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REFLECTIONS ON THE LIVING TRADITION

## Where is God Calling Us? Building an Ignatian School Community

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### Context

I co-teach an Ignatian Global Scholars class, and we begin each day with a “re-set,” inviting students into a few minutes of silence before our work starts—to consider where we have been in our day, as well as inviting learners to consider ways in which they will participate in our upcoming class. “Maybe you can use this time to re-set, clear your mind. Perhaps, think about, reflect on, or pray about how you’d like to engage with the material and the class today.” Sometimes I say, “Perhaps now is a perfect time *to ask God for the grace you wish to receive today during class.*”

What are the graces we wish to receive today? Where is God calling us?

It is in this context that at De Smet Jesuit (St. Louis, MO) we developed ideas around our school’s latest Strategic Plan in the spring of 2022. In the beginning, our president, Fr. Ronny O’Dwyer, S.J., began by asking our school community: “Where is God calling us?”

Explicit in O’Dwyer’s question is the word *us*, which implies that when we move in God’s direction, *we* move . . . when we reflect on where our deepest desires meet God’s desires for us—to think and act in new ways in the world in which we live guided by the Holy Spirit—we move together. Few things in our Ignatian charism are done in isolation; rather, we are companions and collaborators.

Hopefully, too, as we prayerfully consider this question—*where is God calling us*—we might also consider where we find joy in what we do, be-

cause this joy—these feelings of consolation—is where God is calling each of us.

As we institutionally explored this question, what emerged were priorities that, if achieved, would contribute to the fulfillment of a particular vision. Some of these priorities are:

1. Building our middle school to address needs of Catholic education in the Archdiocese of Saint Louis (MO);
2. Growing our Inclusion Academy to provide education for students with Down Syndrome, and all the while;
3. Growing our Ignatian charism.

Along with these priorities, we asked:

- Which ones include “community?” And if so, who is included in “community?” What groups of people encompass our school community? Where are our blind spots? Who is left out?
- What are challenges/obstacles to/tensions within the priorities, for our Ignatian school community?
- Who else or what else helps shape and build the vision for our Ignatian school community?
- Do we network with others outside our school? If so, what or who?
- And what’s next? Having reflected on these ideas, what do we notice, and what needs action?

Our responses to these questions help us continue to build our Ignatian school community. De Smet Jesuit’s current Strategic Plan is the most comprehensive in the school’s history and serves as the foundation for our future school initiatives and facilities upgrades and additions, over the next five years.

In it, we are *called to the frontiers*, remembering why our school was founded: De Smet Jesuit was founded in 1967, in response to the growing need for Jesuit secondary education options in St. Louis. In 1967, the Jesuits in the Missouri Province responded to this need.

Our school Strategic Plan is trackable and achievable, and it is the culmination of community perspectives that includes input from the following school groups:

- Students (JSN survey);
- Parents (JSN survey, working Strategic Plan Pillar teams);
- Alumni (JSN survey, working Strategic Plan Pillar teams);

- Faculty and staff (SWOT analysis at beginning of process, during targeted individual conversations, working Strategic Plan Pillar Teams, and JSN survey); and
- Board members (Strategic Plan priorities approval, JSN survey).

We also used the JSN school group survey results, to inform our Strategic Plan and our sponsorship self-study.

Prior to our Strategic Plan development and solidification, the COVID-19 pandemic was an inflection point. De Smet Jesuit was nimble and flexible, continuously attentive to students and families. We used creativity and imagination to meet students where they were, and bring them along with us, in a safe, predictable, and supportive environment that continued to provide the foundation for students coming into relationship with one another, with Jesus, and ultimately with God. That said, COVID-19 was also a figurative frontier, forcing us to practice Ignatian Indifference<sup>1</sup>—being detached enough from things, people, or experiences to be able to either take them up or to put them aside, depending on whether they help us to praise, reference, and serve God.

