Chapter XVII

WITHDRAWING JESUIT PRESENCE -- ITS IMMEDIATE PRELIMINARIES (1968-1969)

Since a notable decline both in applications and in registrations after acceptance was an important factor in the withdrawal of Jesuit presence from Xavier, figures in these matters are pertinent. While applications in December, 1965, for the class of 1970 were a high of 302, only 156 were found acceptable and of these only 108 enrolled as freshmen in the fall of 1966. In December, 1966, for the class of 1971, the highest number of applicants in all its years presented themselves -- 374. The total enrollment of freshmen in 1967, was, however, only 114. By December, 1967, there was a notable decline in applications for the class of 1972. The numbers were down from the 374 of the previous December to 248. Only 157 were acceptable and the actual registration was 110.

The December 1968 application and subsequent slow registration for the class of 1973 became a matter of serious concern. Of the 207 applicants and 131 acceptances by the school, only 100, after a process drawn out to April, 1969, indicated determination to come. This class was generally considered the poorest since the opening year. It was concerning this class application and determination to come to which Fr. Vigneau spoke at the first session of the Province Congress at Round Hills in February, 1969.
As an aside, it should be pointed out that the official statistics widely used on the state of applicants omitted the applicants of December 1966 for the class of 1971 when the number of applicants were the highest. Somehow, this strange omission was detected, but only on one of the archival copies was the missing information listed.

As a sequel to the accreditation process and in view of the slow response of acceptable students to register, a Xavier community meeting took place as early as February 26, 1968. In addition to the Xavier staff, there were invited to attend, but not to vote, other groups and individuals. Invited were all the Jesuit students residing in the community, the Spiritual Father, three theologians engaged in part-time counselling, the Province Treasurer and the Province Prefect for Secondary Schools.

In detail Fr. Francis J. Donovan, Minister and Treasurer, aided by Mr. Doug Smith of the Boston College High School Treasury Office explained what expenditures and revenues could be projected from June, 1968, through June, 1971. These figures could show what tuition must be charged in view of projected and generous raises for lay teachers and for some decline in total enrollment. If the school had from 352 to 383 students, the tuition charge must be $800.00. If the registration fell to 306 or down to 282, a $1000.00 charge was necessary. In view of the current $580.00 tuition, these increases up to $800.00 or $1000.00 were notable additions. The only other solution would be a drive for funds usable for general school purposes or to found tuition grants. Discussion followed
this presentation so that voting during the next few days could be informed.

Voting returns showed unanimity on some points, wide cleavages on others and many unanswered results on questions of a crucial character. There were also answers that had a squinting connotation. All twenty-two voters agreed that even as a means of saving money there should be no increases in class size up to thirty and no raising of teaching loads up to twenty-five hours a week.

As to the authentic apostolic value of Xavier, eighteen believed it was apostolic, two that it was not, and two others believed that it probably was not.

If the province were to close two secondary schools or turn them over to others, should Xavier, the community asked, be one of these. Here there was more division. Eleven opposed such a change, four and perhaps five favored this course of action, six abstained. A straight-out-vote on this issue would have been more helpful, especially if any of these six abstentions preferred that Xavier should remain.

As to an immediate rise in the annual pay of $600.00 to lay teachers, all but one voted affirmatively. Nor should there be any skimping on class ratio. Tuition and gifts were the ways to gain funds.

In view of some criticism on adequacy of Xavier in cultural and athletic facilities, a vote on this matter showed the belief that they were not adequate or, if they were, they were barely so. As a consequence, some more money must be spent
On April 17, 1968 Fr. Harold O. Small, American Assistant of the Society of Jesus, thanked Fr. Vigneau for the copy of the report of the February meeting and its voting conclusions. He remarked, without prescience, that, as long as Cardinal Cushing was alive the Society could not surrender Xavier, since gratitude was a virtue. He thus hinted that some way short of withdrawal should be sought for its problems.

Xavier went ahead with plans to raise funds and to increase tuition. On October 9, 1968, a letter was addressed to the parents of Xavier students by Fr. Vigneau. Even when the school was accredited a year before, he pointed out, there had been a warning that, without a notable increase in tuition, Xavier could not continue as an excellent school. After long studies on possible charges, it was concluded to raise, beginning in September 1969, the tuition to $900.00 for the first three years of students and to $750.00 for the class of 1970. This letter ended on an upbeat note concerning the school and its future. There was no intimation of serious problem if the tuition were raised directly from $585.00 to $900.00, or to $750.00 for the senior class.

