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Włodzimierz Ledóchowski's Call for *Cura Personalis*: Humanist Roots and Jesuit Distinctiveness in Education

Wezwanie Włodzimierza Ledóchowskiego do *cura personalis*. Unikatowy charakter jezuickiego wychowania i jego humanistyczne korzenie

ABSTRACT

The value of *cura personalis* has enjoyed a meteoric rise in usage in the last few decades and is now considered emblematic of the Jesuit philosophy of education. The meaning of this expression, though, is still ambiguous. The first to use this expression was Father General Włodzimierz Ledóchowski, who adopted it when addressing the colleges and universities run by the Jesuits in the United States in 1934. Ledóchowski claimed that a culture of the person was deeply enrooted in the spirit of the Society of Jesus, and particularly in the spirituality of Ignatius of Loyola. This paper aims to provide the necessary historical background to Ledóchowski's usage of the expression "*cura personalis*" and show how both humanist and Ignatian roots made this expression successful within the Jesuit educational scenario.

KEYWORDS:
cura personalis, Ignatius of Loyola, Włodzimierz Ledóchowski, Jesuit pedagogy

ABSTRAKT

W ciągu kilkudziesięciu ostatnich lat zwrot *cura personalis* zrobił błyskawiczną karierę i stał się symbolem jezuickiej filozofii wychowania. Jednak znaczenie tego zwrotu jest nadal niejednoznaczne. Pierwszą osobą, która go użyła, był generał zakonu jezuitów Włodzimierz

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:
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Ledóchowski. Posłużył się nim w 1934 roku w przemówieniu skierowanym do przedstawicieli szkół średnich i uniwersytetów prowadzonych przez jezuitów w Stanach Zjednoczonych. Ledóchowski stwierdził, że kultura osoby jest głęboko zakorzeniona w duchu Towarzystwa Jezusowego, a zwłaszcza w duchowości Ignacego Loyoli. Niniejszy artykuł ma na celu nakreślenie tła historycznego, które doprowadziło Ledóchowskiego do użycia zwrotu *cura personalis* oraz pokazanie, w jaki sposób zarówno humanistyczne, jak i ignacjańskie korzenie przyczyniły się do jego sukcesu w obrębie jezuickiego scenariusza wychowawczego.

Introduction

A very popular assumption in the contemporary Jesuit educational discourse is that *cura personalis* is a long-standing and perhaps even, along with *magis*, the most important tenet of the Jesuit philosophy of education. This recurrent conviction is often accompanied by a historiographical claim, according to which the distinctively Jesuit *cura personalis* is enrooted in the spiritual origins and even the early teaching practices of the Society itself. Now, if one takes it literally, this claim is not true, as Barton Geger convincingly proved in a recent article (Geger 2014: 6–20). No evidence has been found that any Jesuit used such an expression in official documents before the instruction letter that Father General Włodzimierz Ledóchowski addressed to the American Jesuits in 1934 concerning crucial characteristics of Jesuit education (Ledóchowski 1935: 5–16).[1] However, what is still surprising is how easily this new conceptual category entered both the self-understanding and the practice of a religious order that, regarding education, had been solidly attached to the "monument" of the *Ratio Studiorum* (1599) for centuries, a monument in which the expression "*cura personalis*" does not occur at all.

The goal of this essay, though, is not to "brush history against the grain," providing a circumstantiated history of further appearances of the expression within Jesuit literature and correcting current commonplaces with the frown of the philologist. Rather, this essay will

[1] The *Instructio* was prefaced by a letter from Fr. Ledóchowski in English, *Letter to the Fathers and Scholastics of the American Assistancy Announcing the New Instruction on Studies and Teaching*, dated August 15, 1934 (Ledóchowski 1935: 1–4).

inquire into the theoretical conditions that allowed such an imagined *Wirkungsgeschichte* to develop and reveal the philosophical threads that connect current practices relating to the care of the person in Jesuit schools to the cultural origins of the Society of Jesus.[2]