COVID-19, a tragedy by all accounts, led our school to new ways of meeting needs and serving students. And, since COVID-19, we have developed the following programmatic foci:

- Understanding that our academic curriculum is important, as well as care for students spiritually, emotionally, psychologically, and physically—*cura personalis*.<sup>2</sup>
- Creating a School Improvement Plan (SIP), as part of our accreditation process, that focuses on vertically and horizontally aligning our academic curriculum; using best practices, research-based classroom teaching; and using data that informs student learning.
- Growing our Ignatian Global Scholars Certificate Program<sup>3</sup> in collaboration with the Jesuit Schools Network (JSN). Then, using this as a model for future programming in the school.

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1 See Marina Berzins McCoy, “Ignatian Indifference,” IgnatianSpirituality.com, accessed December 15, 2025, <https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-indifference/>.

2 See Andy Otto, “Cura Personalis,” IgnatianSpirituality.com, accessed December 15, 2025, <https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/cura-personalis/>.

3 Our Ignatian Global Scholars Certificate Program, rooted in the Jesuit Universal Apostolic Preferences, invites students to take globally-focused classes, participate in co-curriculars, travel, serve, and reflect—then earn a Certificate upon graduation.

- Growing our Inclusion Academy for students with Down Syndrome.<sup>4</sup>
- Testing a partnership with St. Louis City (our professional soccer team)—to educate student athletes in their development soccer program that requires them to travel extensively.
- And, serving the needs of boys in grades 6-8, in response to current Catholic faith needs of that group and positively collaborating with and responding to the Archdiocese of St. Louis' *All Things New*—by planning for the opening of our middle school in the fall of 2025.

*Where is God calling us?* And where do we continue to find joy in what we do? This is where the spirit is calling us. Building an Ignatian School community invites us to continuous growth in response to questions and needs. Our continuous reflection on our experiences reveals answers.

Our trials, practices, initiatives, and habits lead us to become better only because they have been carefully aligned to our central mission and focus, which has been clearly communicated by our president to our school many times, and is echoed in the JESEDU-Jogja Vision Statement sentence—from the experience of participants in Indonesia during the summer of 2024: we try to lead “others to God in an encounter with Jesus Christ through the gift of the *Spiritual Exercises* and Ignatian spirituality.”

These Strategic Plan initiatives only work when we are in community. But the work does not suppose there are no obstacles. We, of course, are called to live in the tension of challenges present in our schools.

### **Challenge One—Diminishing Jesuits in School**

The first challenge when we create Ignatian school communities is a response to the diminishing number of Jesuits in our school.

We meet this challenge when we accept the invitation by the Society of Jesus to collaborate with them—to be their companions—as we work to embody Ignatian spirituality for students in the school.

“The culture of the Jesuit teacher consisted of the attitudes, habits, and practices that led him to teach in certain ways. Much of that culture came from his environment, which was the pedagogical organization, practices,

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4 In August 2023, De Smet Jesuit became the first Catholic high school in St. Louis to launch an Inclusive Education Program for young men with intellectual disabilities within a typical high school setting. Rooted in our Jesuit mission to care for the whole person, this program provides students the opportunity to grow academically, socially, and spiritually in a supportive and faith-filled environment. See “Inclusion Academy,” De Smet Jesuit High School, accessed December 15, 2025, <https://www.desmet.org/explore-de-smet/inclusive-education-program>.

attitudes, and presuppositions of his order—in other words, the Society’s teaching culture.”<sup>5</sup> For the greater glory of God, not for his own glory.

In 1969, De Smet Jesuit had eighteen Jesuits: President, Principal, Assistant Principal, one in English, two in math, three in history, two in world languages, four in religion (the entire theology department), one in studio art, one in maintenance, and one bookstore manager). This represented nearly 50% of the faculty and staff. The community of Jesuits, their way of proceeding, was Jesuit *and* Ignatian because, well, our faculty were in large part Jesuits.

Today, we have one Jesuit: the Director of the Work, our President. He represents a little over 1% of the school faculty and staff. We have gone from 50% Jesuits to 1% Jesuit in 55 years. This is a trend in all of our schools. And it’s something that since the mid-nineties, Jesuit Secondary Education Association (JSEA), now Jesuit School Network (JSN), has been helping schools plan for.

JSN designs programs and resources inviting schools to strengthen their Ignatian charism and identity. This is one of the networks that helps us build Ignatian school communities, as the presence of Jesuits in our schools diminishes.

