

Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education

Volume 40 *Re-creating Jesuit Higher Education: The General's Challenge*

Article 33

September 2011

Book Review: University History at its Best. Robert Emmett Curran, *A History of Georgetown University*

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Recommended Citation

McKevitt, S.J., Gerald (2011) "Book Review: University History at its Best. Robert Emmett Curran, *A History of Georgetown University*," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 40, Article 33.

Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol40/iss1/33>

UNIVERSITY HISTORY AT ITS BEST

Robert Emmett Curran, *A History of Georgetown University*. 3 vols

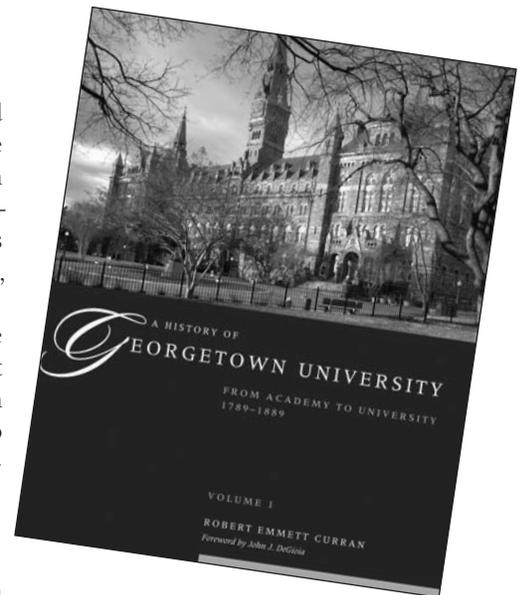
Washington, D.C., Georgetown University Press, 2010

By Gerald McKevitt, S.J.

In recent years a number of new university histories have appeared, shedding fresh light on the evolution of Jesuit higher education in the United States. Few, however, have been as eagerly anticipated or are as ultimately satisfying as *A History of Georgetown University*. Written by Robert Emmett Curran, the author of several works on American Jesuit history, this new study explores the university's unfolding from its founding in 1789 to its bicentennial in 1989, with a brief epilogue summarizing the last two decades. Among the twenty-eight institutions in the Jesuit tradition, Georgetown University is of singular importance not only because it ranks first historically—it is America's oldest Catholic institution of higher learning—but also because it is one of the top-tiered schools in the Jesuit cohort. Curran examines how Georgetown University attained national prominence in a relatively short time. He also identifies decisions and decision-makers that sometimes thwarted the school's

educational advance. Although focused on the story of a single institution, the author provides useful information on the long history of Catholic higher education in the United States, especially its Jesuit version. Critical and exhaustive, this is a model university history.

Georgetown was planted in the nation's capital during the heady first years of the American Republic by John Carroll, the former Jesuit and archbishop of Baltimore. Created "to diffuse knowledge, promote virtue, and serve Religion," its mission was both academic and religious. Sulpicians kept the fledgling academy alive for its first fifteen years, but with the Society of Jesus' restoration, Jesuits assumed responsibility. Uncertain funding and a scarcity of teachers made it unsure on whether the place would survive. The arrival of Jesuit exiles driven from Europe by the revolutions of 1848 revitalized the institution, as they did several Jesuit schools in mid-century America. Prominent natural scientists among the émigrés proved ideal educators in a country that prized scientific learning.



The European refugees brought acclaim to the institution, but they also brought conflict. Continental and

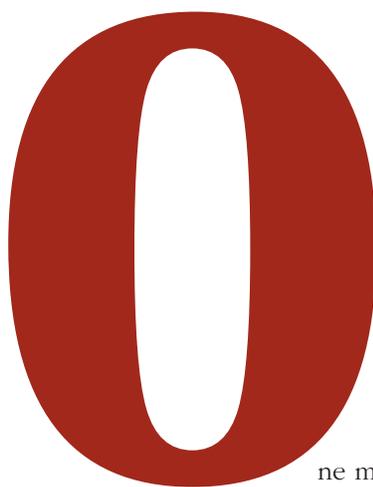
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Book Review

Anglo-American-Irish Jesuits clashed over adapting Catholic educational tradition to the republican values of young America, especially curriculum and student discipline. Continental Jesuits championed a traditional course of studies centered on Latin, Greek, and philosophy. Anglophone clergy argued that science—not moral philosophy—should be the curricular capstone. Science was the best instrument for intellectual integration, they argued, because it was through science that God “chiefly manifested his greatness and majesty.” Curran’s description of nineteenth-century student culture and Jesuit pedagogy and curriculum is the most informative you are apt to find anywhere. And his analysis of student demographics that appears at the end of volume one is superb.

Although its current preeminence sets Georgetown apart from many Jesuit institutions, it mirrored the struggles of its sister schools for most of its history. Presidential terms were often cut short because appointees were not up to the task—Georgetown once had four presidents in seven years. Institutions competed for resources and personnel, frustrating the academic ambitions of visionary leaders. There were “too many Catholic colleges in too many isolated places,” a Georgetown president lamented in 1889. The Jesuits alone staffed seven colleges on the East Coast. When Joseph Havens Richards, Georgetown’s thirteenth president, sought to promote graduate studies in the hope of creating an American Jesuit institution “worthy of our times,” his provincial superior replied, “I haven’t got a limitless supply of great men on tap” to make progress possible. Richards’s plan to make Georgetown the center piece of Jesuit education in the United States was also rebuffed by Father General Luís Martín who

frowned on creating a rivalry with Catholic University, which was sponsored by the American hierarchy and powerful ecclesiastics in Rome. Thus, if Georgetown owed its existence and much of its uniqueness to its Jesuit founders, its ecclesiastical connection was sometimes problematic.



