

The society of jesus the jesuits religion essay



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The Society of Jesus is unlike any other Catholic order in existence. From the day of its inception in the basement of a Paris church of Saint Denis till today the Jesuits have always been more progressive than the rest of the Catholic Church. The Jesuits were created by an ex-soldier and nobleman by the name Ignatius of Loyola. They went out into the world and worked hands on with the communities that they were helping. The Jesuits spread out through the world building schools, hospitals and instilled a sense of solidarity in millions over the years. At any given point in history they were considered either the most valuable order of the Catholic Church or its scourge. They pledged an oath to the Pope and yet they question many of the Catholic Doctrines. The Jesuits are a very flexible, progressive order in a theocracy known for its resistance to change and a strict set of rules. Since their beginning the Jesuits have seemed to always be involved in some controversy with the Church.

St. Ignatius was born Inigo Lopez de Loyola in 1491 and was the youngest son of a Spanish nobleman in the Basque country. In 1509 he entered the military and fought for twelve years without ever being seriously injured, until the Battle of Pamplona. At the Battle of Pamplona in 1521 while defending the Spanish border from the French he was hit by a cannonball that shattered his right leg. This injury ended his prosperous military career and even though he did not yet know it, started what would become a legacy lasting half a century.

After Ignatius' injury he returned to his father's castle and underwent multiple surgeries in an effort to regain the use of his leg. While recuperating he came across a book entitled *De Vita Christi* written by Ludolph Saxony

that chronicled and commented on the life of Jesus Christ. The message Ignatius discerned from these books altered his entire way of life. He also began to see visions that he could not accurately describe except for a sense of calm and peace that accompanied them. After he had fully recovered Ignatius began a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. When he returned to Spain he chose to abandon his life of privilege and live in poverty, doing works of charity, fasting and learning Latin. He began to preach the gospels to groups of men and women. Large crowds would gather entranced by his oratory. Gradually he began to attract the attention of the Spanish Inquisition and was imprisoned twice, presumably because he was seen as a possible threat to the papacy. After a period of time living on the streets and searching for his spirituality he had an epiphany, or a mystical experience that began his spiritual journey. This understanding led him to the University of Paris and his future.

In 1534 Ignatius entered the University of Paris to continue his education. While attending the University he met six men whom all became as close as brothers. After the seven men had completed their studies they all took a vow of chastity and poverty and began working in hospitals and teaching religion. Eventually Ignatius and two friends went to Rome and placed themselves at the disposal of the Pope. In 1539 Ignatius asked his old companions from the University to meet him in Rome. They presented themselves to the Pope and petitioned to form the new order The Society of Jesus. In 1540 Pope Paul III officially gave permission to form the new order. Ignatius was then elected as the first Superior General 1541 and served until his death fifteen years later in 1556. Ignatius' military past and new

spirituality establishes the structure and rules of The Society of Jesus, setting them apart from the rest of the Catholic Church.

Since the day Ignatius and his friends took their vows the Jesuits were already different from the other orders within the church. They took the same first three vows as all other Catholic priests; poverty, chastity and obedience. However they also took a vow of obedience to the Pope himself. A very important difference that visibly sets Jesuits apart from other priests is that they are not required to wear a habit. This allows them to move more freely through foreign lands and to assimilate with the native people. Also they were not required to congregate in order to hold prayer which allows more individuality than other orders. A Jesuit can pray anywhere they wish so long as God is in their heart. These seemingly insignificant differences are what allow the Jesuits to move relatively free throughout the World. Having this un-fettered rein of what they can do and when is what permits them to tangibly help the people in their communities and missions.

The Jesuits began spreading out all over the globe, wherever the Pope sent them they went, and because of the different approach the Jesuits took towards their missions they were able to succeed where others had failed. For example, China had a long history of attempted conversion by various Christian religions. Because of this, China closed its borders to foreigners. In 1583 the Jesuit priest, Father Matteo Ricci, was able to gain a foothold in the Chinese Empire. Ricci accomplished this by adapting to Chinese customs, learning the language and dressing like a Chinese literati which was an educated native in China. Through academics Ricci was able to gain trust, respect and eventually was became a consultant to the Emperor. Ricci and <https://assignbuster.com/the-society-of-jesus-the-jesuits-religion-essay/>

the other Jesuits that came later were valued for their extensive knowledge of Western science, which at the time China was severely lacking.

Relationships between the Jesuits and the Chinese were strained at times but a lot of that tension stemmed from the Pope's rigid stance on the old Chinese customs and refusal to modify Catholic Doctrine.

The Jesuits had begun to spread all over the World. In 1859 the second attempt at entering Indonesia succeeded with the work of Francis Van Lith S. J. He followed the same path that Ricci had set forth three centuries before. He adopted the culture, helped build schools, churches and medical centers. Lith was able to do this because he had the foresight to reach out to the village leaders and teach them first. Once he baptized the four village leaders the rest of the villagers slowly followed, Lith also was shrewd enough to not try and destroy the customs of the converts. Not all efforts by the Jesuits succeeded however. Initially they had huge success and were able to convert three hundred thousand Japanese. However the Japanese government saw the influx of Western ideas as a threat and effectively exterminated the Jesuits efforts.

