enough in the first year or two of his teaching, and then recoils from all further study and investigation, will

---

occasion arises, feels he can approach freely for advice because of his humanity and personal warmth." See Casalini and Pavur, *Jesuit Pedagogy: A Reader*, 193. In the same years of this letter, the American Jesuits were involved in conversations that led to introducing the concept of *personalis alumnorum cura* (personal interest in students) that resonates with the "pertinent advice" mentioned in this letter and which Ledóchowski will adopt in his 1934 *Instructio* for the American colleges of the Society of Jesus. See A. Taiga Guterres, "Articulating a Jesuit Philosophy of Education in the Twentieth Century: A Critical Translation and Commentary on the *Instructio* of 1934 and 1948," *Jesuit Educational Quarterly*, 2nd ser., 1, no. 1 (2025): 73–114 (here, 90), <https://doi.org/10.51238/1ZnRn8z>.

ever be able to impart to his students an understanding and erudition in keeping with the progress made in various subjects in recent times. Further, it is extremely regrettable how much time is wasted, as I am told, by teachers who are content with a certain mediocrity, and refuse to strive after higher goals, that is to deepening their knowledge or to writing.

Now on this subject there are two points, not to be recalled to the minds of Superiors for they have been recalled more than once, but to be put into practice by them. The first is that they seriously strive to increase the number of those who are equipped with academic degrees.<sup>9</sup> These are thenceforth to be steadily applied to teaching so as to become excellent educators. In order that the number of these teachers with degrees be more easily increased, their studies should be arranged right from the minor seminary, as they really are in some places, that the students can be, and in fact, are presented to be examined for a degree over a period of time. In this way if one or other vocation is exposed to danger or even wrecked, we shall on the other hand have vocations the more solid and worth while.

The second point is that classes be assigned in good time to the teachers who are to conduct them, and be not easily changed. Let the young men who are to be sent to the colleges be informed shortly after their final examination in philosophy of the subjects which they are to teach, and then under the guidance of an experienced Father be instructed in sound pedagogy, as is usual in many Provinces of the Society. Otherwise it may come to pass that teachers lose heart, carry the burden of the class not with enthusiasm but reluctantly, spend their hours of leisure uselessly and, finally, that they doubt about the concern of Superiors and complain of their lack of foresight. Indeed we even deprive the students themselves of the instruction which we owe them *ex iustitia*. I grieve therefore to understand that negligence still exists in some of the Spanish Provinces even after my repeated admonitions, and this to such an extent that subject matter is sometimes assigned to the teachers only a week or even less before the opening of classes. This mode of acting is wholly opposed to the spirit of our Holy Father Ignatius, who in the fourth part of the Constitutions desires that, not only for theology, but also for letters and for the arts and natural sciences, fit and learned teachers in due number be provided.<sup>10</sup>

My third recommendation regards Prefects and Assistant Prefects of Discipline. How carefully their qualities are to be weighed, and how highly esteemed, appears from this alone that they contribute more effectively

9 The same concern for raising the level of academic degrees of Jesuit educators was shared in the American context during these very same years. See Guterres, "Articulating a Jesuit Philosophy," 77–79, 82, and 91.

10 See Geger, *Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, 207–8.

than others toward forming the character of students, of students that is to say who for the most part, since they are young boys, imitate little by little the example of the supervisor and readily mold themselves to his conduct.

Wherefore, although their whole activity centers on external conduct and although they must respect the consciences of the boys and by no means encroach on the internal forum, nevertheless they, should be solidly spiritual men, including a number who are ordained to the priesthood, competent to recognize the aptitudes of the young and to direct our Scholastics also in the office of Assistant Prefect. Hence it is clear too with what solicitude Superiors should see to it that they have sufficient time for performing their daily spiritual exercises in their entirety and with the needed quiet. The Prefects and Subprefects, however, must regard their office as a very important one and discharge it with all seriousness. They should treat the boys with great reverence<sup>11</sup> and observe the rule of touch exactly, as befits religious. In this matter Superiors and General Prefects should set a good example. If a violation is noted, it must not be coveted over but punished, first by the recitation of the culpa in the refectory, and should it occur again, by more severe penances.<sup>12</sup>

If ever from strict necessity, which I understand sometimes obtains, this office is to be entrusted to Coadjutor Brothers, this must not be done without great prudence and discrimination. Let those chosen be such Brothers as so important a charge demands, excellent religious, by no means uncouth or harsh, but friendly and affable; nor should they be set over any but small boys. All the supervisors indeed, but most of all these Brothers, should rely not solely or principally upon external measures and rule by military command; but they should gently draw the boys to right conduct from interior and supernatural motives, from the law of right reason and conscience, and cast in their minds the seed of Christian perfection.

Finally, I should like to persuade Superiors to practice severe selection in admitting students. Certainly I take joy and comfort in the huge number of youth handed over to our care and discipline; but I rate their qualities higher than their numbers, and desire not so much that they be many as that they excel in learning and in character. Let us follow the example of the adversaries of religion, of the communists themselves of our day, who take the greatest pains, for the readier dissemination of their base ideas, that the best workers in every shop be imbued with them, those who stand

11 Here the letters echo Juvenal's say as a common reference in the tradition of Jesuit pedagogy: "Maxima debetur puero reverentia" (The greatest reverence is owed to the child). Juvenal, *Satires* 14:47.

12 See Geger, *Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, 231; and Pavur, *The Ratio studiorum*, 126–27 and 151–52.



out in their natural gifts and have the power to influence others smoothly and more effectively.

Never, and especially not for economic reasons, are youths of corrupt morals or sons of families that are generally recognized as irreligious to be admitted. Moreover, in keeping students or dismissing them, the prescriptions of the Constitutions, Part IV, Chapter 16 (*Epitome*, n. 390)<sup>13</sup> are to be faithfully observed. Rectors may well be assured that the supply of students will be greater as the selection is the more careful. Of this I could give very many examples; let one suffice, that of a certain college in which not a few students of loose ways or of less reputable families had matriculated. A new rector set over the college dismissed more than twenty of them, not without scandal to some of the Fathers, who feared that the school would be reduced to nothing. Behold, so many pious and honored parents, recognizing that they could do so now with a safe and quiet conscience, entrusted their sons to us to be educated that the new registrants exceeded the number dismissed. God Himself so blessed our decision, taken to promote His greater glory.

If the selection of students be more strict, if we, retain those outstanding for piety and love of study, external discipline will be maintained easily and without harshness, and the current of our lives and those of the students, will flow more peacefully and happily. We shall reap in fine from this ministry the richest fruits, including especially the fruit of vocations, as the Society has always clone from its very inception.

I commend myself to your Holy Sacrifices.

Your Reverences' servant in Christ,  
Wlodimir Ledóchowski,  
General of the Society of Jesus

December 17, 1927  
Rome

---

13 Geger, *Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, 230–31.