Ledóchowski's Instructions

In his "New Instruction," Ledóchowski affirmed that the ultimate end of Jesuit education is to help students know and love God more deeply. As General Roothaan had done in the nineteenth century by issuing the revised *Ratio Studiorum* (1832), Ledóchowski made it very clear that this philosophy of education was rooted, if not in the letter, then in the very spirit of the old *Ratio*.[3] In fact, a list of four bullet points under the sub-heading "Iuxta spiritum rationis studiorum" (According to the Spirit of the *Ratio Studiorum*) was meant to summarise and revive that long-lasting tradition. As means to attain the goals of Jesuit education, Ledóchowski listed a solid grounding in Catholic doctrine and scholastic philosophy and "an approach to education that looks beyond intellectual learning to the development

[2] An excellent survey on current practices and the core values of Jesuit pedagogy is offered by a collective volume recently published in Portugal and edited by José Manuel Martins Lopes, SJ (2018), titled *A pedagogia da Companhia de Jesus: Contributos para um diálogo*. Martins Lopes provides an engaging reading of the historical and theoretical tenets of Jesuit pedagogy in his contribution, entitled "Linhas caracteristicas da pedagogia da Companhia de Jesus" (pp. 5–72). As to what concerns the concept of care of the person, Luiz Fernando Klein, SJ tracks it in the culture of the first Jesuits, who built their educational model upon the pedagogy of the University of Paris (see Klein 2018, in particular pp. 160–161).

[3] Ledóchowski's aim was that of "reorganising our educational institutions, leaving untouched the inviolable principles of our Institute and its *Ratio Studiorum*, but combining them with approved modern methods, so that our standard may be equal to the best in the country" (Ledóchowski 1935: 6). A century before this letter, Ian Roothaan addressed the commission he had summoned to revise the *Ratio Studiorum* with the following words: "It is easy to understand how much reverence must be shown in handling this matter, and with what great care and prudence the slightest change is to be introduced into a work which was the result of long, thorough consultation and deliberation on the part of very eminent men, a work which has been tested by the successful experience of almost two centuries and which has not infrequently received the very highest of praise even from the enemies of our Society themselves" (Roothan 1935: 5).

of the faculties [in Latin, *formatio*] of the 'whole person' [*totus homo*]." The fourth (and last) bullet point states the following:

> The personal care of students, by which [Jesuits], beyond the teaching and example provided in the classes, endeavour to direct and help individuals by means of [good] counsel and exhortation.[4]

Given the structural context of the expression (a sub-heading in a bullet-point list), it should not surprise that it went apparently unnoticed among the American Jesuit community. However, after some decades, Fr. Laurence J. McGinley, outlining the draft for a homily that Superior General Pedro Arrupe was expected to give during his visit to St. Peter's College in New Jersey in 1972, recovered the expression "*cura personalis*" and attributed its origin to the spirit of the first Jesuits: "what Jesuits 400 years ago called [*sic!*] 'cura personalis' [was] the concern, care, attention, even love of the teacher for each student—in an atmosphere of deep personal trust."[5]

In 1986, the International Commission on the Apostolate of Jesuit Education published a document entitled *The Characteristics of Jesuit Education*, where *cura personalis* was strongly reaffirmed as a value that "remains a basic characteristic of Jesuit Education."[6] Given the institutional author of this document, it should not surprise that the phrase became universally recognised by the global network of Jesuit schools and universities as a central tenet of what made them distinct in the educational landscape. References to "*cura personalis*" became more frequent, and there sprouted an educational literature that sought to elucidate that expression within the context of the theory and practice of Jesuit pedagogy.

How could a subtitle in a bullet-point list become so pivotal for the self-understanding of contemporary Jesuit education? And is the adoption of such a concept revealing of anything deeper than a bureaucratic stylistic need? What underlying philosophy of education

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[4] Ledóchowski, *Instructio*, no. 8, trans. Claude Pavur. Emphasis original. Quoted in Geger 2014: 7.

[5] "Centennial Visit of Jesuit Father General Pedro Arrupe, Nov. 11, 1972," file folder, Centennial Year Records, accession 001-XX-0013, box 5, University Archives, St. Peter's University, Jersey City, NJ, 5. Quoted in Geger 2014: 7.

[6] The text of *The Characteristics of Jesuit Education* is reprinted in Duminuco 2000: 173–216 (here 181).

explains the success of the concept and made it so popular among Jesuit educators?

