

Are the Jesuits Catholic?

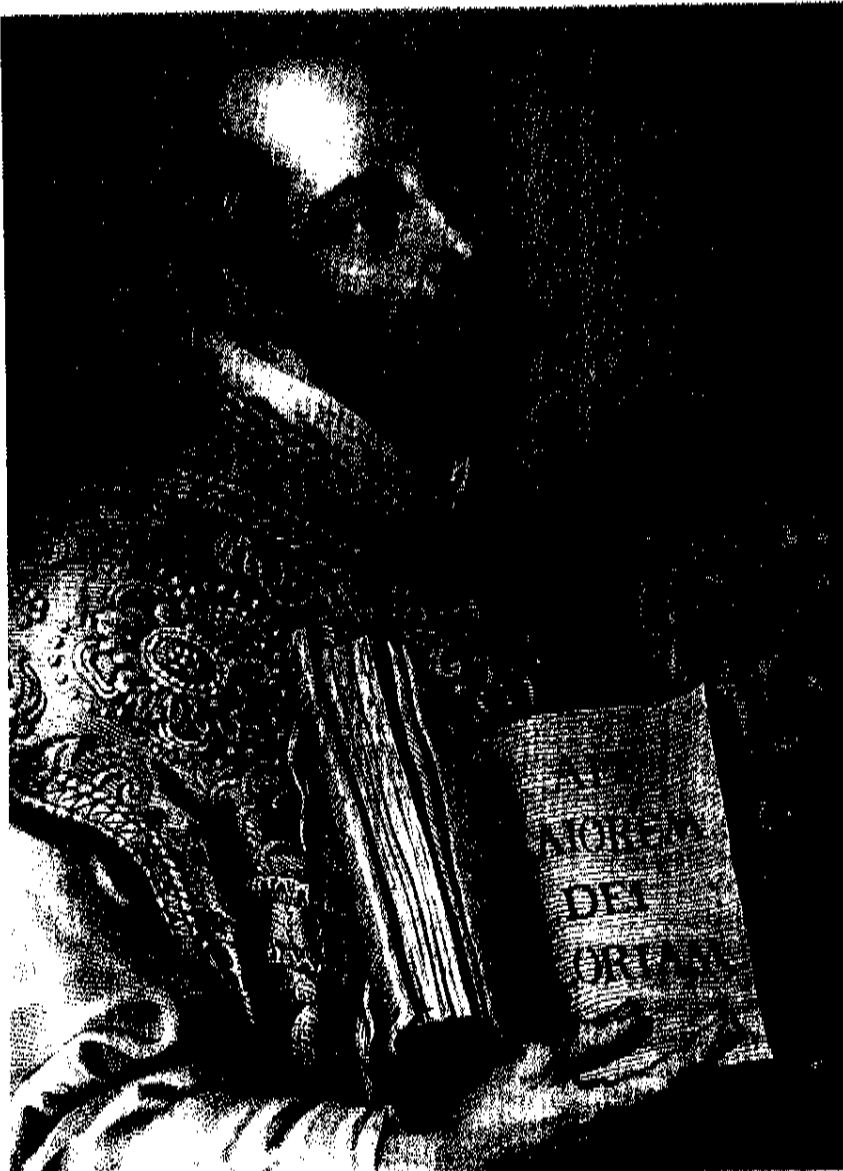
By PAUL SHAUGHNESSY

“My dear fellow, we all see the difficulties that beset any notion of a revealed religion,” says an Oxford philosopher in Ronald Knox’s *Let Dons Delight*. “You draw a blank check, as it were, by assenting beforehand to its doctrines, not knowing whether there will be enough assets to meet it when you come to look into your account.”

The Catholic Church understands herself as the legatee of universal and immutable truths about God and man, claiming a divine guarantee that she never has taught, and never will teach, error. As a Basque soldier named Ignatius Loyola came to realize with particular clarity, this position is either true or insane: Only moral cowardice or intellectual muddle could make room for a middle ground. Hence no faith is more radically vulnerable than Catholicism to the shortfall intimated by Knox’s skeptical don, no religion more in need of a nimble, adaptable, and ever vigilant defense.