In our USA Central and Southern (UCS) province, we have thirteen schools, and some of those schools will perhaps never have Jesuits assigned to them again, while others will. Considering this fact, how will we remain Jesuit and Ignatian, without the presence of Jesuits in our building? And will Jesuit sponsorship continue?

Our previous provincial, Fr. Ron Mercier, S.J., in a keynote to UCS Jesuits who work in our province secondary and presecondary schools, at the meeting in New Orleans about 8 years ago, said that our UCS schools will remain Jesuit and sponsored by the Society of Jesus if they retain and animate the Jesuit *and* Ignatian charism and thus maintain a healthy relationship with the province through the Provincial.

To do this, we must continue to “embody a spirituality that is Ignatian.”

At that meeting, though, there was debate among a small group of Jesuits in secondary education who felt a school could only be Jesuit *and* Ignatian when it had Jesuits. As I sat listening to that debate, I heard clericalism. And I left that meeting thinking, “What does this mean for our schools?”

Today our first challenge is responding to the diminishing number of Jesuits in our schools by accepting the invitation to collaborate with the

5 Paul F. Grendler, “The Culture of the Jesuit Teacher 1548–1773,” *Journal of Jesuit Studies* 3, no. 1 (2016): 18, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22141332-00301002>.

Society of Jesus, through the Province, through the provincial, and through JSN—as it relates to how specifically our school is Ignatian in accordance with Jesuit Universal Apostolic Preferences and Jesuit Schools Network’s *Standards and Benchmarks*, and so continue to be sponsored by the Provincial, in our Province, through the Sponsorship Agreement Process.

Today we have, celebrate, and animate an Ignatian spirituality inviting us into a way of proceeding that gives witness of Jesus Christ, to one another, and to students. How do we then resource and fine-tune our behaviors and ways of proceeding to continuously align to the Ignatian and Jesuit way of proceeding, despite the loss of Jesuits?

Perhaps this is the grace we should be asking God for, during this time in our histories. And perhaps, too, this is the place for communal discernment. Collaboration is certainly key to building Ignatian schools. In what ways do we collaborate with others to retain the Jesuit and Ignatian charism in our schools?

### **Challenge Two—Catholicism & Pluralism**

The second challenge is a “going to the frontiers” issue: our response to a student and adult population in our schools that is not as religiously active, practicing, and homogeneous as it once was. Catholicism is perhaps not practiced as much among students and families whom we serve, and we accept more students who are not practicing, not Catholic, and perhaps not Christian. As we accept these students, do we proselytize, or do we invite them to learn to discern where they find consolation?

How do we see not only student experiences in our schools but also disaggregated data about student faith knowledge and practice, as the opportunity to develop meaningful Catholic pathways that are welcoming? How do we do *welcoming work*?

Or do we side-line student experiences and data about the increasingly diverse student population in our school, dismissing it as secular creep & pluralism? And march ahead with our Catholic agenda(s)?

What role does pluralism and our views of secular society play in our schools, and how are we responding to a decrease in Church-attending Catholics in the US, along with geographical and ethnic shifts among Catholics in the US?

### **More About Our Challenges**

Challenge one is for us and it’s on us: the laity. In what ways are we invited to collaborate with others to build Ignatian schools by embodying Ignatian spirituality in our lives? As Pope Francis (r. 2013–25) remarked about the laity on March 15, 2023: “All of you, the majority of you are laypeople. The

laity share in the priestly, prophetic, and royal office of Christ and therefore have their own share in the mission of the whole people of God in the Church and in the world.”<sup>6</sup>

As lay collaborators, then, what is our role? Jesus Christ performed three functions (or “offices”) in his earthly ministry—those of prophet, priest, and king. What do those mean for us today? Simply put, they invite us to share responsibility *with the Church, with the Jesuits*—as collaborators in this work of the Church. At my school today, the laity represents 99% of our faculty and staff.

Our actions in school and in the world give witness to Jesus Christ. But, just as no Jesuit is perfect because he is human, the laity are not perfect either. We must live in the consolation of progress, not perfection.

It is therefore on us to use resources available to live Christian lives through an Ignatian lens, whereby bringing Jesus to life in our schools and helping students to know that God unconditionally loves them. This is our challenge.