At the same time, a letter was sent to the province detailing the new tuition charges. It also indicated an earlier undated decision to limit the student body to 400 in view of the province manpower capabilities and the burden of higher salaries for the lay associates. It indicated that no saving of money was anticipated by any increase in class size. Parents with financial ability must expect to pay fully while poorer students
can still be aided. Some sort of an answer was invited to enlighten the province as it studied the apostolate of secondary schools. No copies of any formal reply to this appeal were found in the Xavier archives. I, for one, first read this October, 1968, letter when I received the Xavier files in late November, 1977. Opportunity to discuss these matters with reference to Xavier could easily have arisen in the course of the current province planning and the sociological survey meetings.

The moves towards Jesuit disassociation from Xavier began to move more rapidly on the inside. On February 20, 1969, Fr. Vigneau, as rector, wrote his annual letter to Fr. General Pedro Arrupe. He recalled the preparation for and the announcement of the tuition increase to $900.00 and set forth some of the results. In December, 1968, there were only 207 applicants whereas in December, 1967, there were 248 and, in 1966, there had been 374. Requests for financial aid had doubled. If a good lay faculty were to be retained and properly reimbursed, a further increase in tuition would soon be mandatory. Not only were additional Jesuits out of the question, but some of the present Jesuit staff were contemplating study or experimental work. The cardinal's choice of Concord as a location for the school was deplored. Nor did Cardinal Cushing, it was said, help by snide remarks about even the $580.00 tuition. There was an intimation that Emerson Hospital might purchase the plant.
As for the foreseeable future -- without any possibility of governmental or continued province financial aid -- there appeared no market in enrollment for a school whose tuition could be soon forced higher. Fr. Vigneau concluded his letter to Fr. General by asserting that either there was no real apostolic need for this type of education in Concord, or the upper middle class must show a willingness to pay for it and subsidize it.

In the absence of Fr. General, who was on visitation in Australia, one of his general assistants, Fr. Vincent T. O'Keefe, responded on March 10, 1969. If people do not care to pay adequately for superior education, some other use of Jesuit manpower and effort should be sought. As to the Cardinal, a frank conversation with him by Fr. Vigneau and Fr. Provincial was proposed. He might thus be prepared for later closing of the school. Concomitant with this Roman correspondence was Fr. Vigneau's report to the February, 1969, Province Congress at Round Hills concerning the currently low registration of a new and coming class of 1973. It was only in April, 1969, that the minimum required enrollment was reached and, as has been reiterated, it was a less satisfying group of students academically.

Before matters came any more to a head, an interesting study authorized by the trustees of Xavier became available. This study was a nineteen-page Attitude Survey Report dated May 12, 1969. Leo F. Weiner, a professional consultant of Canton, Massachusetts, had been engaged by the Xavier trustees to initiate this study beginning on March 31, 1969. This inquiry
sounded out seventy-nine individuals representing the student body, teachers, alumni, parents of present and former students, officials of the Society and of the Archdiocese of Boston, educators and natives of Concord. For these nine categories queried, a total of seventy-nine being polled seems somewhat small. Pertinent in this report were questions on financial aid to the school, increase in size and recognition or not of the current state of Xavier's financial jeopardy.

As to whether there was a real concern for Xavier's future or continued existence -- on which most had no insights --, students may be said to have been concerned up to eighty percent, parents up to ninety percent, alumni only twenty-eight percent. Even these percentages come from joining votes for considerable concern with the votes of those who are so confident that they experienced no concern whatsoever.

When the question was raised about increasing enrollment in its relation to the Xaverian program and image, there was a problem. Respondents were told that increased enrollment meant not a jump, for instance, from 400 to 500 or 600 students, but only an increase in student ratio to teachers seemingly independent of whether there was a 400 or 500 student body enrollment. To some this ratio type of increase was adverse, less so to others. To eighty-eight percent of the faculty and to sixty percent of outsiders, this change in student ratio would be considered adverse. It was also considered adverse by fifty percent of the parents and twenty-five of the students and seventeen percent of the alumni. There was, thus,
some difference in viewpoint between current and past students and those who have paid the bills or just looked down with appreciation from the outside.