Loyola’s companions, given the sarcastic name “Jesuits” by their opponents, organized themselves on military lines with a military love for a clear chain of command, as their founding document attests. The Jesuit is to “serve as a soldier of God beneath the banner of the Cross, and to serve the Lord alone and the Church, his

Paul Shaughnessy, S.J., is a Jesuit priest and frequent contributor to Catholic World Report.



St. Ignatius Loyola. Nathan / Archive.

spouse, under the Roman pontiff, the vicar of Christ on earth.” The Jesuit’s mission is “to strive especially for the defense and propagation of the faith and for the progress of souls in Christian life and doctrine.”

Passionate Uncertainty

Inside the American Jesuits

by Peter McDonough and Eugene C. Bianchi
University of California Press, 380 pp., \$29.95

It’s a risky business. The blood-curdling vows by which the Jesuit binds himself perpetually to poverty, chastity, and obedience are typically made for the first time when the novice is twenty or twenty-five years old—not at the conclusion but at the outset of the ten years of training in which he will learn what precisely he has committed himself to defend. The more intelli-

gent and idealistic the aspirant, the more spiritually precarious his position, as he comes to grips with the full power of the Church’s adversaries and the all-too-human frailty of her defenders. Loyola’s gamble was that, if a man’s own desire for God could be made present to him, he would willingly endure the required sacrifices until he saw the truth “from inside,” and was motivated no longer by discipline but by love. For four centuries the gamble worked.

No more. The recently published *Passionate Uncertainty: Inside the American Jesuits* is a quirky yet convincing depiction of the collapse of the renegade Society of Jesus: papists who hate the pope, evangelists who have lost the faith. Deprived of their reason for existence as Jesuits, they respond either by putting an end to their existence as

Jesuits (deserters outnumber active members in the United States) or by indulging a willed imbecility in which the explosively divisive questions are never permitted to surface.

The authors of *Passionate Uncertainty*, Peter McDonough and Eugene Bianchi (a political scientist and professor of religion, respectively), portray the Jesuit crack-up most vividly by quotation from the interviews and written statements they took from more than four hundred Jesuits and former Jesuits. Both the spectrum of the speakers presented and the content of their opinions accurately reflect the current situation. Not that the speakers themselves are always balanced, fair, or magnanimous—the resentments run too deep for that—but taken as a whole the voices give us a true picture of the quandary of America's Jesuits: able yet aimless men, hopelessly compromised by perjury.

The trajectory of the decline is not hard to trace, and the Jesuit story, though more dramatic, differs little from that of other progressive religious orders in the decades following the Second Vatican Council. Liberalism had been seen to foster tolerance and mutual respect in pluralist secular communities. Yet, being purely negative in content and procedural in application, it proved lethal when imported into an intentional association like the Society of Jesus, one both doctrinally exclusivist and rigidly hierarchical. Almost overnight the pope's light infantry became a battalion in which every man decided for himself which war he was fighting. The result was an institutional nightmare: confusion and cowardice at the top; despair, rage, and disillusionment in the ranks. American Jesuits went from 8,400 members in 1965 to 3,500 today. Entering novices declined from a peak one-year total of 409 to a low of 38. Worse, the number of priests who jump ship each year roughly equals the number of entering novices; the number of Jesuits who die annually is twice as high as either.

Yet at its heart, the crisis is not one of size but of allegiance. One of the sig-

nal services performed by *Passionate Uncertainty* is that it lets us hear influential Jesuits—those who shape policy—speak their minds frankly, in words unsoftened by the public relations personnel in the fund-raising offices. "I am appalled by the direction of the present papacy," says a university administrator. "I am scandalized by Rome's intransigent refusal to re-examine its doctrines regarding gender and sex. . . . Frankly I think the church is being governed by thugs." "The



