

Living History

Jesuit History and Me

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I have loved history for as long as I can remember, and that love stayed with me when in 1946, at age 18, I joined the Society of Jesus. Almost from the beginning, my superiors in the Society looked upon my interest with benign eyes and left me free to decide how I wanted to pursue it. Once I was ordained and my training in the Society completed, I knocked on the door of Harvard University and in 1961 was admitted to its doctoral program in history. Choosing Harvard for my degree was one of the best decisions of my life. The university provided me with precisely the training I wanted and needed.

Even as a boy, I had a special interest in sixteenth-century European history. Once I entered the Society, I began to focus my interest within that period on the early Society of Jesus. I hoped, therefore, that I might write my dissertation at Harvard on a Jesuit subject. I think Professor Myron Gilmore, my mentor at Harvard, might have been willing to direct such a dissertation, but something happened that convinced me that was not a good idea.

One day in Harvard's Widener Library, I met a faculty member from nearby Boston College, the Jesuit school in the area, and we continued to bump into one another there. In a casual conversation with him one day, he asked me if I had a topic for my dissertation. I replied that I did not but that I hoped to write on some aspect of Jesuit history. No, he said. As a Jesuit, you are too close to the subject and do not have the perspective to do a credible job.

Yes! He was right, and he convinced me on the spot. That was that. But I still had to find a topic. When I later did the obvious thing and asked the advice of Professor Gilmore, he suggested Egidio da Viterbo [Giles of Viterbo]. Although I had no idea who Egidio was, I said it sounded like a good idea.

I discovered that Egidio (1469–1532) was a polymath, a true Renaissance man. He was also a prolific writer, prior general of the Augustinian order (1507–1518), and a respected figure at the court of Popes Julius II and Leo X. I was immediately attracted to him because he was Italian. Shortly before coming to Harvard, I visited Italy for

the first time. It was love at first sight. I was, therefore, delighted at the prospect of returning to Italy to research my dissertation. Had I known how difficult a subject Egidio was, I would have been less enthusiastic.

Meanwhile, a wonderful thing happened. I received a fellowship to the American Academy in Rome to work on Egidio. As far as I know, I was the first priest to receive such a fellowship. My provincial won permission for me to live in the Academy, despite the many Jesuit communities in Rome where I would normally stay. The permission incomparably enriched my Academy experience.

There at breakfasts, lunches, and dinners I met distinguished scholars specializing in Renaissance Rome — archeologists, classicists, art and architectural historians, and many others. The experience broadened my intellectual and cultural horizons almost beyond description. It also deepened my love for Rome and for Italian culture. By a happy coincidence, my two years at the Academy corresponded to the second and third periods of Vatican Council II. Being able to follow that event close up deeply enhanced my Roman experience.

Despite an excruciatingly difficult few months as I began working on Egidio, I completed my dissertation in a year and a half. I published it a few years later as *Giles of Viterbo on Church and Reform*, Brill, 1968. I had been able to revise the dissertation because of a two-year fellowship to I Tatti, the Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies in Florence.

The experience of I Tatti even more firmly anchored me in Renaissance studies, and the idea of writing on the Jesuits began to fade. In fact, I drew a chronological line of demarcation for myself: no research or writing on anything that might take me beyond 1527, the Sack of Rome. The line conclusively excluded the Jesuits.

In 1975, I won a Guggenheim fellowship and was able to return to Rome, where I wrote a book on the impact of classical rhetoric on sermons preached in the Sistine Chapel during the Renaissance, *Praise and Blame in Renaissance Rome*, Duke University Press, 1979. The book taught me how literary form, in this case the form of epideictic rhetoric (praise and blame), changed content. It is a lesson that has informed my writing ever since. I much later elaborated on it in *Four Cultures of the West*, Harvard, 2004.

In any case, my commitment to the Renaissance now seemed utter. It broadened beyond Italy when I turned to Erasmus, which led to my editing three volumes in the *Collected Works of Erasmus* series published by the University of Toronto Press. Jesuit history had slipped completely off my agenda.



