Chapter XVIII

WITHDRAWING JESUIT PRESENCE -- ITS ANNOUNCEMENT (1970)

At the Province Congress, it was Fr. Provincial who took the initiative in expounding in confidence the situation at Xavier. According to the minutes, he asked whether the congress had a better alternative to Xavier's closing at that time. In a memorandum prepared as a basis for this talk can be found a fuller exposition of his views.

The recruiting of the students had been difficult especially in the early winter of 1968-69 although this situation had been somewhat ameliorated by the spring of 1969. He recalled the subsequent divisions of authority at Xavier, the recent realizations expressed by the province's principals of secondary schools on over-expansion due to declining membership in the Society, the recent resignation of Fr. Vigneau accepted by Xavier's trustees but not yet by himself. He set forth the urgency for an immediate answer.

Moreover, in view of the province's criteria on the promotion of justice and reform of the church, it was questioned whether Xavier's catering to the upper class was really the best use of apostolic talents. Finances for the moment were satisfactory but, with the projected rising scale in salaries, tuition then at $900.00 must be further raised. Six to eight Jesuits planned to leave Xavier on reasons of "spiritual, personal, psychological and apostolic nature." Prospects for new students were very low. There were, in addition, possible
prospective purchasers for the property. Decision must be made quickly to determine whether in this very month new candidates for September should be accepted. He wished to make clear he was not asking a ratification of his decision but for a viable alternative from this session of the congress to a move to "disassociate ourselves from the school." This formulation "to disassociate ourselves from the school" is sharper than a "closing Xavier down" as his thought was reported in the minutes.

A discussion was carried on both in the afternoon and evening sessions of Friday, January 2, 1970. Much time was spent on the exact meaning of secondary school education which, as an undefined term, was generally favored. A fair number of the Xavier staff, either delegates or observers, presented their views with most of them urging a discontinuation of the school. It was fine, they said, in many ways but not the current appropriate outlet for apostolic zeal.

After some time, Fr. Robert P. White moved that the congress "recommend to the Provincial to withdraw Jesuit support for Xavier in the future." This concretized the more general provincial statement of the minutes, that is, "Xavier's closing down," and was in clearer accord with the memorandum formula to "disassociate ourselves from the school." This motion of Fr. White's was seconded.

There was a brief added discussion. Fr. John C. Ford requested a written ballot. The chairman (Fr. Joseph D. Devlin) agreed on such a written ballot. The voting was forty-eight for, and two against the White resolution. Seventeen abstained.
Immediately after this vote a motion was introduced to set up a commission to gather all pertinent data on the other five secondary schools. It was amended to say that the composition of this commission would not be specifically voted by the congress. After one question was raised on the composition of the commission, the proposal as amended was passed. Another motion was also passed for a full history of Xavier so that salutary lessons might be drawn.

On January 16, 1970, prior to the publication of the minutes the executive committee of the congress issued, as part of its preliminary report on all aspects of the congress, the following comments on the Xavier role in the total secondary school discussions. There are some underlinings here. The first is in the text, the second is mine.

Secondary Education. This discussion was obviously one of the most urgent sessions of the congress; focused, as it were, upon the decision about Xavier although the decision had been looming during the last year, the time for decision came to a focus only at the congress. Fr. Provincial asked for the floor and announced to the congress that, unless they could come up with a feasible alternative, there seemed to be no other option than to withdraw Jesuits from the direction and staffing of Xavier.

Extensive discussion took place in which almost one half of the Xavier faculty spoke in favor of the decision. As in past congresses, a number of Xavier people were present as observers at the congresses.
The major thrust of their decisions both individual and collective emphasized their perception of greater responsibility to the needs of future service even when this meant the most difficult decision.

At the end of this discussion, despite the fact that some felt they needed further information, the final vote to endorse the Provincial decision was yes, forty-eight [seventy-two percent]; no, two; abstained seventeen.