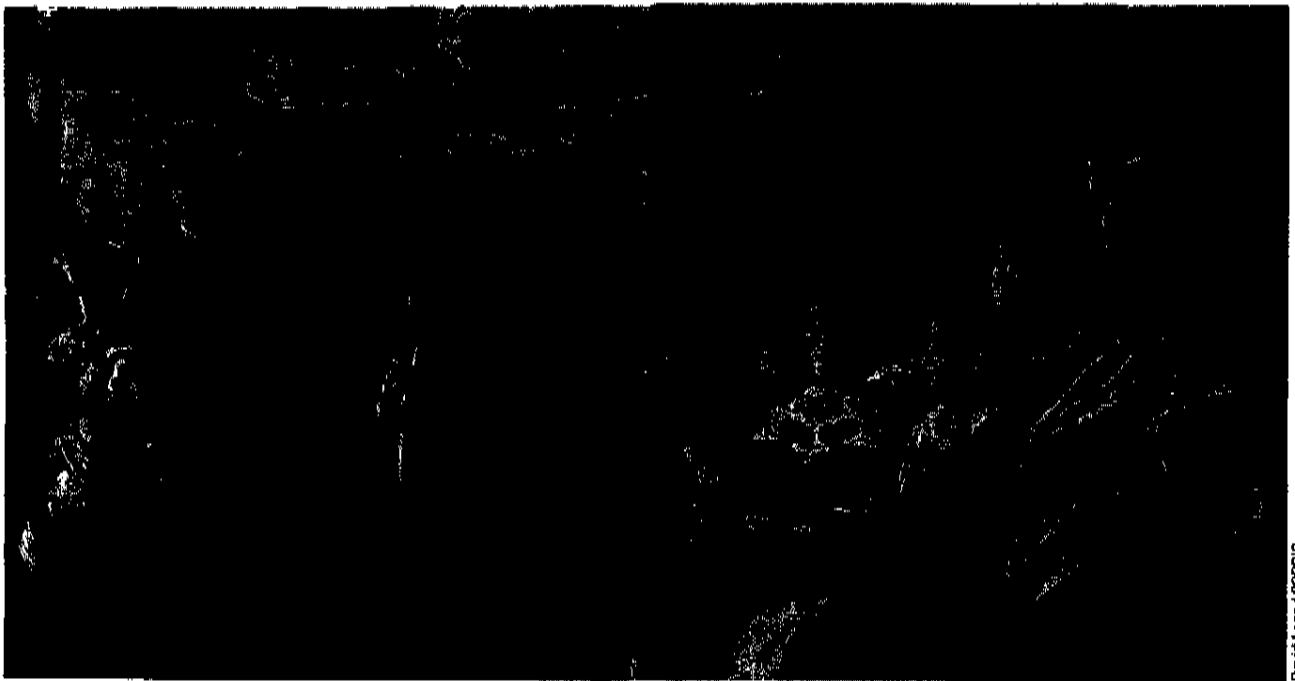
church as we have known it is dying," a retreat master insists. "I hope and pray that the Society will help to facilitate this death and resurrection." An academic gloats, "The Society has not sold its soul to the 'Restoration' of John Paul II." Another Jesuit scholar, a church historian, ranks John Paul II as "probably the worst pope of all times"—adding, "He's not one of the worst popes; he's *the* worst. Don't mis-

quote me." The respondents make it clear that their contempt for the pope is based almost entirely on his intransigence, his unwillingness to imitate their own adaptability in the matter of doctrine.

As do all priests, the speakers above took a solemn oath swearing that they "firmly embrace and accept all and everything concerning the doctrine of faith and morals" proposed by the Church. It must not be assumed that they fail to see the discrepancy. Their willed imbecility derives not from a lack of brainpower or ingenuity but from a deliberate decision to ignore the clash of commitments and to suppress insurgent attempts to throw light on what, for tactical reasons, is better left in darkness.

This "plausible deniability" is the motto of the new Jesuit *nomenclatura*, and the men who made themselves superiors in the 1970s understood clearly that you can write or say pretty much anything you want, provided you keep open your semantic lines of retreat. Thus the German theologian Karl Rahner was able to exhort his fellow Jesuits: "You must remain loyal to the papacy in theology and in practice, because that is part of your heritage to a special degree, but because the actual form of the papacy remains subject, in the future too, to an historical process of change, your theology and ecclesiastical law has above all to serve the papacy as it will be in the future." See the move? Our current Jesuits are all loyal to the papacy, but to the *future* papacy—that of Pope Chelsea XII, perhaps—and their support for contraception, gay sex, and divorce proceeds from humble obedience to this conveniently protean pontiff.