The next question asked, without any reference to image, was whether Xavier should increase enrollment and where. There was no indication in the terms in which respondents were to interpret the word "increase." How, therefore, it was answered seems anyone's guess. To this question eighty-seven of the alumni responded affirmatively but only eighteen percent of the current students. Fifty eight percent of all the outsiders as did seventy percent of the faculty and twenty-five percent of the parents opposed an increase. Coeducation was also opposed by seventy-seven percent of the parents, favored by eighty-seven percent of the outsiders and eighty-six percent of the faculty. Students were in opposition by fifty-five percent.

The recently announced increase in tuition as one way of bettering the financial standing of the school gave rise to a series of questions. Asked if they would send their sons or return themselves to Xavier at this price, the greatest affirmative of 100% came from the parents of alumni. Sixty percent of the alumni would themselves return or send a son, but another twenty percent of the alumni would not and still another twenty percent doubted that they would. Sixty-seven percent of the current students would return and only eight percent were totally negative.
A related question on fund raising dealt with a willingness to contribute. Here, if the definitely affirmative answers were joined to the probability ones, the alumni were favorable to eighty-seven and a half percent, the parents of the present students to eighty-three and a half percent, but the parents of the alumni who were 100% for sending their sons back to Xavier were but seventy-five percent willing to contribute. Tuition, even high tuition, they seem ready to pay, but were less prepared to grant later subsidies. In general, however, all those who did favor contributions wished that the drive for funds had been initiated at once. It was this enthusiasm that brought about a steering committee for this purpose. It activities, however, were delayed in November, 1969, for practical reasons involved in a possible withdrawal of the Jesuit presence.

Mr. Weiner believed that the young alumni despite some sophisticated views on Xavier would rally round in an emergency. He sensed, too, that, while parents sympathized with Xavier's pull towards inner-city students, they did not want Xavier to overlook boys from the middle economic class. The report ended with a few recommendations to keep Xavier going.

Mr. Weiner thought it would be well for Xavier to know and ponder the view of a headmaster, once an opponent of all sectarian education, who now believed that church-related schools were islands of sanity. This view paralleled those of the executive committee of the Insipendent School Commission of the New England Association in November, 1967.
More lay trustees were also proposed by Mr. Weiner. A process in this direction was well-started prior to the events of late 1969 and early 1970. He recommended increase in size of the student body up to 500 by aggressive recruiting efforts. He did not recommend a drive for funds but rather emphasized annual and deferred giving.

His final sentences were: "Xavier deserves to remain in operation. Its family and its friends will see that it does." These were brave words. Some friends and family continued to believe them.

The next step towards disengagement came with the Xavier Commencement on June 4, 1969. Fr. Vigneau presented an annual report of four pages which was often referred to later and was widely publicized. In speaking of the widespread disorder affecting so many schools in the past school year, he indicated that Xavier, without favoring change for its own sake or merely enunciating sound moral platitudes, had striven to enflesh in action its social ideals.

Where a stand had to be taken on a gut issue, this was done. Commitments in deeds not just words and ideas were encouraged. Granted that not everything that was done was always correct or secure, Xavier was challenging social structures where and when needed. If such a mission of Xavier were not accepted by students and parents, Xavier would close. Here was a clear and early enunciation of the view that unwillingness to accept this prophetic concept of Xavier, along with its academic excellence, was a signal that continued work there by Jesuits was
not consonant with God's greater glory. Perhaps these words were taken as graduation day rhetoric. They quite obviously were not.

In the same month of June, Fr. Vigneau proposed that the recently combined office of rector and headmaster of Xavier be split. He would prefer that another be rector, in the sense of a religious superior, and that he be headmaster in full charge of the school. Considerable time was spent by Fr. Provincial in studying and finally approving a deliniation of the respective functions. Since these details are not pertinent to the current narrative, they are omitted.

A request for the change along with a terna for a new rector was submitted to Fr. General. In August, 1969, he wished the system of a rector in full charge of school and community to be continued and he was prepared to accept the nomination of Fr. Richard J. Olsen for the post. There was some embarrassment when it became known that Fr. Olsen's name as rector had been approved but that no action on its promulgation was forthcoming.