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At about the time *Praise and Blame* appeared, however, the Jesuits began to slip back onto the agenda. Several things happened. First, although my love of the Renaissance was undiminished, I had begun to tire of it as a research interest. I was ready to move to something else, to perhaps a history of preaching. I began gathering material for a grand synthesis of it from the patristic era into the present. It turned out to be, however a grand synthesis never written, and the huge pile of materials I collected for it ended in the trash bin.

Second, in 1979, I left the University of Detroit, where I had been teaching since finishing my doctorate, and accepted a position at the Weston School of Theology, a Jesuit school of ministry in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Although Weston accepted lay students and students from other religious orders, its first task was to teach theology to Jesuit scholastics preparing for ordination.

My experience at Weston teaching church history for the first time in my life gently reawakened my interest in Jesuit history. The Jesuit scholastics began asking me questions about it and forced me to examine it, even if superficially out of secondary sources.

Something happened to the Society of Jesus, however, that directly led to my undertaking serious study of the tradition. In 1981, Father Pedro Arrupe, the superior general of the Society, suffered a severe stroke, which made it impossible for him to continue in his office. The Society has clear provisions for such an eventuality, but before they could be put into operation, Pope John Paul II intervened and appointed his own delegate to manage the Society's affairs until he saw fit to allow the Society to proceed to elect a new superior general.

The intervention stunned us Jesuits. It hit like a bolt of lightning out of a clear blue sky. It puzzled and confused us and, indeed, it angered us. What did it mean, and what did it mean in relationship to our famous Fourth Vow, sometimes incorrectly and unfortunately described as a vow "to be loyal to the pope."

The crisis all at once made clear how meager was the scholarship on the vow and how vague even Jesuits were about what it meant. "Somebody" needed to remedy this situation and remedy it fast. Pressure mounted on me to be that someone. "After all, John, you are a historian." I resisted. I protested that the issue was complicated and was an issue for which my training had not prepared me. I also feared that anything written on it would be controversial, and I did not want to get embroiled in a controversy related to the papacy.

Finally, however, I agreed to try my hand at it, and I dived into Jesuit sources for the first time. I loved the experience. Although I

did not realize it at the time, the experience was the true beginning of my commitment to Jesuit history. I also did not clearly realize at the time how well my work on the Renaissance helped me understand the Jesuits and give me new perspectives on them.

In relatively short order, I was able, to my surprise, to publish a fascicle in the series *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* entitled, *The Fourth Vow in Its Ignatian Context*, 1983. I showed that it was a vow to be ready for mission in any part of the world and was not, as such, a vow of loyalty to the pope. This interpretation turned out to be much less controversial than I had feared and seemed to win general acceptance.

In the course of my research on the vow, I had encountered Jerónimo Nadal, and I began to realize how important he was in articulating the ethos of the Society. He so much captivated me that in leisure hours I began to read his exhortations to Jesuit communities, as found in volume 5 of his works in the MHSI. I was doing this for the sheer fun of it, but at a certain point the fun turned serious. In 1984, a year after I published my piece on the Fourth Vow, I published a short piece on him in *Studies, To Travel to Any Part of the World: Jerónimo Nadal and the Jesuit Vocation*.

At the time, the Society was planning celebrations for the 500th anniversary of Ignatius' birth, 1991, and the 450th anniversary of the founding of the Society, 1990. I wanted to contribute something to the celebrations, and why not a monograph on Nadal? The Jesuits and the scholarly world at large needed to learn how important he was. By 1985, I was at work on the project.

Then I discovered Miguel Nicolau's monograph on Nadal published in 1949 and began to question whether in such a short time I could add anything substantial to what he said. I was also becoming convinced that what was needed was not a monograph on Nadal, but something of broader scope, something to counter the misunderstandings of the Society that prevailed even among fair-minded historians.

I was even at this stage knowledgeable enough to know, for instance, that the Society was not founded to counter the Reformation and reform the Catholic Church. My studies in the Renaissance provided me, moreover, with a pre-Counter-Reformation way of imagining the Jesuits. That way of imagining them reconfigured their spiritual and historical profile.

I set to work, therefore, as a revisionist, hoping to publish my book in time for the centennial celebrations. I wanted to write what I called a basic book, a book about the founding generation that

would lay out the essentials for understanding what the first Jesuits were really about.

