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Ite Inflammate Omnia: Setting the World on Fire with Learning

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Ite Inflammate Omnia

*Setting
the World
on Fire
with
Learning*

By Mark Bosco, S.J.

One hears the word *globalization* used frequently by journalists and politicians, by economists and CEOs, and, over the last two decades, in the halls of academia. It is used in various ways, but it is most often a common shorthand for describing the material and intellectual resources that have created the networks of technologies and communication that have mobilized capital – economic, political, and cultural – around the world. Globalization has been growing for centuries. But the speed of communication and exchange today, and the concomitant complexity of interaction among diverse people and places, has intensified its importance.

What is interesting to me is how academic theorists of globalization generally leave religion and faith out of the discussion. Much of the literature views globalization as a byproduct of the Protestant Reformation or merely the result of post-Enlightenment ideology diffused into capitalist modes of production. Max Weber famously argued that modernity implied a secularization

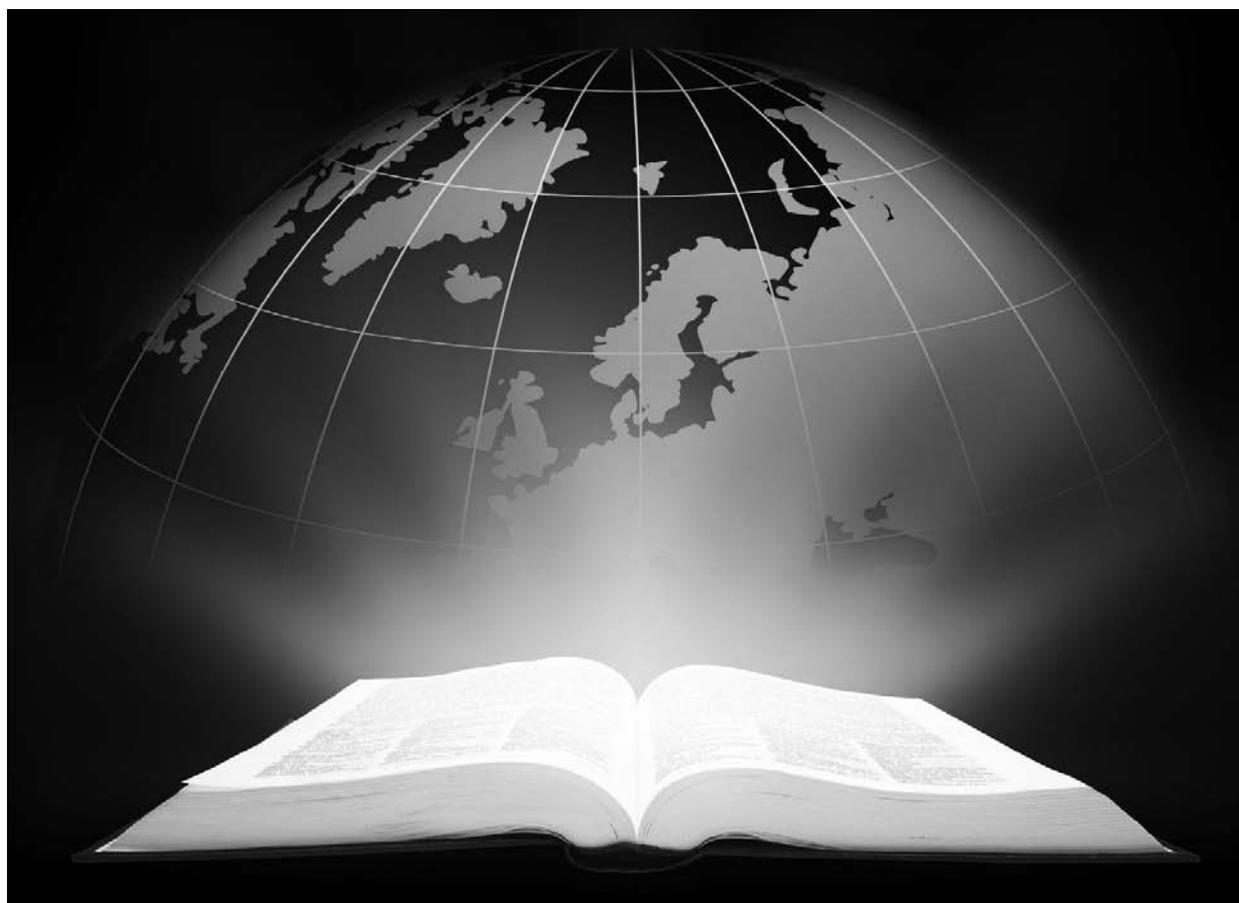
of power and knowledge that was made possible largely because of the Reformation. In his standard narrative, the Reformation, the scientific revolution, and the rise of the nation state worked together to bring about modernity. And yet, one could write an alternative history that looks at Roman Catholic culture and its intellectual centers as the cradle of globalization. Roman Catholicism – its faith and practice – is, after all, a transnational experience that began during the Roman Empire and continues today, a faith tradition that offers an identity and a way of intellectually grappling with the issues of the world that transcends national borders. The Catholic Church's mission from the beginning has been to spread the gospel to every corner of the earth. It seems one doesn't get more global than that!

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This certainly was the impetus behind the work of Ignatius of Loyola and his early companions. As men of great learning (most of them graduates of the University of Paris), they found themselves immediately being asked to found schools in Europe, Asia, and in the Americas. Their successful export of the European university to other continents demonstrated the extraordinary effectiveness and adaptability of the Jesuit network and its Ignatian pedagogy. The Jesuits founded colleges and universities across Europe, beginning with the college in Messina, Sicily, in 1548, but quickly went far beyond Europe. Jesuit colleges were soon set up in India (1554), Mexico (1572), Argentina (1613), Colombia (1623), and, of course, the first college in the newly formed United States of America, Georgetown, in 1789. This global mission linking education and faith formation has become the hallmark of Jesuit education today, both here in the United States and in almost every other part of the world.