Hence, the congress by a seventy-two percent majority voted its inability to offer a viable alternative "to recommend to the Provincial to withdraw Jesuit support for Xavier in the future" (the words of the White resolution) or, in the words of the report "to endorse the Provincial decision" ("to withdraw Jesuits from the direction and staffing of Xavier"). This action came quickly to be formulated in the technical expression of withdrawing Jesuit presence from Xavier. This expression excluded any continued, even though limited management of Xavier by any contractual guarantee of any set number of Jesuits who might labor there under other people's management. If Jesuits were to be there, it would be by personal arrangement in discernment with Fr. Provincial, as men then often worked at state colleges or elsewhere. Such arrangements were in keeping with the freedom of choice in ministry as passed in the second session of the 1969 Province Congress and officially approved.

Rumors spreading in the town of Concord on the sale of the Xavier properties spurred rapid action. On January 4th, Fr. Provincial planned an appointment with Cardinal Cushing to
explain the situation. The appointment for Fr. Provincial, Fr. Vigneau and Fr. Francis X. Miller, the Province Treasurer, was at 10:00 A. M. on January 6th, the very day the president of the nearby Emerson Hospital wrote of his interest in the Xavier property. In the meeting with the cardinal, the circumstances were explained, possible ways of dividing profit or losses were presented and the cardinal accepted the inevitability of the decision to withdraw.

A five-page letter was addressed to Fr. General on January 8, 1970. Much was detailed that has already been seen in this narrative. It recounted the visit to the cardinal and his acceptance of the proposal to withdraw. It alluded to the fact that Xavier was serving a middle or upper middle class student body in days of increasing awareness of the poor and the underprivileged. Hence, Fr. Provincial could not turn aside requests for change in status in keeping with the personal and health needs of men at Xavier in order to save a school barely able to survive. He appeared sanguine about a sale of property to Emerson Hospital or to the Concord-Carlyle regional school district. Since there could be (although it seemed far-fetched) some religious or private group ready to continue with the school, no sale would be consummated until this possibility had been explored. The plans on placing the students elsewhere were explained. A brief timetable on plans concerning public announcements and legal and financial plans were also included.
Plans for assimilating the Xavier student body were quickly arranged. In the event that even the Class of 1971 would not be kept at Xavier, both Boston College High School and Cranwell School agreed to accept any who requested a place. Since the Classes of 1972 and 1973 would not be kept at Xavier, these same two schools agreed to accept the current sophomores on application and to give special attention to applicants from the freshman class. Fr. J. C. O'Brien, the Principal of Boston College High School, and a former Xavier teacher, proposed that, in return for the generosity of Boston College High School in accepting transfers, it receive the library, audio-visual and scientific equipment plus a good choice at several excellent teachers with one of them placed at the top of this list of desirables.

On January 9th, a brief report was made available to the Boston press on the withdrawing of Jesuit presence from Xavier. The announcement was brief:

The Jesuits at Xavier school, Concord, through the headmaster, Rev. John R. Vigneau, S. J. announced that they are withdrawing from the school. Half of the Jesuit teachers will leave in June 1970 and the remainder will depart in June 1971. The reasons for this definitive decision and the alternatives which might be considered by interested parents and others will be explained at a public meeting to be held in the school auditorium on Tuesday, January 30 at 8:00 p.m. Representatives of the mass media will be present at this meeting.

The century old Jesuit presence at Boston College High School will be strengthened by the decision of the Jesuits at Xavier, and the administration at Boston College High School has made generous offers that will facilitate the transfer of many Xavier students. The details of this arrangement will be explained at the public meeting.
On this same January 9th, the assembled students were informed. At this meeting, it was announced that Fr. Raymond J. Callahan was acting headmaster until further notice. Fr. Vigneau would now be only the President of the Xavier Corporation. The same day, signed while Fr. Callahan was director of admissions, a copy of the press release was given to each student at the school assembly for the benefit of parents. Prior to these releases and announcements on January 9th, the faculty had been informed of these matters by Fr. Vigneau. Its members were asked not to pass any comments prior to the public meeting and to assist the students to keep a sense of Christian perspective.