This seemed like a straightforward and relatively easy project, a project I could easily complete in time for the jubilees. I was wrong, about as wrong as I could possibly be. I soon realized that, despite the considerable amount of scholarship on that period of Jesuit history, crucial aspects of it remained almost untouched and other aspects never carefully analyzed or properly located in the historical context. Jesuits had written most of it, which meant it had all the advantages of insiders' history but all the disadvantages as well.

Of course, I was an insider myself, a fact of which I was keenly aware. I was also aware, however, that I could use my background to compensate for at least some of an insider's problems. Trained at a secular university, I had more capacious perspectives than many Jesuits writing on the subject. My dissertation on a prior general of a different religious order moderated any tendency I might have to think all good things began with the Jesuits. My work on Erasmus and the sermons in the Sistine Chapel gave me an understanding of Renaissance Humanism and especially the humanist program of education uncommon among other scholars on the Jesuits.

Being an insider brought with it, however, an investment in the outcome that I had not experienced before: deep down, I wanted the Jesuits to look good. Yet, I knew the work would be useless unless I was honest as I could in telling their tale. I felt torn. Was I being too soft on them? Was I, in compensation, being too hard on them? These two questions haunted me all the way through the long process of producing the book. Critics would have to determine how well I navigated my Scylla and Charybdis.

To help me get on with the project, the president at Weston took pity on me and lightened my duties. Nonetheless, duties did not altogether disappear, and calls upon my time and energy continued. I had to play the game every scholar knows: picking up the project and then, just as momentum builds, putting it down again.

I plowed on. For the first and last time in my life, I for a year had a research assistant, a graduate student in history at Harvard named Benjamin Westervelt, now a professor of history at Lewis and Clark University. Ben was ideal. We formed an excellent but short-lived partnership. We have remained close friends ever since.

One day, Dr. Lindsay Waters, editor for the Humanities at Harvard University Press, phoned me to ask my advice on a book by Umberto Eco the press was considering translating and publishing.

I agreed to look at the book and give him my opinion. In the course of a subsequent conversation, I asked him if he thought Harvard University Press might consider publishing my book on the Jesuits. He asked me to send him a prospective, which I immediately did. Within a short time, I received a contract. This was the beginning of a wonderful relationship with Lindsay and with Harvard University Press that has continued until today.

I was delighted with the contract because I wanted the book published by a secular press. I did not want it regarded as a book of church history in the narrow sense. I wanted it to have a readership secular as well as religious. In fact, I wrote the book with secular historians principally in mind. I felt that publishing with Harvard signaled the book's broad scope.

Like all such contracts, mine with Harvard specified a deadline for submission of the manuscript. I missed the deadline, something I had never done before. Then I missed the second. Obviously, I was having trouble, and, just as obviously, I was not going to have a book in hand in time for the anniversaries.

My trouble derived from the complexity of the subject, the dearth of previous research on certain aspects of it, the sheer quantity of the pertinent documentation, and the originality of my approach to it. Bit by bit, however, problems got solved, and the book began to take shape. I was able to devise a title for it that captured what it was about: *The First Jesuits: Their Ministries, their Culture, and their Way of Proceeding*.

The subtitle pointed to the book's two parts. The first dealt with the Jesuits' ministries. After all, Jesuits spent their lives in ministry. A book about them needed to describe and analyze that aspect of their lives. I had become sensitive to this issue both by publishing a book on preaching in the *Sistina* and by teaching at Weston, a school of ministry.

I found the blueprint for the chapters for this part of the book in the second version, 1550, of the *Formula of the Institute*, essentially the bull of Pope Julius III expanding the provisions found in the first bull, *Regimini militantis ecclesiae*, 1540, that founded the Society. The bull of 1550 listed the Jesuits' ministries, and the first chapters of my book followed that list. Thus they moved from ministries of the Word of God, to sacraments and prayer, and then to works of mercy. This part culminated in the chapter on the schools.

The chapter on the schools was the pivotal chapter. Although it dealt with the Society's most characteristic ministry, it also led readers into the second part of the book, the Jesuits' culture. Unlike

the other ministries the Jesuits undertook, this one changed them. It changed their culture and made them a new type of clergy in the Church.