Implicit in the second challenge is that of course we know this fact: *the world is our home*. Can we be at home situated in the secular and pluralist world? This is perhaps like how Fr. Ed Dowling, S.J. (1898–1960), was when he traveled from St. Louis to New York, inviting himself into the secular and pluralist world of Alcoholics Anonymous by visiting Bill Wilson. Fr. Ed Dowling’s reflection to Bill Wilson, AA founder, was this: “I’m Father Ed Dowling, S.J., from St. Louis . . . a Jesuit friend and I have been struck by the similarity of the AA Twelve Steps and the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius.”<sup>7</sup> This Jesuit was “at home in the world” enough to go to Bill—from St. Louis to New York City. Bill Wilson didn’t find Fr. Dowling. As Ignatian educators, how do we “go out,” imitating Dowling? Again, how do we do “welcoming work?”

The first meeting between the two, initiated by Fr. Ed Dowling, S.J., would prove to be one of many in the AA sponsee-sponsor relationship that the Jesuit would have with the groups AA founder—a quintessential secular organization known worldwide for its resounding successes and 12-step framework to help recover those suffering from addiction and at the same time its deliberate separation from organized religion.

6 Francis, “Catechesis. The passion for evangelization: the apostolic zeal of the believer 7. The Second Vatican Council. 2. Being apostles in an apostolic Church,” Pope Francis to General Audience, Saint Peter’s Square, March 15, 2023, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2023/documents/20230315-udienza-generale.html>.

7 Robert Fitzgerald, *The Soul of Sponsorship: The Friendship of Fr. Ed Dowling, S.J. and Bill Wilson in Letters* (Hazelden Publishing, 2011), 2.

In June 2024, 106 members of the Jesuit Global Network of Schools (JGNS) gathered in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, to explore what Educating for Faith in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century means for contemporary Jesuit schools like ours. They were joined by hundreds of colleagues representing Jesuit schools from around the globe via social media networks and live streaming hosted by Educate Magis. This gathering produced an important vision statement for our schools, which addressed how we should position ourselves in an increasingly secular and pluralized world.

Reviewing the points made me think about how easy Fr. Ed Dowling, S.J., made this look, with his joyous approach to secularism and pluralism—forward-looking, making connections, embracing, *not fearing*. Like Dowling, how do we enter into the world?

Here are some important takeaways from the gathering of Jesuit Global Network of Schools in Yogyakarta that will impact how we go about our business of building Ignatian school communities today and in the future:

- Superior General Arturo Sosa, S.J., commended Jesuit schools “to become apostolic bridges between this beautiful and God given diversity and our faith.”
- Jesuit schools are apostolic platforms, charged with becoming “evangelizers” in this change of epoch by leading others to God in an encounter with Jesus Christ through the gift of the *Spiritual Exercises* and Ignatian Spirituality.
- Jesuit schools should form adult members of the school community in Ignatian spirituality, particularly in the practice of the Examen, personal discernment, and discernment in common, and make an experience of the *Spiritual Exercises* available to all.
- In this change of epoch, faith formation efforts among students must also be rooted in the *Spiritual Exercises* and Ignatian Spirituality and should play a central role in the mission of the school.
- Jesuit schools are encouraged to see themselves as “places of encounter where, as Saint Ignatius encourages “God is found in all things.”
- “Inter-religious dialogue” refers to the “intentional and respectful engagement between individuals or among groups from different religious traditions with the goal of fostering mutual understanding, respect, and peace.”
- To enter fruitful inter-religious dialogue, students must possess a sense of their own religious identity and build, from the beginning an openness to other religious experiences.



- In this way our education recognizes the ways that God is alive in the other and learns from the other's experience.
- Jesuit schools are serving within a secularizing or secularized world.
- Secularization is neither "a friend nor a foe" of faith, but rather it is the context in which many Jesuit schools serve. Therefore, Jesuit schools must understand secularism, analyze it, value their positive aspects and be critical when it becomes an obstacle to a religious experience that opens human life to God. Our schools must also dialogue with secularism with full confidence that whenever one person encounters another in love, they learn something new about God.
- Understanding and dialoguing with secularism are key components in forming a resilient faith in our students.
- Jesuit schools intentionally educate for Catholic faith in the 21st century by accompanying their students in discovering and deepening their core identity—their resilient faith—that emerges out of an encounter with God through an encounter with Jesus Christ that is supported by and celebrated within a community of faith and guided by adults formed and adept in Ignatian spirituality, our Catholic tradition, and the life of Jesus Christ, this identity entails dialogue with other religions and secular views, and implemented according to the local context and culture.
- Our work is simply to create conditions and communities where this encounter may happen.