Further clarification on problems were needed. It had been the understanding of superiors and Fr. Olsen that his temperament and training suited him for the office of religious superior rather than headmaster. After further clarification of the situation, Fr. General acquiesced in the appointment of Fr. Olsen as rector of the community with Fr. Vigneau continuing only as an independent headmaster of the school. Fr. Olsen assumed his office on November 1, 1969. It was during this somewhat of an impasse on jurisdictional matters that plans on increasing trustees with some lay people as members were set.
The next development towards withdrawal of Jesuit presence came from the outside although the group of seven in question included Fr. Vigneau. On November 5, 1969, Fr. Joseph D. Devlin, New England Province Director of Secondary Education since May 31, 1969, met with the principals of the Jesuit secondary schools in the province at 297 Commonwealth Avenue while Loyola House was still Province Headquarters. At this time the principals were Fr. John R. Vigneau (Xavier), James C. O'Brien (B. C. High), Robert J. Starratt (Fairfield), John G. Cornellier (Connolly), James A. Benson (Cranwell) and John J. Bresnahan (Cheverus). The projected purpose of the meeting had been a formulation of a statement on the scope and purpose of secondary education in the province as a way to attract future Jesuit teachers. The focus of the group so changed during the discussion that a different objective was effected. Its members recognized that due to declining manpower there must be a cutback on the number of the schools serviced by Jesuits.

Moreover, a slow process of decision-making was out of the question. According to the last Province Congress, the high schools, for continued Jesuit life, were to rely on self-studies, separate incorporation of community and closer university ties. These devices now appeared overly slow or halfway measures.

Now it was believed by the principals that one top-flight school would be most desirable, obviously in or near Boston to capitalize on its academic and cultural treasures. If there were but one, it might incorporate completely the province
criteria on the promotion of justice and church reform. Two more traditional schools might be maintained but no more. The reasons were the dwindling number of Jesuits ready to be assigned, an increasing number of those seeking other work, and the expensive involvement of adding lay teachers. By five years, the cutback must come on a decision for one or, at the most, for three schools. Three principals unnamed would favor one school or perhaps one additional and traditional one; the other three seemed to favor one major school plus two other traditional schools. In all events, two would have to surrender Jesuit presence in some form, and perhaps even three or four.

At the end of the meeting Fr. Devlin asked and apparently received help for later formulating a plea that could be presented to the congress scheduled for early January, 1970. Whatever Fr. Devlin received for concretizing the proposed motion was to be kept confidential, and so did not appear in the quite ample Xavier archival documentation.

Before the Province congress met at Shadowbrook in early January, 1970, some further developments took place. On November the 11th, the province consultors met and for a time conferred with province curia planners on the forthcoming congress. Dissatisfaction was expressed by two of the consultors that Fr. Provincial had permitted the recall of the 1969 congress personnel rather than authorize new elections for a "province forum" as the group would later be termed. Opportunity for freshness of approach and spirit had thus been lost. Consequently, the prospect for the January, 1970, meeting was of
a drab group with a drab effect on the province.

It was noted also that this same characterization of drab personality and drab outcome was widespread in the province concerning the personnel and predictable conclusions of the congress. Hence, there was need of a gutsy agenda, especially on secondary schools.

Seven days after this consultants meeting, Fr. Vigneau tendered to Fr. Provincial, on November 18, his resignation as headmaster. He wished the resignation to be effective by June, 1970. In this letter he recalled his long involvement in secondary-school work but indicated that he was then impatient with the province dragging its feet on the issue of secondary schools. As an elected member of the two previous sessions of the province congress, he had been pleased with his work but, since its second session, only waiting appeared the outcome. The recent meeting of the principals and their resolves had been heartening. Early and drastic action was, however, needed. Perhaps he had reason to believe his voluntary resignation would advance action in this realm.

There were some reactions in the Xavier community to the announced results of the principals' meeting and, finally, to the resignation. Just before the latter, Fr. Rector, Richard J. Olsen, alerted Fr. Provincial that, after the Province Consultants' meeting, Fr. Vigneau had cancelled the trustees meeting and postponed work on the projected drive for three months. To Fr. Olsen, these actions seem steps calculated to allow the schools to slip downward. At a community meeting on
November the 13th, Fr. Vigneau was reported to have suggested to the community that an offer be made to relinquish its connection with the Xavier School. Doubts had therefore surfaced that on his own he was bringing Xavier to an end as a Jesuit school. It was just after this communication that Fr. Provincial, on return to his residence, learned of Fr. Vigneau's resignation.