A warning should be raised here, as bumping into false friends is always a possibility for the historian of ideas: there is unfortunately no evidence in any of the hundreds of documents and letters collected in the *Acta Romana Societatis Iesu* that could enable one to track the appearance of (and the causes for) *cura personalis* during Ledóchowski's generalate. And almost certainly, the *cura personalis* that Ledóchowski highlighted as a characteristic of Jesuit education did not derive from any exposure of his to the phrase as it appeared in the pugnacious articles that Mounier had been churning out in the French journal *Esprit* during those very same years.[7]

Nonetheless, Ledóchowski's adoption of *cura personalis* does not seem to have been accidental, as it is rooted in a specific philosophy of education that he shared. Indeed, the Superior General understood the distinctiveness of Jesuit schools to reside in their peculiar form of pedagogy, a method that was being challenged by recent developments in educational practices around the world. Jesuit colleges, he believed, had thrived over the centuries not merely because of their excellent transmission of knowledge in specific disciplines but also because of their refined method and their particular culture of education, which was still valid in the 1930s. Such trust in the Jesuit method was not a mere matter of practices, the best of which Ledóchowski felt bound to defend; in his mind, it was also a matter of educational theory.

In a letter on Jesuit formation and the Jesuit magisterium, Ledóchowski opposed to contemporary "false" philosophies of education the long-standing Jesuit pedagogy:

> So that this does not end up doing serious harm to our colleges and damage to sound teaching, we need to have people who uninterruptedly [*perpetuo*] apply themselves completely [*totos*] to educating the youth,

[7] According to Wiktor Gramatowski, Ledóchowski's concern was to build a uniform system out of what was common and shared among Jesuit schools rather than introduce educational concepts drawn from contemporary philosophical movements: "*L deseaba introducir un sistema uniforme de educación en todos los centros educativos de todas las provincias. (…) La Ratio Studiorum fue revisada con miras a la promoción de los métodos educativos en los colegios y para que el plan de estudios tuviese en cuenta los adelantos en las diversas ramas del saber*" (Gramatowski 2001: 1688).

> who devote themselves steadily and generously to teaching, who join theory with real experience, who can make valuable contributions in assemblies on this subject. (*Acta Romana Societatis Iesu* 1933: 468)

Pedagogical formation was essential for the Jesuit teacher, according to Ledóchowski. This preparation could not be the result of mere experiential acquisition but required a process of learning that was both theoretical and practical. In fact, Ledóchowski was clear on the point that, to form a good teacher for Jesuit colleges, intellectual education in the discipline to be taught was not enough; Jesuits who were trained to become teachers had to undergo "pedagogical and practical training" as well.[8]

When Ledóchowski used the expression "*cura personalis*," he evidently had this art of conducting the pupil in mind. As with any other art, pedagogy had grounds in both practice and theory. Therefore, in his mind, the care of the person that made Jesuit education so practically successful over time must also have had theoretical roots stretching back to the very origins of the Society. And also as with any other art, this theory was not merely found in philosophical treatises or specified by intellectual essays. One might rather detect it in the underlying mentality of the Order's founders and track it in the developments of the Society's institutional culture as well as in the *longue-durée* attitudes of Jesuit educators. In this sense, the history of *cura personalis* is not different from the history of Jesuit pedagogy, as they both indicate the very same philosophical concern.

Roots in humanist education and Ignatian spirituality

What, then, were these based on? What are the theoretical roots of the Jesuit "care of the person" and pedagogy? Can they be traced using Ledóchowski's mention of *cura personalis* as a starting point?

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[8] Addressing the Italian Province in 1935 on the issue of Jesuit formation, Ledóchowski remarked: "Ma oltre a questa preparazione puramente intellettuale, si deve pure pensare a dare ai Nostri una conveniente preparazione pedagogica e pratica. Accade invece il più sovente che I nostril giovani Scolastici vengono inviati a fare da sorveglianti o prefetti, a sostenere cioè la parte più difficile e ingrate della educazione, senza che abbiano avuto il più elementare concetto dell'arte di condurre di giovani" (*Acta Romana Societatis Iesu* 8: 320).

In my opinion, the answer is yes. Indeed, Ledóchowski's references to the formation of the *whole* person, combined with attention to the particular characteristics of each and every individual, echo a strongly humanistic approach to education hearkening back to the sixteenth century. Such an approach is surely not exclusive to Jesuit education, especially given the entire history of education. As Geger said, "implying that 'holistic education' and 'respect for the individual' are values unique to Jesuit education (…) is like trying to copyright the alphabet" (Geger 2014: 20). But I think that the encounter of a humanistic educational model with Ignatius of Loyola's spirituality generated a distinctive philosophy of education that early Jesuit schools successfully reflected in their practices.

