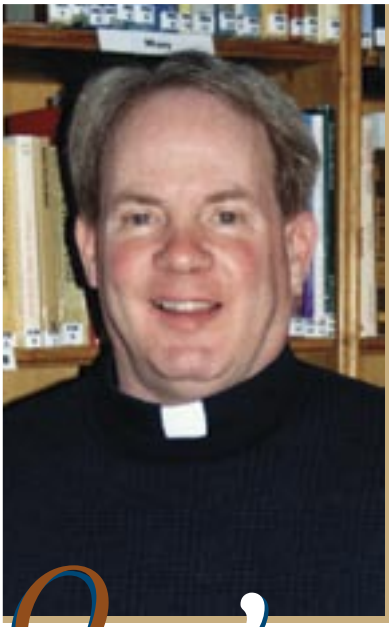


FORMATION FOUNDATION

ST. IGNATIUS AND THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

interview by George Kearney



Q & A

Fr. William L. Verbryke, SJ, is director of novices at Loyola House, the Jesuit novitiate for members of the Chicago and Detroit Provinces. He also serves as Provincial assistant for formation. Fr. Verbryke, who entered the Society in 1973 and was ordained in 1983, has also served as director of vocations for the Chicago Province and President of St. Xavier High School in Cincinnati, OH.

Q The Jesuits talk a lot about formation. What does that mean? What, in laymen's terms, is formation?

A Formation, first and foremost, is the personal integration and incorporation into the apostolic body of the Society of Jesus. Jesuit formation is comprised of different stages and different levels of training—the novitiate, first studies, regency, theology, special studies, and tertianship (editor's note: more information on the different elements of formation can be found on pg. 3)—each of which leads to greater incorporation and helps to confirm, both for the individual and the Society, his call to religious life.

Each and every stage of formation deals with four different parts or dimensions of one's life as a Jesuit: the spiritual, apostolic, communitarian, and intellectual. The spiritual dimension obviously relates to one's relationship with God, daily prayer, examination of conscience, spiritual direction, and the full 30-day retreat.

Then there's the apostolic dimension, through which we're being formed to be companions of Jesus. Each stage of formation is a mission. For instance, in first studies, Jesuits are missioned to be students. However, during each segment of formation, the Jesuit is expected to be involved in some form of ministry work.

There's also the community dimension. We live in communities. Community living is not an end in itself, but rather a way for us to live as companions in the Lord. And finally

there's the intellectual dimension. St. Ignatius wanted every Jesuit to be ready to go where the need is greatest, to go anywhere and do anything, to serve the most marginalized or maybe even serve the most intellectual and influential. Ignatius knew for that to happen, there must be rigorous intellectual training.

Q What stands out in Jesuit formation? What makes it different from the formation of diocesan priests or the formation programs of other religious orders?

A Jesuit formation is unique in its length. It generally takes a Jesuit ten to twelve years to complete formation. The combination of our novitiate and regency programs makes Jesuit formation longer than most. But what really sets Jesuit formation apart, what makes Jesuit formation *Jesuit*, is its foundation in St. Ignatius' experience and his Spiritual Exercises. Our formation is modeled, in so many ways, on his human experience. Jesuit novices complete the full 30-day retreat, the complete Spiritual Exercises, at the beginning of the novitiate. The experience that prompted Ignatius to write the Exercises occurred at the beginning of his spiritual journey and served as a guide for him. We're incredibly blessed to have that kind of spiritual basis as our foundation.

Q Basically, you're talking about eight years of graduate study and three years of ministry. How is that funded?

AThe folks in the development office could probably do a better job of answering this question. It happens because of the generosity of our benefactors. But there's more to the story than that. We're able to be trained and formed because of the generosity of others, yes, but we can't just maintain a one-sided or one dimensional relationship with them. We have a responsibility to those donors and benefactors. We have to allow them to be a part of our mission. We have to invite them into our mission. We also have a responsibility to share our gifts with our donors and benefactors. And the biggest gift the Society and the Church have been given is the *Spiritual Exercises*. We're called to share the Exercises with others. My hope is that our relationship with donors is one of mutuality and partnership, not just one by which they're giving and we're receiving.

QA question on everyone's mind these days is what steps are taken during formation to prevent occurrences of sexual misconduct by Jesuits?