On reflection and on advice the provincial wrote on November 25th that he was not ready to accept the resignation at present. Too short a time had elapsed since the last arrangement had been made and there really was hope in the coming province meeting. It was, moreover, to the Xavier trustees, fully informed, to whom Fr. Vigneau's resignation should be addressed. Details of any such trustees' meeting, their decision and any proposed replacement should then be forwarded to Fr. Provincial. He expressed his opposition to any hasty cancelling of a fund-raising plan since this would make the future more hazardous. No precipitative action of any kind should prejudice the final destinies of Xavier.

Fr. Provincial visited Xavier during December and Fr. Devlin visited it once. Concerning his visit, Fr. Provincial wrote on December 16th that he appreciated Fr. Vigneau's anxiety at province inactivity to date on secondary school matters. He indicated, nevertheless, that no resignation could be effective prior to June, 1970, and even an acceptance then was contingent on later decisions. Secondary school matters would be one of the special issues at the coming congress. Fr. Provincial himself would have the matter brought up so that conclusions could be
reached in a matter of months. Any further inaction was out of the question. He ended by recommending a vacation to Fr. Vigneau.

In a memorandum of December 21, Fr. Devlin recounted his visit to Fr. Vigneau who was looking forward to study and contacts in the Boston area and performing some secondary school work in the province. Fr. Vigneau denied all allegations of trying to close Xavier. He had informed one lay teacher of his resignation and would inform others if no satisfactory action were taken at the coming congress. He stressed that it might well be a preference policy for Jesuits to work in other peoples' institutions rather than in their own. He had a low opinion of current province high school teachers. There were too many psychologically sick, insecure, negative and angry ones. He urged psychological interviews for all Jesuit faculties as well as some due process devices to hear complaints of Jesuits who might be removed by principals from the classroom.

Fr. Vigneau made one more preparation in advance of the congress. He dated a three-page document on December 31, 1969, for immediate delivery to Fr. Provincial. He wished the congress to know what had happened at Xavier since his report in February, 1969, on the matter of low registration which had improved to an extent in April of that year. Presently, some at Xavier were doubting the apostolic value of that school and of other schools as well. For some, this view was the decisive factor for their planned departure from Xavier. The raise in tuition to $900.00 had kept the school solvent for the present, but estimated needs
for higher lay salaries would necessitate a further rise. Of the
fourteen Jesuit teachers currently on the staff, six were
definitely planning to leave and probably a seventh. The
principal of a choice of ministries could possibly help to bring
in new recruits, but it could also lead to so few that the school
would die on the vine. It was crucial for all to know that the
current applications and its consequent registration were
extraordinarily low. There was also an opportunity to sell the
property, but a prompt decision on the continuance or not of the
school was needed to take advantage of any offer to sell. A
developmental drive for funds he called a chimera. The school,
too, had been disadvantageously located and begun at an
inappropriate time. His proposal was to close the school as soon
as possible and, by all means, not to accept a new class for
September, 1970. These opinions were his own although others
shared them. A failure of the congress to decide definitely on
Xavier would be cruel -- worse than a crime, a blunder as it
were.

With this document the initial phase of withdrawal of
Jesuit presence at Xavier comes to an end. Since this term on
withdrawal of Jesuit presence will frequently be used as a middle
term and frequently be misunderstood or ignored rather than
denied, it is advantageous to explain its technical sense found
in germ in the congress resolution and elaborated upon as one
concrete issue is regularly brought into play as to its
amplitude.
The New England Province, after an agreed on date (June, 1970, or at latest, June, 1971) will no longer assign Jesuits to administer and instruct at Xavier or to serve as its legal trustees. If some other group should take over the trusteeship of the school, Jesuits who volunteer to work at Xavier may, after dialogue with Fr. Provincial, be authorized to teach there but none will be assigned there as a result of any contract with any new (non-Jesuit) trustees. This definitive and unwavering position was either not understood or was protested as will be seen from the numerous efforts to have unnamed volunteers guaranteed the title to teach at Xavier even with the ultimate power of trusteeship vested in a Jesuit group. It is the making of this decision and the efforts both to explain it and to illustrate its limited scope to which the next chapter is devoted.