There was a price to pay, of course. Plausible deniability allowed the Society of Jesus to emancipate itself from the Holy Sec, but in the same stroke robbed Jesuit leadership of its ability to lead, to articulate a lucid vision, and to give unambiguous marching orders. Not surprisingly, in the absence of a clear objective, the discipline traditionally accepted as a means to the objective begins to chafe. As the authors



Dennis Lees / CORBIS

Above: Portrait of a Jesuit and His Family by Marco Benefial (1684-1764). Opposite: A Jesuit missionary in Asia c. 1791.

explain in their own jargon: "The incentive structure of sainthood has changed. Ascetical practice has undergone demystification and has taken on more than a whiff of the pathological." The result, quite simply, is widespread infidelity to the vows: slackening in poverty and obedience, but, most dramatically, failure in chastity.

In *Passionate Uncertainty* McDonough and Bianchi cite one Jesuit in his fifties who—admitting to bafflement over the question "what constitutes adherence to celibacy?"—says that this uncertainty "puts priests in a damned if you do (no coherent moral posture) and damned if you don't (old-fashioned repression) dilemma." His further remarks suggest that repression is the road less taken: "Now everybody (with brains) realizes that the rules have changed. Can I work closely with a woman colleague? Go to lunch? . . . Can I kiss her good-night? Spend a night once in a while, as long as it does not interfere with my priestly role? Vacation together?"

Though I align myself with the brainless in this man's typology, I have no doubt that he is right to believe that most of his Jesuit colleagues are of his thinking, and that they live not by their vows but by their own new rules. His account is misleading, however, in suggesting that most of the new breed seek the companionship of women.

"I entered as a way to cope with being gay," says a thirty-six-year-old Jesuit, "although that would not have been the way I put it then." He is not alone. Roughly half of the Society under the age of fifty shuffles on the borderline between declared and undeclared gayness. In 1999 the American Jesuits decided to give priority to the recruitment of gays (under the rubric of "men comfortable with their sexuality"), and the majority of American *formatores*, Jesuits in charge of training, are homosexual as well.

There is a good deal of dissembling among superiors here: some denying the accusation of the gay influx, some admitting it but insisting that it is a boon, most perhaps shifting from one stance to the other depending on the sympathies of their audience and the exigencies of the moment. Overall, superiors have cautiously abetted the transformation of the gay subculture into the dominant culture within Jesuit houses. The website of the California Province portrays its novitiate in frankly camp terms (a photo showing two novices in Mardi Gras masks was captioned "Pretty Boy and Jabba the Slut"). On the other coast, *Boston Magazine* recognized the downtown Jesuit parish as the "best place to meet a mate—gay" in its "Best of Boston" awards.

The cost is not negligible. As Neuhaus's Law (propounded by *First*

Things editor Richard John Neuhaus) has it, "where orthodoxy is optional, it will sooner or later be proscribed." In the Society of Jesus, this applies to diversity of lifestyle as well as of doctrine. One man observes: "Several of my former Jesuit friends would mention the large number of gay Jesuits and the impact that had on community life as being a big reason they left. As a relatively young Jesuit who is heterosexual, I believe I am in the minority, and that raises questions." A thirty-five-year-old Jesuit adds: "My novice master left to marry, my formation director left for a relationship with another man, et cetera. One cannot help but get the sense that we of this generation of Jesuits may be the 'last of the Shakers.'"

It would be an exaggeration to say there is no concern among superiors at what *Passionate Uncertainty* calls—in a memorable phrase—"the gaying and the graying of the Jesuits." But quite clearly they are willing to tolerate the graying in order to expedite the gaying. The pro-homosexual sympathies of men placed in the gatekeeping positions make it especially difficult for heterosexual—and doctrinally orthodox—candidates to survive the selection process. Men of the type regarded as choice Jesuit material in the 1950s are frequently weeded out before they enter the novitiate. Some years ago an

undergraduate at Harvard told me, "From my reading of history I had this idea of Jesuits as bright, kick-ass guys who love the Church. So I thought I'd check them out, and went to talk to the vocation promoter. In the whole hour we spoke he never once asked me about my prayer life or anything like that. He just stared at my crotch and kept after me about how often I masturbated. So long to that." So long to you, my friend, and hello to Jabba the Slut.

