The publishing firm "Counterpoint" of Washington D.C. has recently published a book entitled Jesuits: a Multibiography (550 pages). It was originally published in French in two volumes, entitled Jésuites: une multibiographie (Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1991-1992). This English edition in one volume (translated by Jeremy Leggatt) was made possible by the omission of certain chapters that would be of interest only to French readers.

The author, Jean Lacouture, is a journalist who has written biographies of political personages (De Gaulle, Mendes-France, Nasser, Ho Chi Minh), as well as of men of letters (Francois Mauriac, Léon Blum, André Malraux).

The present work is not a connected history of the Jesuits, but a series of interpretative essays on certain key personages and events in their 450-year history. The early years of the Society of Jesus (always referred to, translating the French, as "the Company") are dealt with in the first six chapters: two on St. Ignatius Loyola, one on St. Francis Xavier, and one each on certain question: the admission (or non-admission) of women; the Jews and the Jesuits; Jesuit obedience ("Perinde ac cadaver").

Two essays deal with Jesuit missionary work: Matteo Ricci in China and the Reductions among the Guarani Indians in Paraguay.

The suppression of the Jesuit Order and its restoration are the subject of three essays.

One chapter deals with the attacks on the Jesuits in 19th century France ("The Black Legend") and another is entitled "Inci-
dents at Vichy” about occupied France in World War II. (This last is perhaps the least objective of the chapters, being bitterly partisan.)

The last four chapters deal with more recent personages and events: “Obedience and Teilhard”; “The Exorcist and the Vatic an”; “Justice and Pedro Arrupe”; “The Third Company.”

Written by a former pupil of the Jesuits who has retained respect and affection for his former teachers and the Order to which they belonged, this book is written with admiration and sympathy, but with a certain critical objectivity. His sympathy does not prevent him from mentioning what he considers defects. Allowing for an occasional journalistic exaggeration, the book is very well written, and the translation generally excellent. (We shall refer below to one mistranslation.) Although not a work of primary research, it is a well-informed treatment based on standard works of solid merit.

There are many things in the book that deserve more detailed comment, but we shall limit ourselves to two points: a brief comment on St. Ignatius; more in detail on the Society’s suppression and restoration.

ST. IGNATIUS LOYOLA

A good biographer is like a good portrait painter. While the details are important, it is the total picture that counts. Lacouture’s portrayal of Ignatius is such a portrayal. It is done with obvious admiration and contains many interesting insights. The treatment however might perhaps have been fuller if the more recent Spanish studies had been consulted. On St. Ignatius recent research has discovered much, but the total picture remains unchanged.

One point in Ignatian spirituality may not have been completely appreciated in this book. It is contained in a “Note” (it would today be called a footnote) in the Spiritual Exercises (nos. 164-167): “Note: Before entering upon an election [of a way of life], so that a person may be better inclined to the true doctrine of Christ, it helps much to consider and ponder on three ways of humility (tres maneras de humildad).” It is seemingly a small item, but of enormous importance. The failure to appreciate the
full import of this component of Ignatian spirituality makes it difficult for the author to understand the conduct of the Jesuits when their Order was abolished by Papal edict. We shall return to this point presently.

SUPPRESSION

How explain the burning hatred (that term is ours, not Lacou- ture's) against the Jesuits in the 18th century? The hatred eventually resulted in the expulsion of the Jesuits from countries ruled by monarchs of the Bourbon dynasty: first Portugal, then France, then Spain and its colonies (including the Philippines), then Naples, and finally the Duchy of Parma. Not content with expelling the Jesuits from their territories, the Bourbon monarchs compelled the Pope to abolish the Society of Jesus as an Order.

"Clement XIII died at the beginning of February 1769. The conclave was convoked for February 14, the members assembling beneath the ponderous gaze of those monarchs whose power would play a more decisive role in the Cardinals' choice than the dictates of their conscience. . . ."

One of the blessings of modern times is the fact that the Papacy is now truly free and independent. It is difficult for us to imagine the times when Papal policies and the very election of the Pope depended on the whims of temporal rulers, whose chief interests were not always the greater glory of God. It was Pope Pius X, early in the 20th century, who abolished the "right" of temporal rulers to veto the election as Pope of any cardinal that they did not like.

The result of that conclave of 1769 was the election of a cardinal who is said to have promised the Bourbon ambassadors that, if elected, he would abolish the Jesuit Order. He took the name of Clement XIV. And on 21 July 1773 he issued a Brief declaring the total abolition of the Society of Jesus as a corporate religious organization.

The manner of promulgation of that decree enabled the Jesuits to remain in existence in those territories where the decree was not promulgated, namely in White Russia and in Prussia, both of which included parts of Poland. In those territories, the Jesuits were protected by non-Catholic monarchs who appreciated the
value of the Jesuit colleges and schools. Lacouture gives some interesting details about the Jesuit survival in those places.

RESTORATION

Forty-one years after it was killed by one Pope, the Society of Jesus was restored to life by another Pope, Pius VII, the man who had suffered imprisonment and maltreatment under Napoleon. Some historians refer to this restoration as a "resurrection." Lacouture points out that the term is inaccurate, since the Jesuits had not completely died but had continued to exist (with Papal approval) in White Russia and Prussia.