The philosophical origins of the concept stretch back to the humanist mentality that framed the Society of Jesus at its inception and the pedagogy that Jesuit schools theorised and implemented from the very beginning. According to O'Malley, such was the influence of the humanistic culture of education on the Jesuits that

> if you are looking for the Jesuit philosophy of education, you will not find it explicitly articulated in that document [the *Ratio Studiorum*]. The Plan assumed that the strictly intellectual goals of the universities was a good worth pursuing. More important, it took for granted the humanists' philosophy as undergirding the whole program, and therefore felt no need to repeat it or to elaborate a philosophy of its own. (O'Malley 2015: 25)

Unlike some of their contemporaries, the Jesuits did not oppose humanistic education to scholastic (university or professional) education, as if these were two incompatible systems or cultures. They saw them, rather, as complementary (O'Malley 2015: 11). They esteemed the intellectual rigour of the scholastic system and the power of the detached analysis it provided, and they believed in its goal of training highly skilled graduates in the sciences and in the professions of law, medicine, and theology. They saw this graduate training, specifically in theology, as especially appropriate for their own members and even for a few select students of the diocesan clergy. This was because they considered it useful in the establishment of a more "professional" and doctrinally reliable ministry, for they shared the goal of both Protestant and Catholic leaders to produce a literate, more learned clergy.

At the same time, Jesuits esteemed in the humanist system (primary and secondary education) the potential of poetry, oratory, and drama to elicit and foster noble sentiments and ideals, especially in younger boys; they believed in its potential to foster *docta pietas* (learned as well as upright character) (O'Malley 2000: 8; Pavur 2019).

The second element I mentioned is Ignatian spirituality. As Saint Ignatius evolved from hermithood to reconciliation with the world, he simultaneously developed an aspect of his spirituality that is pertinent to our topic. The world was meant to be the great stage upon which God's drama was played out, where His ineffable plans would be brought to fruition. Every person was an actor in that drama; everyone had a unique role in the story. The goal of every Christian was to perform as well as possible in order to let the drama develop and attain the glory it deserved. With this spiritual theology in mind, Ignatius came to believe that the primary mistake (and sin) that a person could commit was that of harming his or her own performance and that any excess in punishing one's own body was clearly such a sin. To state it in other words, God required all humans to be in good shape, or else His divine plans could not be appropriately aided and enacted by them.[9]

Ignatius was extremely consistent in adopting the same vision for Jesuit scholastics and lay students. In a letter to Everard Mercurian (June 1552) with instructions about the nature, goals, and method of a Jesuit college, Ignatius wrote that students had to be formed in all aspects of their persons, rather than merely instructed. He said that students "must observe decorum in word and deed, and let themselves be *formed* in good behavior and in *interior* and *exterior* virtues" (Ignatius of Loyola 2006: 373, emphasis added).

It was important that every Jesuit teacher take care of himself as well as of his students, according to his and their qualities. Instructing the Jesuits who were sent to Clermont to run the college (May 11, 1556), Ignatius recommended the superior to take care that "everyone is properly occupied, taking as his goal their own and others' aid in learning" (Ignatius of Loyola 2006: 656) and that

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[9] The literature on Ignatius's spirituality is immense. On its reverberation on early Jesuit culture and psychology, see Christopher van Ginhoven Rey's *Instruments of the Divinity: Providence and Praxis in the Foundation of the Society of Jesus* (2014).

> everyone stays healthy and strong enough in body to sustain the toil of God's service. Hence, the superior should not let them get overtired in their studies or other devotions or spiritual exercises in the aid of souls; everything must be moderated according to the quality of persons, places, and times. (Ignatius of Loyola 2006: 657)

Relating specifically to the term "*cura personalis*," Superior General Peter-Hans Kolvenbach pointed out the roots of this expression in Ignatian spirituality as follows:

> The tension contained in 'cura personalis' may be described in this way: it was Ignatius' experience that on the path to God a person needs 'cura', the help of a companion on the way, even if this spiritual adventure will be, in the Spirit who is always strictly personal, 'cura personalis'. (Kolvenbach 2007: 10)

Humanist roots and Ignatian spirituality conspired to build a successful model for Jesuit schools. The philosophy behind this model was based on a distinctively Jesuit culture of care, the dynamic and goals of which were intertwined with those of transmitting knowledge (*tradere disciplinas*) and educating a broad array of students. This pedagogic "surplus" produced a Jesuit educational "structure" that was able to compete successfully with those of medieval universities and elitist humanist *conversari* all across Europe.