Considering these ideas, which are the building blocks of Ignatian schools, what is our response? What are we most drawn to? What do we wonder about?

Perhaps these are bigger picture ideas when it comes to building Ignatian school communities, but there is good news when it comes to how this plays out at school—for how we build Ignatian communities in our schools.

These ideas seem consistent with (1) concrete actions as they relate to our school's response to building Ignatian school communities and (2) resources that we might consider, in the hopes that this might spark your thinking about how to continue building your own Ignatian school community.

## De Smet Jesuit High School

Below are some Strategic Plan concrete actions, to continue to build an Ignatian school community over the next five years—and many of these actions represent movement to the frontiers—meeting specific needs of those we serve:

1. We are collaborating with a local Catholic organization—the Boniface Foundation—to develop and deliver a school-wide cultural audit, create a school team and plan, network with JSN, and work with Campus Ministry to develop retreats, support affinity groups, and introduce Culture-fest—embracing and serving all students in our school. At the same time, we are inviting discussion on how we can be more economically-feasible for those in poverty and specifically for those who attend our Jesuit nativity school, Loyola Academy—who serves the African American population that is at and below the economic poverty line in the city of St. Louis. We are updating our culturally responsive teaching and learning practices and integrating those into our class visit rubric and resulting reflecting conversations. These are “frontier issues,” directly aligning with the Jesuit Universal Apostolic Preference, walking with the excluded.
2. We are developing our Ignatian formation reflection tool used by teachers as the centerpiece of their annual evaluation conversations with our principal team, ensuring the invitation to reflect on how our way of proceeding in our classrooms is Ignatian. How do we embody Ignatian spirituality?
3. We are further developing our Sophomore Conference program and Senior Insignis programming, based upon *The Profile of the Grad at Grad* and collecting and using concrete data results to improve student experiences.
4. We are visiting two Jesuit schools in our province to learn more about their campus ministry programming ideas (and related facilities) for students.
5. We are continuing to develop and resource our school campus ministry: writing student learning outcomes, gathering data on faith formation and spiritual needs of students, and addressing gaps through programming in theology, campus ministry, and retreats. We are doing this through Cognia-supported Catholicity surveys and (potentially) through surveys from a JSN Catholicity project. We are going to the frontiers by looking at our students and their faith practices and developing institutional interventions

to be welcoming—to work toward renewed expressions of Catholic identity today amid a complex and changing culture.

6. We are collaborating with local parishes and the archdiocese of St. Louis to offer OCIA to students, frontier issues to help students.
7. We are reviewing and revising student retreats for each grade level and making each grade level retreat a student requirement. At the same time, we are ensuring every retreat has a required student written reflection piece tied to our Profile of the Graduate at Graduation Student Portfolio.
8. We are reviewing and renewing the school service program to ensure it aligns with the UAPs, especially as our service programs invite students into direct contact with the excluded and serving at sites focused directly on sustainability and ecology—two areas that continue to be frontier issues and preferences for the Society of Jesus.
9. We are increasing opportunities of all students to participate in local, national, and international service trips, including participating in the annual Archdiocese of St. Louis Pilgrimage to the US/Mexico border, specifically in El Paso, TX, where we explore immigration.
10. We are forming a mission-oriented faculty by strengthening resources to assist with recruiting and hiring for mission and identity.
11. We are revisiting the purpose and goals of our adult Ignatian Charism team, which leads adult faith formation and implements the 5-year formation program for new hires.
12. We align adult faith formation offerings and choice, with teacher evaluation.
13. We work to fund JSN and UCS Ignatian pilgrimages to Spain and other resources.
14. We established a *Bridges* sight on our campus, to network and increase opportunities for faculty and staff to experience the *Spiritual Exercises* and train as lay spiritual directors of the Exercises—imagining new ways of experiencing the *Spiritual Exercises* and delivering them—frontier issues.
15. We developed and use a Jesuit Ignatian Formation Playbook for training all athletic coaches—in and out of our building.
16. We are creating and implementing board formation through one day mission programming, one overnight board retreat, and offering Ignatian Pilgrimage opportunities to Spain.