On the other side of the World the Jesuits were fighting a different battle in Latin America. The Jesuits had built missions all over Latin America, which many European colonial powers felt threatened by their presence. They were not worried about the Jesuits themselves, they were worried that the indigenous people would be protected and therefore not available for slavery. Europe was correct in their fears. The Jesuits began converting the natives and building cities to keep them safe from slavery. Two of these

cities are Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro which are now flourishing as major metropolitans.

In today's world the Jesuits are still just as active as they were during colonialism times, their goals have shifted but they retain the Ignatian values and ideals. Currently there are nineteen thousand Jesuits worldwide making them the largest male order in the world. The Society of Jesus has become something like a bureaucracy with multiple levels of leadership, and an internal system of rules similar to our judicial system. The Society of Jesus has spread across the entire globe boasting a Jesuit presence in almost every country. There is one Superior General who is in charge of appointing a Jesuit to govern each of the 91 geographical regions which are referred to as Provinces. The Jesuit in charge of a Province is called a Father Superior. The Father Superior in turn appoints a Jesuit to preside over one of the ten "assistances" that each Province is split into. The current Superior General is Father Adolfo Nicolas S. J.; he was elected in 2008.

Since St. Ignatius started the Jesuits one of his fundamental goals was education. The first Jesuit school was built in Italy in 1548. They have continued their mission of education and there are now three thousand seven hundred and thirty Jesuit schools. There are over four thousand Jesuits and one hundred twenty five thousand Lay persons working in an educational capacity. Not only are Jesuit institutions located all over the World but they are highly regarded as some of the best educational institutions as well. In India for example there are dozens of educational institutions and they are regarded as the best schools in the country. Japan has one of the top Jesuit Universities worldwide. These educators are helping

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to shape the minds of over two and a half million students. Not only do these schools teach the standard subjects, they also teach solidarity, social justice and how to be “ Men and women for others”.

Building schools and educating people is one aspect of the Jesuits goal of building solidarity and social awareness they have created a number of different organizations to combat the injustices occurring around the world. The African Jesuit AIDS Network (AJAN) works in AIDS ravaged areas of Africa and has been doing so since 2002. The Jesuits are helping in all kinds of facets on the ground level. They are organizing communities and creating solidarity and understanding of the epidemic and compassion for those afflicted with AIDS, helping the “ older child” families that have lost both parents to AIDS. AJAN is working with the orphanages full of children, who have lost their families to the virus, and educating communities in the prevention of AIDs. In addition, an important part of the education process in Africa is helping to dispel the stigma attached to a person infected with HIV/AIDS. As always, the Jesuits try to keep with the traditional Ignatian ideals of respecting the cultures, customs and beliefs of the native people they are there to help.

The Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) is another social justice organization that is working towards a world of solidarity and understanding. The mission of the JRS is to give a voice to displaced persons who have been removed from their homes. Some of the main issues they focus on are; improving the detention stations at the border, many atrocities occur in these refugee holding areas and the refugees are basically turned into prisoners. They are also a big advocate for the rights of refugee women. Many of whom are the

victims of abuse and are being exploited, either in the refugee camps or by men taking advantage of a person who has just lost everything. This is a very noble part of their mission, unfortunately a necessary one. Keeping with the Jesuit mentality JRS is working to educate refugees. Not just with standard reading and writing but also how to acclimate to their new environment. The JRS has been actively involved in Haiti since 1990 and were one of the first groups to respond after the earthquake. They were instrumental in securing clean drinking water and providing temporary shelter immediately after the disaster. Typical of the Jesuits, they see that the physical needs of individuals must be helped before the religious education can begin.

The Jesuit Conference's Secretariat for Social and International Ministry (JSIM) seems to be a monitoring system for the other social justice organizations under the Jesuits. Not just monitoring however because the Jesuits have always encouraged open dialogue between groups and the JSIM facilitates that. They also allow a forum for people in the community to talk about the Jesuit work that is being done in their area. JSIM works with all different types of community outreach programs that focus on 'solidarity for all'. Some of the groups they work with include Jesuit Volunteer Corps, Ignatian Solidarity Network, the JRS and many more. They are also trying to raise the public's awareness on important social justice issues throughout the world. There are four main focal points right now. One is Africa with its AIDS pandemic and the constant state of warfare on the continent. Another is domestic poverty; they are trying to raise the minimum wage to a livable wage. Third is migration reform in which they are working very closely with

the JRS. Lastly JSIM is calling for a peaceful end to the violence in Colombia and Iraq. They believe that through education and understanding that peace can be reached instead of through the use of force and violence. They are also calling for an end to all forms of torture; it is cruel, inhumane and dehumanizing and has no place in modern society. JSIM is the Jesuits' voice in congress. The Jesuits are a very wealthy and therefore a powerful order of the Catholic Church and because of this they can sometimes persuade the government. As they did in 1989 after the Jesuits in El Salvador were murdered. The U. S. government was trying to protect the El Salvadorian Government, yet the Jesuits had enough political clout to force the U. S. to investigate and eventually convict some of the people responsible for the death of their Jesuit brothers.