Conclusions

Pedagogy, that is, the practical art of conducting the pupil in their process of growth and learning, found its scientific expression when the phrase "*cura personalis*" appeared in the instructions that Ledóchowski sent to his fellows in the fourth decade of the last century. The Superior General recognised that the key to the success of Jesuit schools had historically lain in the excellence of the *care* that such institutions devoted to their students. Excellence in other areas—including the teachers' extraordinary mastery of their disciplines, the perfection of the bureaucratic machinery, and even the beauty of the system of rules that let that machinery do its work—was not enough. Rather, what made the Jesuit schools so successful over time was their care for the whole person of each of their students, a process that had as its goal the formation of a fully-fledged

spirit, an upright character, a sound body, and a learned person in support of the common good.[10]

This ideal anthropology was certainly drawn from the humanists' philosophy of education, but it was also derived from Ignatius's *spirituality* of education, rooted in a positive view of the powers of humankind, as well as from a *theology* of education that brought the concepts of person, conversation, and care down to the level of the intercourse between the Jesuits and their neighbours.

The care of the person, as pursued through a pedagogy that focused on the formation of the student rather than the transmission of knowledge, can be understood as a perennial commitment of the Jesuits. In a remarkable letter that Peter Jan Beckx, Superior General of the restored Society, wrote to the Austrian minister of worship in 1854, he specifically re-affirmed the value of formation over the mere acquisition of knowledge:

> The gymnasium must remain what it is proper for it to be, gymnastics of the mind, consisting not so much of material as of formal maturation [*Bildung*], not at all in the gathering together of multitudinous, heterogeneous knowledge, but in the right, natural, and gradual unfolding and improvement of mental power. (Originally quoted in: Huber 1873: 373)[11]

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[10] This anthropology for the common good is apparent in the words of Fulvio Cardulo (1529–1591), a Jesuit who very clearly had in mind what the teaching of the humanities was to be directed towards: "The intent of the Society should not be the teaching of grammar and Latin in any way we like. Rather, we ought to strive for a nobler goal, that is, forming good citizens who can contribute to society, and instructing so many of the youth and nobility in a way that with time they may show what they can do in pulpits, senates, secretariats, and ambassadorships—these students that our companions subject to school-discipline throughout the world. So the prudence and eloquence that we should be teaching in our schools will serve the Christian commonwealth and produce good preachers, senators, secretaries, nuncios, ambassadors, and others who serve the common good" (Cardulo 2016: 218).

[11] Originally quoted in Huber 1873: 373. It is not surprising that this passage has often been misquoted in anti-Jesuit literature as evidence for the anti-humanistic culture of the Society. Beckx's emphasis on formal maturation as opposed to material learning has often been understood as praise for void, amoral imitation of the ancient classics (the so-called Jesuit "formalism"), but it is evident that he was referring to the classic philosophical distinction between form and matter, assigning primacy to the form (the *soul*, for rational psychology) in Jesuit *Bildung*. This means that rather than simply stuffing a student's memory, one had to cultivate a student's *habits*—which was exactly the goal of the humanists who wanted their students to go through

Although this was clearly the ultimate goal of education, as much for the early Jesuits as for Ledóchowski, the means to attain it could not be improvised or merely developed through some kind of practical experience. They had to be learned; they had to be *theorised*. This is exactly what happened during the editing the *Ratio Studiorum*, which, although it does not make any reference to the concept of *cura personalis* as such, does refer to the need for Jesuit teachers to undergo a period of pedagogic studies before beginning to teach—a passage that is often, quite regrettably, neglected. The profound and extended discussion that occupied the Jesuits for more than thirty years in the second half of the sixteenth century gave birth to a Jesuit philosophy of education that was based upon the care of the person—as the fullness of time would reveal.

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the ancient classics for the purpose of acquiring an "upright character" (i.e., nobler habits). For the anti-Jesuit interpretation of Beckx's work, see, for example, Compayré 1904: 191.

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