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From the Editor: The Academy and a Church in Crisis

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The Academy and a Church in Crisis

By one measurement the scandal of sexual abuse within the Catholic Church began in Lafayette, Louisiana, in 1991, when a priest, Gilbert J. Guadet, Jr., was indicted on thirty-four criminal counts. Eight years later in his 1992 study Lead Us Not into Temptation, Jason Berry, the best-known historian of the crisis, records that between 1984 and 1992 four hundred priests in North America were reported for molesting children.

The scandal would resurface from year to year; then, in 2002, following the revelations in the Archdiocese of Boston, the news—and the analysis of the news portraying the Church as a dysfunctional institution—began to overwhelm us like a flood.

Though the number of new accusations has gone down, the flood has not subsided.

And the long and necessarily painful process by which the institutional Church reforms itself in a way that will both put the scandal to rest and prevent its recurrence is in the earliest stages.

The identification of the Jesuit colleges and universities with the Church—in both its glory and its sinfulness—is as intimate as that between a child and parent. In time the responsibilities of one toward the other change with circumstances.

In these years, it seems, the intellectual community has an enormous responsibility to use its resources and talents to serve the Church—seen not merely as embodied in Church authorities but in our students, faculty and staff, and in the public who look to the teaching profession for moral leadership.

In this special issue Conversations considers the role of the university described as “the church thinking.” First, we have invited distinguished scholars—a historian, a psychologist, a teaching theologian, and a team of social scientists—to address the issue of the academy’s responsibility toward the Church, each from his own perspective.

Second, faculty members from nine institutions have generously answered the question: What should the Jesuit college or university do in response to this crisis in the Church?

The Heartland Conversations are part of the growing network of formal and informal relationships which have grown up among Jesuit institutions in various parts of the country to both improve communication and stimulate our common intellectual life. The New York and Maryland, for example, have a group called the Gathering, which met recently to discuss Robert Bellah’s article on the most recent Conversations.

The essay on the “Jesuit Thing” is a shortened version of Paul G. Crowley, S.J.’s address to the recent Heartland meeting.

In the Talking Back section we feature responses to Bellah from three more points of view.

Sometimes we try to call attention through our illustrations to schools that have given the Seminar hospitality that year. The two illustrations for the lead article come from “The Spiritual Journey of Saint Ignatius Loyola,” a part of a series of paintings in acrylic on wood by Dora Nikolova Bitnau in the Chapel of Saint Ignatius at Seattle University, where the Seminar met in June. The first depicts Ignatius’s “Abiding Intimacy with the Trinity in Rome”; the second, “Educated and Blessed with Companions at the University of Paris.” The painting includes 20th-century students from diverse cultures.

The basketball pictures recall Saint Joseph University’s brush with sports glory last spring.

Finally, we welcome two student contributors: Sean Reid, author of the student profile from Seattle University, and Sean Cullen, Saint Peter’s College, who read the Forum essays and interpreted them in a collage.

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