Teaching lay students destined for secular careers meant that the Jesuits had to be expert in secular subjects. Jesuits of course had to be trained in the two traditionally clerical subjects, philosophy and theology, but they now also had to be trained in worldly subjects such as poetry, theater, and astronomy. Worldly expertise thus came to characterize the culture of the Society of Jesus. For that reason, the chapter on the schools led seamlessly into the second part of the book, the Jesuits' culture.

In that half, I understood culture broadly to cover the Jesuits' religious and theological mindsets, their place in the church, their place in sixteenth-century society, and their place in the traditions of religious life in the Church.

"Our way of proceeding," an expression frequently upon the lips of the first Jesuits to describe modes they brought to whatever they undertook, seemed to me a good way of tying the book together. In fact, I believed the book was in its entirety an extended study in their way of proceeding. Way of proceeding was close to a synonym for their style. It was an expression of the Society's corporate personality.

No matter how neatly my subtitle caught the structure of the book, it suffered a swift and untimely death. On the great day when I was satisfied with my manuscript, I carried it over to the press, which was just a few blocks away from my office at Weston. My editor, copy-editor, a few others gathered to congratulate me on finishing it. Then the managing editor of the press swept into the room. She took one look at the manuscript and said imperiously, "Get rid of that subtitle." The book appeared in 1993. Its title was simply *The First Jesuits*.

I was proud of the book and felt it did a number of things that needed doing. It countered prevailing stereotypes. While underscoring the determining role Ignatius played, it brought Polanco and Nadal out of the shadows as shapers of the Society. It showed how the Jesuits changed even within the short span the book covered. In that regard, it made clear for the first time how the schools imbued the Jesuits with a new and distinctive culture, which became an essential part of their way of proceeding. In so doing, it showed the impact on them of the Renaissance. It showed the complexity of the Jesuits' relationship to bishops, popes, monarchs, and various inquisitions. It did other things as well.

The book did well at the box office, exhausting three hardcover printings within a relatively short time. It was widely and positively reviewed in professional journals, in journals for general readerships, and even in a few newspapers. It won a best-book prize for church history from the American Society of Church History, a professional organization of Protestant origin and tradition. It won another best-book prize from the American Philosophical Society, this time for "cultural history," a sign the book had the broad relevance I had hoped for it. It is now in twelve languages.

Perhaps most gratifying to me was the number of letters I received congratulating me and telling me how helpful they found *The First Jesuits*. The letters eventually filled a fat folder—a phenomenon very unusual for an academic author like myself. We professional historians have learned to be pleased to receive two or three such letters upon the publication of a book.

Among the letters were some from graduate students and recent PhDs asking for information or clarification on an aspect of Jesuit history they were investigating. Those letters especially caught my attention. In reading them, I saw that these young scholars had no way of networking with others working on the Jesuits, and they thus had no way of receiving encouragement for their work. Many of them had never met a Jesuit, and many were not Catholics.

Would it not be a good idea to bring them together for a weekend to help them get stimulus for what they were doing? But as young scholars they were by definition short on cash. If we were to bring them together, somebody would have to pay for their travel, their room and board, and their other expenses. Who or what institution could that be? I knew that Weston did not have the resources to do underwrite such a project.

My friend, the late Father Michael Buckley, was director of the Jesuit Institute at Boston College, and I knew that he had secured a substantial endowment for the Institute. Maybe he could help—with advice if not with funds. I decided to approach him.

One evening over dinner, I explained the project to him. I emphasized its modest scope and the modest budget it would require. Once I finished, Michael said, "Oh, John, think big! I can get you the money you need." Think big! I can get you the money! That was all the encouragement I needed, and within a few days I had in mind three scholars in the area with whom I might collaborate in bringing the now "big" project to fruition.

I contacted them, and they immediately accepted. They were Gauvin Alexander Bailey, an art historian who had at Harvard

recently finished his dissertation on the Jesuits; Steve Harris, a junior faculty member at Harvard whose specialty was Jesuits and science; T. Frank Kennedy, a Jesuit musicologist teaching at Boston College who had recently produced a performance of an opera composed for the Jesuits' Roman College in 1622.