Given their areas of scholarly interest, it is surprising that McDonough and Bianchi fail in *Passionate Uncertainty* to touch on the single most important post-conciliar change in the command structure of American Jesuits: the shift of *de facto* power from the formal hierarchy (rectors, provincials) to university presidents. On paper, the presidents remain subject to their religious superiors; in reality the presidents set the tone by which Jesuit life is lived and, on the occasions of a conflict between presidents and superiors, the presidents win hands-down. The fate of Father Joseph Fessio, a former student of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger and director of Ignatius Press in San Francisco, is a good illustration. When Fessio made himself a nuisance to University of San Francisco president Father Stephen Privett earlier this year by assisting in the founding of a two-year Catholic college in the vicinity, he was promptly reassigned as a chaplain at a tiny hospital in Duarte, California. Few Jesuits were surprised; none failed to get the message.

The social typology of the new leadership class is also an important dimension of the current reality. Prestigious positions, like university and theologate administrators, are filled for the most part from a group informally known as the "Gallery Owners": discreet, well-spoken, well-dressed gay priests in their fifties and early sixties. Where the older Jesuits are notable for the heat of their anti-papal passion, the Gallery Owners display a nearly complete apathy toward religion in all its forms. Conventionally liberal, they

support condoms and women priests less as a matter of faith than a fashion statement—rather like wearing a baseball cap backwards. Last year eleven of the twenty-seven American Jesuit universities hosted productions of Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues*, while more humbly employed Jesuits, often inclined to puzzlement at these developments, were officially assured by headquarters that "the Catholic identity of [Jesuit] colleges and universities has never been stronger." The teachings of the Church, being largely an



is one of men content in their vocations, who have drawn closer to the person of Jesus while leaving an earlier Almighty God figure behind."

This remark, paradoxical though it seems, is a deft expression of the characteristic disconnection between Jesuit identity (in the new mode) and priestly service of God (in the old). In McDonough and Bianchi's chapter on "Ministry and the Meaning of Priesthood," we hear another man languidly dismiss the notion of sacerdotal duty as an instance of emotional immaturity: "Formal sacramental action is less central, as are religious 'practices,' than they had been in earlier years—but frequently much more engaging. To celebrate daily Mass, simply because it's there or expected, is no longer part of my way of thinking. It would be like an every-night-is-sex approach to a marital relationship."

"None of the men I know cares about being a priest," reports a man in charge of theological training. "What matters is being a Jesuit." A spiritual director in his fifties concurs, "If I could remain a Jesuit while joining the Quakers, I could be tempted." It should not be imagined that these are the voices of passed-over malcontents; on the contrary, this is fast-track Jesuit chic. In the *New York Times*, Maureen Dowd wrote of a television drama in which a "hip, glib, cute young priest" drives his penitent to get an abortion: "I didn't think the show reflected the point of view of the entertainment elite or, as some critics have ranted, of its 'non-practicing' Jewish producers. I recognized the point of view of the Jesuit elite. Jesuits are the flyboys of the church, the teaching intelligentsia most likely to be found drinking pricey wine and traveling abroad and devising interpretations of church dogma." As it turns out, she was right: The co-creator of the program and one of the paid consultants were Jesuits—Jesuits, we may surmise, who have successfully left an Almighty God figure behind.

Obviously such forward-thinking men neither have nor wish any part of the retrograde religious world of the

irrelevance, has minimal importance in shaping the opinions of the Gallery Owners, who tend to regard orthodox Catholicism—like boxing or heterosexuality—as one of the coarse amusements of the working class.

One early reviewer of *Passionate Uncertainty* (himself a member of the Jesuit *nomenklatura*) glanced briefly at the indicators of decline given by McDonough and Bianchi—but concluded cheerfully, "The overall portrait

Early Jesuit thinkers: Lessius and Molina. Milton: Archive

Jesuit saints and martyrs. Edmund Campion, Jean de Brebeuf, Miguel Pro, and their company all died for convictions the new breed finds adolescent and embarrassing. Of course, among the 3,500 American Jesuits there are a few recusants: men who are not interested in joining the Quakers, who still feel bound by their vows, who celebrate Mass, who wish, in their unimaginative way, some kinship with the simplicity and zeal of St. Ignatius Loyola. They tend to speak little and write less: keeping their heads down, for the most part, and carrying bedpans when they don't.