The Jesuit order has had a long history of controversy and debate with the hierarchy of the Catholic Church. The leaders of the Vatican have been calling for a return to the traditional teachings of the Catholic Church.

“ Consecration to service to Christ cannot be separated from consecration to service to the Church. Ignatius and his first companions considered it thus when they wrote the formula of your Institute in which the essence of your charisma is spelled out: “ To serve the Lord and his Spouse the Church under the Roman Pontiff.” It is with sorrow and anxiety that I see that the *sensus cum ecclesia* of which your founder frequently spoke is diminishing even in some members of religious families. The Church is waiting for a light from you to restore the *sensus Ecclesiae*.”- Cardinal Francis Rode, 35th General Congregation of the Jesuits, Jan 8, 2008

Over time the Jesuits have become increasingly progressive and liberal which is where the disagreements and controversy originate. One of the major points of contention is currently the Church's traditional teachings about *Humanae Vitae* which is Latin for "Of Human Life". The church prohibits the use of any device that prohibits the transfer of human life, namely any form of contraceptive. Always looking at the issues from an academic standpoint the Jesuits contend that because of the AIDS epidemic condoms should be allowed to be used, not as contraception but as a preventative medical necessity to combat HIV/AIDS.

Conservative Catholics have been critical for decades about the liberal atmosphere of Jesuit educational institutions. They feel that the Jesuits have moved too far from the ideals of the Catholic Church and are teaching ideas contrary to the strict doctrine of the Church. The controversy probably stems from the progressive nature of the Jesuits and their beliefs of acceptance and open mindedness. The Jesuits have always been an adaptable order adjusting to whatever situation they are sent into, whether it is an AIDS ravaged region of Africa, poverty and earthquake decimated Haiti or the new times we are entering with sexual liberation. The Jesuits recognize that changing times necessitate changes in the strict laws of the Vatican regarding homosexuality and contraception. Once again the Jesuits take a stance on the issue that doesn't directly conflict with that of the Vatican but does call for some changes. While they agree with the Vatican that the sanctity of marriage should be preserved, they believe that just because a person is homosexual does not make them a sinner and that they should be allowed to receive Communion. The Jesuits are known for their shrewd

tactics at addressing sensitive issues in the Church but at the same time they do hold firm to their progressive beliefs.

“ We no longer exist to pat the conservative Christian on the back.”- Unnamed Jesuit, Time Magazine, Mon Apr. 23, 1973

I firmly believe that the actions and philosophies of peace and solidarity as practiced by the Jesuits in the past as well as today are essential to the survival of the Catholic Church. The Jesuits are the face for the church with respect to social justice; they desire to help every type of person from the AIDS victim to the refugee. It does seem that they may be spread a little thin due to the extensive nature of their work. While their charitable activities and their schools are commendable. However, the resources of the Jesuits like other Catholic organizations may be diminishing partly due to the multitude of different projects they are participating in and the increasing needs of the helpless. This lack of resources could result in a failure of the Jesuit goals allowing the very individuals that they are trying to help to slip through the cracks. I believe that focusing on select and high impact issues may be more effective than being involved in a multitude of causes.

Unfortunately this problem does not have a simple solution, how would the Jesuits decide who they will help and who they won't when one of their mottos is to be “ men and women for others” not men and women for a select few.

The Jesuits could possibly be more effective by redistributing the number of Jesuits across the globe and among the selected activities they sponsor.

Sixty percent of Jesuits worldwide are located in just a few regions, namely

the United States, Europe and South East Asia. The focus in the United States and in Europe is the area of education. This seems to be a problem because areas that are in desperate need of assistance are Africa and Latin America. These under-served areas only receive less than eight percent of Jesuit manpower. When the Society of Jesus was founded its mission was to go out to the far reaches of the world to help people and spread the word of God. Today the majority of Jesuits are located in the select areas doing tremendous good; yet the noble goals of St. Ignatius may no longer be attainable without additional resources and vocations.

While the Jesuits continue to do immense amounts of humanitarian works and fight for social change, equality and understanding they will always be hindered by the conservative Catholic Church. The Catholic Church does not change quickly, a bureaucracy never does. The Jesuits on the other hand have the ability to change with the times primarily because of the academic element they are able to look at issues with a more worldly and open minded view. While the Jesuits strive for change and progression the Vatican seems to desire stagnation in Catholic doctrine. This rigidity of the Vatican is in part what is causing the decline of the Catholic Church and the Jesuits see this. They have been calling for changes in the Vatican for years to help the dwindling number of Catholics such as; allowing priests to wed and for women to enter into some form of priesthood. The Jesuits are trying to move forward with the times and to connect with the new generation that has become increasingly jaded towards Catholicism. I believe that in order for the Jesuits to become an even more effective instrument for Social Justice it is necessary to distance themselves from Vatican Law.