Lacouture mentions how on 7 August 1814 Pope Pius VII left his palace of the Quirinal and proceeded "with much pomp" to the Jesuit church of the Gesú. There, in the presence of old survivors of the pre-Suppression Society, the Pope in person read his bull Solicitude omnium ecclesiarum, reestablishing the Society of Jesus as a religious order with all the canonical rights and privileges it had formerly enjoyed.

No sooner was the Society reestablished than the Jesuits were expelled from Russian territory which had long been their refuge. The Jesuits had been protected by Catherine the Great. Her successor, the Tsar Paul, expelled them. The expulsion was brought about as a result of what Lacouture calls "private errors and public scandals." The first "scandal" was the announcement by a young man that he would become a Catholic. (Like most of the nobility, he had belonged to the Russian Orthodox Church.) He was the nephew of a Minister of State and he had studied under the Jesuits, and therefore the Jesuits were blamed for his conversion to Catholicism. Demands were made for their expulsion from the country.

The other "scandal" was the refusal of a Jesuit confessor to absolve a penitent unless there was a change of life. A certain lady, wife of a nobleman, became the mistress of the Tsar. She went to confession to a Jesuit. The Jesuit did what any priest would have been bound to do: he told her that she could not be given absolution unless she gave up her adulterous relations with a person who was not her husband. She complied with that advice and told the Tsar that she could no longer live in sin
with him. The Tsar decided the Jesuits must be expelled.

AN ULTRA-CONSERVATIVE SOCIETY

A young Dutchman named Roothaan had left Holland to enter the Jesuit novitiate in White Russia. He was one of those who were now expelled from that country. He wrote that the expulsion of the Jesuits from Russia saved the restored Society of Jesus: for the Jesuits trained in Russia were now dispersed and became the superiors and trainers of new recruits. He himself became Superior General of the Jesuits.

Lacouture does not agree with that view. Because the restored Society was now composed of very old men, and because their younger men came from territories under the absolute control of the Tsar, the restored Society became ultra-conservative in its attitudes and policies. Many things helped to induce such an ultra-conservative spirit: the memory of the horrors of the French Revolution; the deistic “Enlightenment”; the excesses of Napoleon’s regime which did not even spare the Pope — all these tended to make people suspicious of anything modern or progressive. Lacouture points out the irony of the Jesuits becoming the staunchest defenders of “throne and altar,” when the occupants of the “throne” were the very persons who had brought about their suppression.

LACK OF SPIRIT?

Lacouture apparently cannot understand the behavior of the Jesuits at their suppression. They did not protest. They did not rebel. They accepted without any demonstration of disapproval the “mean-spirited decree of abolition issued in 1773 by Clement XIV.”

He finds that puzzling. On the one hand, “Character emerges from ordeal, our Jesuit teachers used to tell us.” On the other hand, where was their old fire? their former fighting spirit? “Where now were Jesuits like Lainez or Canisius, constantly hunted, persecuted or proscribed, but always in the breach? Was this formidable body of men, which had once made the Holy Office tremble and infuriated the gentlemen of the French Par-
liament, destroyed forever by a feeble Pope?"

"There was no underground movement, no catacombs, no resistance network to confront the illegal order extorted by coercion and blackmail. With helpless Lorenzo Ricci [the Superior General] dying in his cell at the Castel Sant’ Angelo, the Company appeared simply to expire."

Perhaps we should remember that it sometimes takes heroic courage to suffer patiently without protest or fight. There was no protest on Calvary.

The spirit with which the Jesuits responded to the Pope’s edict of suppression may be illustrated by the conduct of their Superior General, Lorenzo Ricci. It has been a refinement of cruelty not only to abolish the Jesuit Order but also to imprison for life their Superior General. He was imprisoned in the Pope’s Castle of Sant’ Angelo without trial and even without any charges. His one crime was that he had been the head of the Order. Shortly before his death Ricci wrote to the Pope begging to be released from prison. His letter (not quoted by Lacourt) ended as follows: "If the Pope’s clemency does not allow him to release me from my long agony, I beg Almighty God to call me from this life as soon as possible. At the same time I beg God to prolong the life of His Holiness for the good of the Church."

The Pope ignored the letter and Ricci died in prison.

A MISTRANSLATION

While the English rendering of this very readable book is usually excellent, there is an ambiguity created by one little bit of mistranslation. During the 41-year suspension of the Jesuit Order, some of the French ex-Jesuits who had survived the bloodbath of the French Revolution tried to revive the Society’s spirit under other names. But the strongest force that kept the Jesuit spirit alive was a confraternity of laymen founded long before by the Jesuits, and which continued to exist even after the suppression of the Jesuit Order. It was a body that included among its members some influential people, including some Ministers of State. That body is referred to in this English edition as “The Congregation.” Which the reader may find puzzling.

The French of course is “La Congregation.” The reference is
to what in English was called the Sodality of the Blessed Virgin Mary. (In Spanish, "Congregación Mariana" and the members "congregantes.")