So, if the situation in the Society of Jesus is really as McDonough and Bianchi describe it in *Passionate Uncertainty*, why doesn't the pope intervene and make radical changes? Two reasons suggest themselves. On the one hand, the attitude of Pope John Paul II towards religious congregations, female as well as male, is somewhat Darwinian. He is content to let the healthy groups prosper—Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity are a parade example—while letting the unhealthy ones die out of their own accord, like sick caribou amid the permafrost. On the other hand, recent popes have judged the political cost of intervening to reform failing congregations as excessive in view of the likely benefits to be gained. A close analogy can be drawn with the moles that surfaced in the British Secret Service in the 1950s. Their treachery was known long before action was taken against them; bit by bit they were denied access to sensitive material, simply so that they'd have less to betray. In the same way, and for the same reasons, the popes have declined a dramatic showdown with the new Jesuits, preferring instead, without calling attention to the fact, to give the really important business to more dependable agents.

"As I get older, I find myself less church centered," says a senior academic. The hero of McDonough and Bianchi's story, the passionately uncertain Jesuit, like a man separated from a wife of thirty years, preserves an icy

courtesy in referring to his spouse and fulfills the bare minimum of social duties. He may be convinced that he has arrived at the best possible truce given his rocky personal history; but no young man—at least no young man with real options—chooses to give his life to a truce. It is a lonely senescence.

Here and there are rumors of courage, devotion, even faith. But the passionately uncertain Jesuit finds himself enclosed in a small corner of a small world, with the waning consolations of sodomy and single-malt whiskey, tottering down the corridors of an increasingly ominous twilight. ♦

Horse Opera

Randolph Scott and the art of the western.

BY TERRY TEACHOUT

If you long to meet odd people, it's hard to top Manhattanites who go to movies on weekdays. To be sure, I am among their number, but at least I have an excuse: I write about movies. The viewers I have in mind are the pure-hearted obsessives, overwhelmingly male and uniformly unattractive, who flock to revival houses on sunny spring afternoons to take in the latest week-long tribute to Alexandr Dovzhenko, Ida Lupino, or Edgar G. Ulmer—it scarcely matters, since the same folks show up every time, no matter what's showing.

Rarely are such proceedings invaded by those with lives, but innocent strangers have been known on occasion to wander into an art house just for fun. Not long ago, I was flabbergasted to see a gaggle of so-I'm-like-duh teenagers at a screening of Jean Renoir's *The Rules of the Game*, though I soon realized that they were film-studies students doing their homework. A few weeks later, I went to the opening of a Budd Boetticher festival presented by the Film Society of Lincoln Center, and was equally astonished to find myself seated behind an intense-looking man who'd brought along a pair of small children. Wondering how a fellow who bore all the stigmata of film geekery could have

forgotten himself long enough to father two cute kids, I tuned in on their pre-show chatter. Would they be lisping about aspect ratios or dye-transfer processes? Far from it. No sooner had I started listening than I overheard a snatch of conversation so appropriate to the occasion that I scribbled it down in my notebook:

Child #1 (firmly): "Two wrongs don't make a right!"

Child #2 (smugly): "Oh, yes, they do!"

The children didn't know it, but the conundrum about which they were arguing was the subject of the movie their father had brought them to see. *Ride Lonesome*, originally released in 1959, is a B western directed by Boetticher and starring Randolph Scott. Unlike such better-remembered films as *Shane*, *Rio Bravo*, and *The Searchers*, it is known only to a small but stalwart band of critics and buffs who regard it as a minor masterpiece. As a rule, fanatics are not to be trusted on any subject whatsoever, least of all one that falls within the compass of their obsessions—but every once in a while, they're right.

In certain ways, Hollywood today is just as it was a half-century ago: a company town, a plantation devoted to the manufacture of cultural commodities to please the largest possible number of people. Then as now, nearly all it produced fit neatly into the pigeonholes of

Terry Teachout, the music critic of Commentary and the film critic of Crisis, is the author of The Skeptic: A Life of H.L. Mencken, forthcoming in November from HarperCollins.