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From the Editor: Jesuit Schools and the Catholic Intellectual Tradition

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Jesuit Schools and the Catholic Intellectual Tradition

In many ways, the inspiration for this *Conversations* has been stewing for 55 years.

It began with the collective realization in American Catholic circles that we had failed to pass along the treasure — the Church's history, arts, and humanities — that had been the bedrock of its intellectual life. Historian John Tracy Ellis, Catholic University of America, spelled out the church's failure to keep up in his wake-up-call article, "American Catholics and the Intellectual Life," in Fordham's journal, *Thought* in 1955.

The *Thought* editor was William F. Lynch, S.J., himself a leading intellectual, who as a young scholastic in 1941 had brought together composer Virgil Thompson and ballet star Erick Hawkins to produce at Fordham a musical and dance drama of *Oedipus Rex*, starring Fordham students, in the original Greek.

Ellis argued that the church's intellectual depth was shallow for several reasons: the anti-Catholicism of the original English settlers; the ignorance of the 19th century Catholic immigrants; the educational weakness of the families who did not read to their children; the narrow training of bishops who learned canon law but not the humanities; the anti-intellectualism in the America character which favored pragmatism over learning; the Catholic universities who poured resources into professional programs and neglected research and scholarship.

At the same time, some Jesuit universities, like Fordham and others, had been sending young Jesuits to the best secular and foreign universities. The base was beginning to confront its problems. The process found bold expression in the meeting of university presidents at Notre Dame's villa, Land O'Lakes, in 1967, where they proclaimed, among other points, that Catholic universities, while maintaining their Catholic identity, must meet the same scholarly standards of their secular competitors.

The central question in the articles we have assembled is: What have we done to pass along the intellectual tradition which defines us as Catholic institutions?

The seminar's internal process in formulating our own answer had its ups and downs. One proposal was to gather a list of prominent intellectuals at Jesuit — and some other — universities and call attention to their work. This foundered in disagreement on who should be on the list and on whether a list was a good idea any-

way. We concluded with no list, but nevertheless with a collection of writers for this issue who in many ways represent the church at its best.

We have tried to balance big-picture pieces with on-the-ground experiences — including astute student observations on the arts and academic attitudes, an objection to outcomes assessment, and a warning against academic pride.

But, like *Thought* in 1955, this *Conversations* in 2009 will matter insofar as it prompts today's faculty to both revisit Msgr. Ellis's article and ask to what degree its old criticisms still hold true. Does it concern us that, depending on the standards of the school, some faculty never publish books or articles, and a student can drift through Jesuit College X and never encounter a religious intellectual challenge or will go to Mass only to witness a friend's wedding?

We welcome letters and longer "Talking Back" essays that confront these issues.



Alan Wolfe, director of the Center for Religion and Public Life at Boston College, and Mark Massa, S.J., Gasson Professor, helped formulate the list and suggest themes for this issue. The cover photo by BC photographer Gary Gilbert shows the office of Fr. Donald Monan, S.J., BC chancellor and former president, in the Bapst Library. The office's unique attraction is the stained glass windows depicting the great American intellectuals of the past — including the usual Emerson, Thoreau, Longfellow, Twain, and Bancroft, but also Catholics Orestes Brownson, Joyce Kilmer, Bishops John England and Martin J. Spalding, and William O'Brien Pardow, S.J., about whom — till I googled him and learned that a thousand women wept at his 1909 funeral at St. Ignatius Church in New York — I am ashamed to say I knew nothing.

The back cover, by Santa Clara photographer Charles Barry, depicts the statue of Saint Clare and its sculptor, second year theologian Trung H. Pham, described in Dan Vaillancourt's article on Catholic art. ■

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