The much heralded and awaited public assembly took place as scheduled. Fr. Vigneau assumed the brunt of the announcement in a nine-page statement. For the withdrawal, he cited the lesser numbers of available Jesuits and the very low number of new applicants. Several seasoned teachers, for spiritual reasons, were departing the staff to serve "even greater needs." For these departures there were no obviously trained Jesuit replacements. Only one of the lay staff would consider continuing in these new circumstances. In a short time even a tuition charge of $900.00 would be too low to maintain the school's excellence. The steering committee which had worked on finances was thanked but their efforts were no longer considered germane.
In last place he stressed what earlier had been intimated at Xavier, Jesuits were not fulfilling service for the greater glory of God to which they were committed as an ideal. A Jesuit commitment involved risk, flexibility and, while it promised itself nothing, demanded all from self. Xavier school did not make such service possible.

Matters of a pragmatic character were also expounded. There was a willingness to cooperate with any group that might take over the school but not to arrange for Jesuits to remain. The current junior class of 1971 could graduate from Xavier provided enough enroll for the following year. They might transfer if they wished to Poston College High School or Cranwell School or attempt early entrance into college. Those in second year, who would not be continued at Xavier, could be accepted by one or other of the same two Jesuit schools. Those in first year could apply for acceptance by these two schools and be given every possible consideration. No new class of 1974 would enter in September, 1970. Xavier alumni will be affiliated with Boston College High School's alumni.

Fr. Vigneau concluded this address with pride in a heritage that, while creating first-class institutions, could be flexible enough to move on when God's greater glory beckoned.

*Newsweek*, in its February 2, 1970, issue, carried an extended article on the problems of maintaining Catholic schools. The article had a paragraph on the Jesuit withdrawal from Xavier. When asked, according to this article, to explain the gnawing doubt about the lesser value of work in Xavier, Fr. Vigneau was
reported as saying, "I want to try something new and I think I would like to work among the blacks in Boston." This remark, continued Newsweek, brought applause from many students and silence from parents. There are in the Xavier files several letters applauding Fr. Vigneau's credo.

Opposition to the Jesuit withdrawal was at a high pitch for the next few months. In the files of Xavier are eighty-five telegrams and twenty-nine letters sent during January. By some Emily Post system of etiquette, the letter writers received a gracious form letter, but no response appears to have been forwarded to the senders of telegrams. Three additional letters which came later were separately and personally acknowledged. The letter sent out at the end of January in reply to pleas for some form of continuation at Xavier was the following:

Thank you for your letter concerning the recent announcement that the Jesuit Fathers [sic] are withdrawing from Xavier School, Concord, Massachusetts.

As you are aware this was not an easy decision to make. I did so only after consideration of all the factors involved and I regret any inconvenience that this decision has caused you. It is, however, irreversible. I am sorry that I could not answer your letter personally but the large amount of correspondence received on this issue precluded any such arrangement.

With best wishes and a promise of prayers for you and your intentions, I am

Sincerely yours,
William G. Guindon, S.J.
Provincial
That, at the public meeting, it became known that some of Xavier's Jesuits were ready to remain and perhaps be joined by others from other sources led to one important warning as well as to proposals on continuation of some Jesuit efforts to save the school. As to a warning, Mr. Ralph O. West, Director of the Evaluation Commission on Independent Secondary Schools of the New England Association, recalled that since Xavier had been accredited as a Jesuit school with a sizable Jesuit staff, any marked change in that personnel would affect seriously the accredited standing of the school.

As to a way of continuing Xavier with Jesuit assistance, plans such as the Shreveport or Austin Prep plan came into prominence. These are set forth in detail later in this narrative. These possibilities became the chief hopes of a group of parents under the leadership of George A. Coleman, Dr. Harry Ernst and Dr. Richard Stanton.

Reactions of New England Jesuits to the decision as presented to Fr. Provincial were varied. Some expressed the view that they regretted the manner in which the withdrawal had been made, but they took no further action. One who wrote was informed that the Xavier experiment was really just a boat drill; more than a boat drill could be expected elsewhere.