We four formed a perfect team. We worked easily together and complemented one another in our specialties and in the contacts we had with other scholars. For two long years, between May, 1995, and May, 1997, we met almost every other week trying to decide what we wanted to do and how we wanted to do it.

We began by assuming that we would invite only younger scholars. We soon realized, however, that for their sake as well as for the success of the conference we needed to expand the project with senior scholars in the different fields. As the project thus expanded, so did the budget, very much exceeding what the Jesuit Institute could provide. We became fund-raisers, a burden that fell heaviest on Frank Kennedy and me.

The conference finally opened at Boston College on May 28, 1997, and ran four days. Entitled "The Jesuits: Culture, Learning, and the Arts, 1540–1773," it consisted in over fifty papers and included the performance of a little opera, "San Ignacio Loyola," composed in the mid-seventeenth century by two Jesuit musicians, Domenico Zipoli and Martin Schmidt. They were both missionaries to Spanish America.

The conference for the first time brought together a large number of scholars from different countries and different disciplines specializing in different aspects of Jesuit history. It thus helped spark a new international, multi-disciplinary interest in the Jesuits, an interest further sparked in 1999 by the publication by the University of Toronto Press of a volume of carefully selected papers from the conference. The volume, which ran over 750 pages, bore a slightly different title from the conference, *The Jesuits: Cultures, Sciences, and the Arts, 1540–1773*.

My three colleagues now wanted to build on our success and sponsor a follow-up conference. I resisted. I had found the project exhausting. I felt, moreover, that we had accomplished what we set out to do. They managed to persuade me, however, and we went back to work. This time the planning and organizing was much easier because the first conference served us as a model.

The second conference took place at Boston College, June 5–9, 2002, and was followed by a second volume of selected papers, 2006. It was hardly over when Frank Kennedy was ready to go to

work on a third conference. This time I was not alone in resisting the idea. We were tired. Another conference would be more of the same. I felt there was no need for it because enthusiasm for Jesuit history had caught on and others were ready to organize meetings and conferences to feed the enthusiasm.

Moreover, as happened with the Renaissance, I was getting slightly bored with Jesuit history and ready to move to another field. As I mentioned, when I was at the American Academy, I was present in Rome during the two periods of Vatican II. Soon thereafter, I began writing articles about the council, and at Weston I taught a course on it. Now, by the time our second conference was over, I had almost completed a monograph on it, and I wanted to devote myself to seeing the monograph through to publication, which I eventually was able to do. Then, after that book, came books on the Council of Trent and Vatican I. I had bidden the Jesuits a fond but firm farewell.

I soon discovered, however, that it was easier to say goodbye to them than to make the goodbye stick. In one way or another, I got drawn into projects related to the history of the Society of Jesus. For instance, Gauvin Bailey and I in 2005 edited a much-expanded English-language version of a volume originally edited by Giovanni Sale, S.J., *Ignazio e l'arte dei gesuiti*. We called our volume, *The Jesuits and the Arts*. Saint Joseph's University Press, Philadelphia, published it.

Gauvin and I established an excellent relationship with the director of Saint Joseph's Press, Carmen Croce, and with its editorial director, Father Joseph Chorpenning, OSF. Once *The Jesuits and the Arts* was published, they asked me to act as editor-in-chief of a new series, Early Modern Catholicism and the Visual Arts. I eagerly accepted the invitation.

To date 18 volumes have appeared in the series, a number of which are on Jesuit topics. I have edited two of them. In the meantime, I continued to accept invitations to speak on the Jesuits at conferences and other venues and later to publish the talks. Robert Maryks, long-time friend, kindly volunteered to edit a collection of these articles. He published them as *Saints or Devils Incarnate: Studies in Jesuit History*, Brill, 2013.

At the invitation of the Belgian press, Lessius (now Éditions jésuites, Brussels and Paris), I have published two small monographs. Their English titles are *The Jesuits: A History from Ignatius to the Present*, published by Rowan and Littlefield, 2014, and *The Jesuits and the Popes: A Historical Sketch of Their Relationship*, Saint Joseph's University Press, 2016.

I have ideas for a few more articles on the Jesuits, but for some reason I keep getting the impression that I am not as young and energetic as I once was. I wonder why I am getting that impression (I am only 93) and what it might mean for the future of those articles. Time will tell.