Nowhere is the global consciousness of this mission more beautifully rendered than in the famous

Baroque fresco that stretches across the nave ceiling of the Church of Sant' Ignazio in Rome, a copy of which graces the cover of this issue of *Conversations*. When I teach at Loyola University Chicago's study abroad summer program in Rome, I often suggest to my students that this extraordinary fresco is one of the earliest representations of globalization. Composed around 1691 by the Jesuit artist and architect Andrea Pozzo, the *trompe l'oeil* ceiling depicts St. Ignatius and a cloud of Jesuit saints (Francis Xavier, Aloysius Gonzaga, Robert Bellarmine, Francis Borgia) being welcomed into heaven by Christ and the Virgin Mary. Pozzo turns the barrel vault into a theatrical illusion: the observer standing on the earth sees a lofty cupola above, opening up to the heavens. If the saints sit comfortably on the upward floating clouds, other figures more precariously hold on for dear life, as if they were about to fall into our earthly realm. This dizzying effect reflects not only the proximity of the divine and human encounter but the probability that the divine realm will collapse upon – and perhaps



injure – those in the world below! The aesthetic experience conjures heaven and earth literally falling into one another and the Church – its physical and ecclesial structure – as the place, the moment, where this encounter happens.

The ceiling's overwhelming effect offers us a globalized vision of the interconnections of Jesuit ministry, situating the apotheosis of St. Ignatius into the larger context of the worldwide mission and reach of the Jesuit order. The entire fresco dramatically responds to Luke 12:49, when Christ said, "I have come to cast fire on the earth, would that it were already kindled." St. Ignatius, responding to this biblical injunction, often ended his letter to Jesuits going to the missions with the exhortation, *ite inflammate omnia* – "go set the world on fire." This refrain is commonly found in the mission literature of many Jesuit colleges and universities today, for just as St. Ignatius wanted everyone to be set afire with passion and zeal for the Kingdom of God, we continually exhort our faculty, students, and alumni to be agents for change in the world, men and women for others.

Pozzo stresses that this missionary fire originates in the Trinitarian beam of light, reaching down to Christ carrying the cross, invoking the manner in which St. Ignatius mystically encountered Christ at La Storta, a place just outside the walls of medieval Rome. From Christ the holy beam is directed to the heart of St. Ignatius; and from his heart four rays of light spread out to the ends of the earth, represented in the form of feminine allegories of the four known continents – Europe, Asia, Africa, and America (note how "old Europe" is drawn as an elderly matron while the others are young women, continents newly discovered and new to the faith). Pozzo draws out *ite inflammate omnia* with a second beam of light reflected on the shield with the insignia IHS – representing Christ's name in Greek – figuratively lighting the flame of God's love. Notice the angels, as keepers of the flame, passing it along to one another down the pillared vault. As this is a painting of globalization with a religious hue, the ceiling suggests that the Jesuit intellectual tradition, along with its spiritual ministry, not only connects the global outreach of faith to the four corners of the world but also serves as a portal for the cosmic encounter that brings the heavens and the earth together.

Inspired by Pozzo's extraordinary painting, this issue of *Conversations* offers us a look into the global network of Jesuit higher education today. Whether or not we like the language of marketing when talking about the mission of our institutions, Jesuit schools are an internation-

al brand of higher education. Ask any talented young student, or parent of a successful student, who wants to get into a good college, whether they be in Africa, Asia, or in the Americas, and they would most likely identify Harvard, Oxbridge, the Ivy League, and the Jesuit university in their region as potential candidates. All of these institutions offer a quality education, but the Jesuit brand offers something more. With over 450 years of Jesuit secondary and higher education under our belt, Jesuit education has developed its brand as a *style* of teaching that is commonly shared in the network of schools. This style can be articulated concretely as a pedagogy that honors spirituality as a human dimension, a spirit that can be found not only in the campus chapel but also in the classroom, lab, or residence hall. It is a Socratic pedagogy that presumes value-laden considerations over value-neutral ones. It prioritizes interdisciplinary and synthetic thinking through – and engagement with – the contemporary issues and challenges of our world. Embracing both the local and global perspectives, Jesuit education is sober about the human condition, sensitive to injustice, and aware of the power of knowledge. Like St. Ignatius' exhortation to set the world on fire, our universities see themselves as agents to make the world a better place. Our Jesuit heritage invites us to network and collaborate on a style of teaching that fosters a common horizon of the good, the true, and the beautiful – terms which, in the Christian faith, are simultaneously names for God and are ideas that can be comprehended and affirmed beyond religion.

In this issue we will learn what *ita inflammate omnia* looks like in the global network of Jesuit schools of higher education in the 21st century: we will see excitement about new Jesuit universities, like the one recently started in Andalucia, Spain, and prospective Jesuit initiatives for opening similar institutions in Africa; the proliferation and success of Jesuit colleges and universities in India; study abroad programs transforming our students in places as diverse as Qatar, China, and El Salvador; student immersion trips to Bosnia, Northern Ireland, and the Dominican Republic; scholarly collaborations of our faculty throughout Jesuit networks in Indonesia, the United States, and Peru; and the first-hand experience of students who reflect on what it means for them to be part of the global network of Jesuit education today. It is good to know that this international brand is thriving and, at the same time, challenging us to deepen our bonds of mutual support. Let's go set the world on fire. ■