Other views expressed strong doubts on a variety of issues. The congress was not given adequate time to make so drastic a move. There was some doubt whether Xavier's financial situation was as weak as alleged, and whether the enrollment was as hopeless as pictured. But the greatest stress was laid on the
presence of enough and qualified volunteers to join that portion of the Xavier staff who were ready to remain.

Time and again, and from a variety of sources, this matter of volunteers arose. At no time was a list of these people with their qualifications presented to Fr. Provincial. One letter in the files written by an official of another Jesuit school than Xavier did list some seven people. Three of these were Jesuits who as priests had had experience in secondary school work, three had their priestly experience in colleges, and one had experience in both. Of these seven, some were of college retirement age; a few were actively teaching in Jesuit secondary schools.

Other points were also urged as grounds for reconsideration. Even the congress had placed great emphasis on the value of Jesuit secondary education; yet it was here that contraction was made. Comparison were made with the continued support of three colleges where stress on Jesuit values was not always too evident. It seemed to objectors that, if lack of manpower was a decisive factor in withdrawing Jesuit presence from Xavier, it should be the colleges rather than the secondary schools that should be affected.

Personalities, too, at times obtruded into the objections raised. Fr. Vigneau was charged with too single-handedly able to effect the closing of Xavier. In view of the freer hand given to younger Jesuits in life style, it was argued that older men willing to continue Xavier might have the use of the Xavier faculty residence while working in the school.
as volunteers.

To these objections a settled answer was given. The decision favored by the clear majority of the congress and ratified by the provincial was to stand. There was a financial and enrollment problem at Xavier. As to any volunteers, they would have to work with some group, whatever it might be, that might assume the fullest legal, financial and academic responsibility for Xavier. Jesuits, so inclined, could volunteer to teach there under these outside auspices and, after dialogue with Fr. Provincial, have their requests seriously considered under the principle of the freedom of choice of ministries.

Moreover, it was emphasized that any new setup was in no circumstances to include any Jesuit trustees even when others assumed financial responsibilities. Nor was any arrangement to be judged compatible with withdrawal of Jesuit presence which would require any guaranteed number of Jesuits as could be a feature in some proposals. Since no group, as will be seen, ever assumed responsibility for the continuation of Xavier, the topic of volunteers and their sanctioning never came to a test.

Even while these objections were being raised by Society members, a new reaction on January 17, 1970, came from Cardinal Cushing. This was occasioned by newspaper accounts and some public pleas which had reached him. In a letter to Fr. Provincial, he noted the possibility of volunteers and seemed worried by public dismay and disenchantment along with consequent ill effects on other aspects of Catholic education. He recalled the past sacrifices made for education, especially by Jesuits.
He discerned apostolic value to the archdiocese in Xavier and indicated how the school had enhanced, and could continue to enhance, adult education. In view of these desirable effects, and to stem advancing secularism, he believed the preservation of secondary school education necessary.

Because of his necessary absence from his office, Fr. Provincial could not respond until January 27th to this letter concerning the decision "to relinquish responsibility for staffing and directing Xavier High School." As to the volunteers, they were presumably retired men between sixty-five and seventy years of age. Their names had not been disclosed to him. Hence, there can be no decision on their availability. Appreciating the value of secondary education, the province was willing to turn the management and staffing over to some other group rather than to close the school. Adult education was realized as a valuable contribution, and one of those priests who was withdrawing from Xavier planned to prepare himself for fuller time at it. The sad fact about Xavier was the lack of available and qualified teachers, and of qualified students, only twenty-five of whom had appeared ready to enter a class in September, 1970, where 200 could be enrolled. This response is the letter which the Coleman Report was to characterize as abrupt. It was undoubtedly to the point, not on closing Xavier, but on withdrawing Jesuit presence. It was hardly disrespectful, as the term "abrupt" might imply.

The narrative now turns to a fathers' group interested in, and even militant for, some retention of Xavier, and then to the final decision sanctioned by the General to withdraw Jesuit
presence from Xavier.