AFormation has changed in many ways. We directly address these issues now in the formation process. But, more important, I think, is the culture of trust, honesty, and openness that supports the entire formation process.

This may not sound like a big change or an adequate response to the current crisis. And it may not be a direct response, but it's a change that has created a healthier formation process, and it's been happening since the early 1970s. When I was in formation, we were encouraged to talk about and reflect on our human development, spiritually, psychologically, emotionally, sexually, and physically. It's all part of who we are and what we bring to ministry. It's part of growing as a person. But it wasn't always part of the formation program. Today, through spiritual directions, retreats, conversations, and workshops, we're very conscious of making sure development of the whole person takes place.

We've also taken some concrete steps to respond to all that's happened. Each year, day-long "boundaries" workshops are presented to the novices. Similar workshops take place in the ministry assignments of young Jesuits and at other levels of formation. Before Vatican II, the Spiritual Exercises were usually given in a "conference style." Today they're individually directed. All of this creates a more open, honest, and trusting formation.

I think it's also important to point out that we discuss the sexual abuse crisis affecting the Church. We don't ignore it. We discuss it often. Again, there's an openness. It's a reality. The young men in the Society are look-

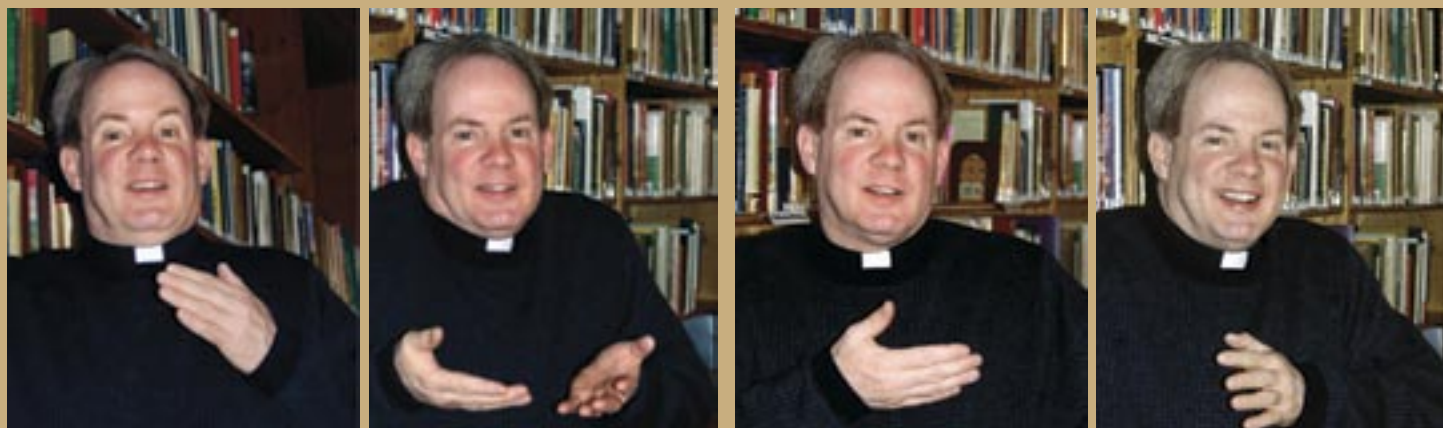
ing to build a new Church, a stronger Church.

QFrom your experience as director of novices and a former high school president, do you feel like Jesuit formation works? Why?

ADefinitely. It definitely works. I know because when I was at St. X, many talented men came into the school as candidates, novices, and regents and had a great impact on the students, faculty, staff, and parents. And that's what Jesuit formation is for; preparing Jesuits to serve, supporting our ministries.

But Jesuit formation is also for the individual, preparing the individual, helping the individual grow. In my almost two years as novice director, I've seen men grow as companions of Jesus in each of the different phases of formation. They're growing in their identity, and in relation to the ideas of faith and justice. The growth and change that takes place in each person is significant for each Jesuit. It's significant, too, for many of the men who determined religious life wasn't for them and opted to leave the Society. They remain committed to the Church and the mission of the Society. Though they're no longer Jesuits, their lives, too, have been changed.

That happens, obviously, for the Jesuits, too. So yes, I'd say it's definitely working. ■



MARGARET KEARNEY