17. We are developing a digital and in-person parent formation piece: Why De Smet? Ignatian Spirituality 101 Course, and we are working in collaboration with alum to develop a yearly Jesuit speaker series and retreats. Educating beyond our students, toward the frontiers.
18. We are working on our School Improvement Plan, which is our accreditation-approved plan, which includes developing a standards-based written curriculum, using research-based classroom instructional strategies, and using data to improve student achievement.
19. We are growing our learning center and services to meet more students and their needs, beyond those with IEPs. Journeying with Youth (UAP).
20. We are enhancing the following programs already in place: College Readiness, Catholic Inclusion for Students with Down Syndrome, Ignatian Entrepreneurship Program, Ignatian Global Scholars Certificate Program, and emerging Middle School—frontier initiatives.
21. We are reviewing and revising our student activities program, requiring all students to participate in at least one activity per semester, placing a school priority on inviting students into community—both counter-cultural and frontier.
22. Finally, in terms of maintaining institutional vitality, we are increasing enrollment, expanding marketing/communications, enhancing scholarship opportunities, improving campus facilities, improving school sustainability awareness, reviewing and renewing the school's technology plan, and working to review and revise administrative processes and expectations aligning to the school's Strategic Plan.

These action items from our school Strategic Plan are evidence that we are on the path to continuing to build our Ignatian school community, and many actions are happening in response to filling frontier needs.

What resonates with you? What questions or ideas do you wonder about, as they relate to your school and building an Ignatian school community? Building is about a plan and action aligned with a vision that hopefully places a priority on the embodiment of Ignatian spirituality.

Our Strategic Plan action items were not developed in isolation with just a few people but were the results of a collaborative effort of many school groups. In addition, I am grateful our school uses the Jesuit Schools Network and our Jesuit Province.

## Jesuit Schools Network (JSN)

We use six JSN resources, to help us grow in our awareness and practice of Ignatian identity:

1. *Mission Formation Officer Support*: after the JSN MFO gathering in San Juan, Puerto Rico, we developed a 5-year adult formation program, built on our existing program.
2. *Our School participates in the JSN—Enhancing Catholic School Identity Pilot* inviting us to explore models of lived “Catholicity” in schools. We are working to develop concrete projects toward increasing Catholicity and identity, and ultimately working toward a model called “Dialogue School,” that acknowledges and “affirms the religious and cultural diversity fostered by pluralism, but also actively seeks to promote Catholic identity and culture and works to ‘re-profile the Catholic faith’ amid such plurality.” This is exciting work, and we are grateful De Smet Jesuit participates in this community of practice.
3. *Throughout the last 25 years, our school has sent colleagues to the Seminars in Ignatian Leadership* program, inviting participants to learn about and practice a way of proceeding and leading from the Ignatian lens.
4. *We participate in Ignatian Colleagues Gatherings* offered each year at the North American level and regional province levels.
5. *We participate in the JSN Colloquium on Ignatian Education* that brings over five hundred people together every three years.
6. *And, finally, most recently we used JSN Ignatian Identity Surveys* for students, staff, board, and alum, that provided useful data informing our school’s Sponsorship Review process.

## UCS Province Jesuits

At a regional level, we take advantage of our UCS province resources that help us build Ignatian school communities:

1. *Each year, new hires attend the province-sponsored New Ignatian Educator Retreat*, which includes a deep dive into themes of the *Spiritual Exercises*.
2. *Each year, veteran teachers attend our province-sponsored Colleagues Retreat*, which is a longer, summer experience, also grounded in the themes of the *Spiritual Exercises*.
3. *And last year we completed our UCS Sponsorship Review*, grounded in the Standards and Benchmarks for Jesuit Schools of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

These opportunities outside our school—specifically through JSN and UCS—invite us to continue to build our Ignatian school community at De Smet Jesuit.

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