One motif of Georgetown’s story is its zig-zag course to university status. In 1919, the institution took an important step by establishing its School of Foreign Service, the first such institution of its type in the United States. The quality of professional education improved slowly, however, evidenced by obstacles to accreditation faced by the Medical School during much of the early twentieth century. According to Jesuit President Gerard Campbell, until the 1960s, Georgetown was “a college with professional school satellites grouped unevenly around it” rather than a true university. Under the leadership of his successors, Fathers Robert Henle and Timothy Healy, it moved steadily toward the mainstream.

A host of critical factors explain Georgetown’s rise in the ranks of American higher education. Exploiting its location, the school forged a new partnership in the 1960s with the federal government. Despite spiraling costs,

budgets were balanced and endowment soared for several decades. The university also profited from the leadership of a series of farseeing presidents and administrators. During the presidency of Jesuit Timothy S. Healy in 1976-89, Georgetown finally joined the ranks of the elite. One of the twenty most selective colleges in the nation, its graduate and professional education programs, including the School of Foreign Service, enjoyed new prominence. By the mid-1990s, the Georgetown Law School was not only the largest in the nation but also among the best.

Progress was accompanied by a decoupling of academic achievement and religious character, a shift that began in the late 1960s with the emergence of ascendent presidents in American Jesuit higher education. Strong leaders such as Edward Bunn became increasingly independent of supervision by provincial superiors and the once powerful Jesuit Educational Association. Separate incorporation of the Jesuit Community in 1968 further moved the institution away from “familial and paternalistic governance.” Additional changes came quickly. “There is serious question today,” the dean of the graduate school noted in 1971, “whether Georgetown in its graduate programs can or should reflect a Jesuit and Catholic character.” Those hallmarks, once guaranteed by the presence of a large Jesuit faculty, seemed to pale with the ascendancy of a more composite professorate. Populated by an undergraduate population that was only marginally (59.3 percent) Catholic by 1975, the campus newspaper even claimed “Georgetown is no longer Catholic.” Hyperbole notwithstanding, authorities acknowledged the challenge. It was vital, Healy had noted in 1988, that Georgetown

marry its “secular excellence with its religious tradition.” “We have shown that we can be ‘good’ as a university,” he declared, “but we have yet to show that we can continue to be ‘Catholic’ and all that means.” Issues of identity remained on the forefront at Georgetown—as at other Jesuit schools—in the years that followed,

although perhaps with more urgency and attention at Georgetown because of its prominence.

This three-volume study, weighing in at ten pounds, is grand in every sense of the word. It rests on research in American and European archives, numerous interviews, and an impressive array of source materials.

Georgetown is university history at its best—thoroughly grounded, impartially told, and crisply written. It is also beautifully designed and illustrated, satisfying both mind and eye. One hesitates to describe a work as definitive, but that is the right adjective for this elegant and informative study. ■

James Martin, S.J., *A Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything: A Spirituality for Real Life*

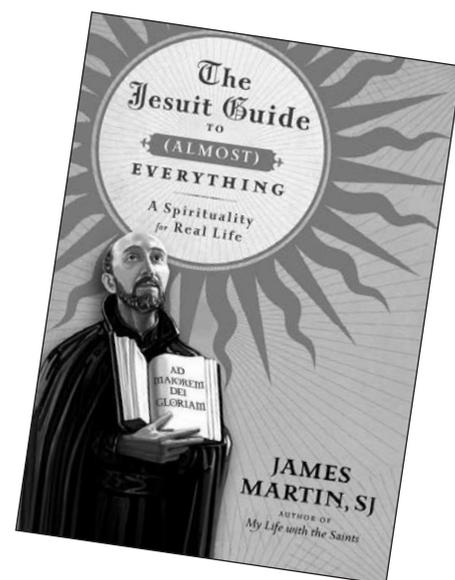
Harper One, 432 pp, \$26.

By Aparna Venkatesan

As a non-Catholic faculty member at a Jesuit university, I found *A Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything: A Spirituality for Real Life* to be very well written and an enjoyable read for the general layperson. It is entertaining and humorous, but its accessible style goes hand-in-hand with depth of material. The author conveys simply and succinctly the background of the Ignatian paradigm and the Spiritual Exercises, and how to apply these teachings practically in one’s life and to the world today. I found much of this background as well as the topics and specific suggestions interesting and helpful for my understanding of Jesuit practices.

James Martin, S.J., begins with a description of the life of St. Ignatius and

key Ignatian qualities, including finding God in all things, and seeking freedom and detachment. He stresses that Ignatian life is not just about prayer but about being contemplatives in action. Within this context, and the three Catholic religious vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, he presents a provocative discussion of the purpose and goals of chastity in the wake of the sexual-abuse crisis in the Catholic church. He also points to the unexpected freedom of “downward mobility” (a term coined by Dean Brackley, S.J., an author in this *Conversations* issue), in relation to the vow of poverty. A simplified life with fewer possessions could be a potent antidote for some of the modern gods of career and monetary ambitions, and have an impact on many lives. This reminded me of the Gandhian motto “Live simply so that others may



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