In the United States the Sodality had degenerated into superficially pious groups, often female in membership, and often more interested in "social affairs" (like dances and parties) than in serious apostolic activity. But in Spain and France and some other places, it had a different nature and orientation. It was a school of profound lay spirituality. The abolition of the Sodality during the generalship of Father Arrupe may have been due to a failure to appreciate its potential as an instrument for promoting lay spirituality and lay apostolic activity.

TEILHARD DE CHARDIN

The first six decades of the 20th century were, from the intellectual point of view, not a bright page in Church history. Alarmed by the Modernist controversy at the turn of the century, the Roman authorities had become almost fundamentalist in their attitudes towards doctrine and Scripture. Any new idea was suspect, and in some cases harshly condemned without first being thoroughly examined. It is as if an obscurantist pall had fallen upon the Church, and great thinkers were silenced. Among the victims were biblical scholars like the Dominican Lagrange, and theologians like the Dominican Congar or the Jesuits de Lubac and John Courtney Murray. Vatican II swept away that cloud of obscurantism, and some of those who had been silenced were vindicated. Danielou, Congar and de Lubac were made cardinals. Courtney Murray was dramatically vindicated by Paul VI. But one man who was never vindicated in his lifetime and who died in obscurity and the Church's displeasure was the Jesuit paleontologist, Father Pierre Teilhard de Chardin.

Understandably, Lacouture is better at portraying his life than in assessing his thought. And his treatment is not entirely free from an occasional journalistic exaggeration. For instance, commenting on the view of some biographers that Rome's removal of Teilhard from his professorship in Paris and sending him in exile to China was a "providential" event, as it enabled him to win an international audience, Lacouture says:
Untrue! Teilhard's influence would have extended no matter where he found himself. . . . But the terrain — not only in China but in Abyssinia and the Malay Archipelago — gave him constant nourishment and helped root him in his evolutionist convictions. Every blow of the pickaxe moved the Zhoukoudian paleontologist a little farther from the Roman vulgate.

Well, not from the Roman vulgate. The Vulgate is the official Latin translation of the Bible, and Teilhard never denied the divine authority of Scripture. What he called in question was the historical genre of the Genesis story of Eve and the talking serpent. To say that it was not a historical incident is not to deny its truth. For truth can be expressed in many ways: in literal terms as a philosophical proposition, or in symbolic terms in poetry and myth. Today, hardly any Scripture scholar would hold that there was, as a historical fact, a talking serpent in Eden "with a hand to proffer an apple." Teilhard was punished for teaching what almost all Scripture professors teach today.

As for his acceptance of the theory of evolution as a way of explaining the development of the universe, even the encyclical Humani generis that put a lid on all theological "innovations" (as Lacouture points out) admits that Catholics could accept as "probable" the theory that God created the first man "from preexisting living matter."

What Teilhard found difficult was not only the constant harassment and humiliation but the forced inability to share his vision of reality with others. "People can't be blamed for thinking I am an atheist, since I am not allowed to tell them what I really believe." At the end of his life he said, "I am the only one of my species who has seen."

Lacouture mention the death in New York on Easter Sunday 1955 and that few attended his funeral. He does not mention what perhaps was the biggest irony of all, the fact that his American Jesuit brethren did not even know who he was or how internationally famous he was. The priest who answered the summons and came to anoint him recorded his name in the book as "Father Jordan." And on his tombstone they wrote his name as "Petrus Chardin." It was the constant ridicule over many years that finally moved them to change it to his real name.
Here was a man who received the French Legion of Honor (for his services in World War I) and who was offered professorships and academic honors (many of which were vetoed by Rome), and the members of the Jesuit community to which he was attached in his exile did not know who he was.

Sixteen years after his death, on the occasion of the centenary of his birth, a word of recognition finally came from the Vatican. It was a letter from the Cardinal Secretary of State to the French Provincial: “The astonishing echo of his research work, together with the radiance of his personality and the wealth of his thinking, have indelibly marked an era. . . .”

One thing emphasized by Lacouture was the heroic obedience of this great man, condemned to silence and continual harassment by uncomprehending superiors. Urged by friends to leave the priesthood and thus free himself from the unjust impositions of Rome, Teilhard refused even to consider the idea. “I think I see that if I rebelled in any way whatever (humanly speaking it would be so simple and so ‘nice’) I would be disloyal to my belief that all things are the work of Our Lord. . . .” Much later, to the Jesuit Superior General he wrote: “I feel today more intimately tied to the Hierarchical Church and the Church of the Gospels. Never has Christ seemed to me more real, more personal, more immense. How can I believe that the path I tread is the wrong one?”

A FINAL QUESTION

The last three chapters in Lacouture’s book deal with recent events. One chapter recounts how the Jesuits were involved in the movement that culminated in Vatican II’s declaration condemning all anti-Semitism. Another chapter deals with Father Arrupe and the modern thrust on justice. The final chapter (“The Third Company”) ends with a question that will amuse most Jesuits: “Why have so many men of such diverse genius chosen to add to the yoke the Church imposes on its ordinary priests the even more tyrannical yoke of the Company?”

Why, indeed!