



Q & A

Fr. John O'Malley, SJ, professor of church history at the Weston Jesuit School of Theology in Cambridge, Massachusetts, is teaching this academic year at Fordham University, where he is the Loyola Chair in Humanities. Fr. O'Malley is a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and has authored a number of books; including *The First Jesuits, Trent and All That*, and *Rome and the Renaissance*. He's also edited a vast array of books and encyclopedia articles.

THE INTELLECTUAL APOSTOLATE:

A Jesuit Charism

RESPONSES FROM FR. JOHN O'MALLEY, SJ

interview by George Kearney

lation. Even if Jesuit scholars do not write such books, they are at least in conversation with people who do, and they can influence them. This is not even to mention the immense impact a scholar has on scholars-to-be by forming them in doctoral seminars. If I may speak of my own case, I think my scholarship has helped reshape a whole field of study, so that Catholicism in the crucial era of the Protestant Reformation is now finally getting its share of attention and a fairer hearing. I hasten to add that I've been just one voice that has helped do this. Another, from the Chicago Province itself, has been Fr. Robert Bireley (Loyola University).

We certainly want Jesuits in administration and pastoral ministries. This is what, by innate gifts and temperament, some Jesuits do best. But I believe in the power of ideas, which is what scholars deal with. Through the results of their scholarship, scholars help us to see things differently, help us break out of our narrowness, help us ask questions that break the logjam of our predicaments. I think it's of the utmost importance that those Jesuits who can do this kind of work be given every encouragement to pursue it. I cannot think of any ministry that in and of itself should be a higher priority.

Society of Jesus? Is that tradition still alive and well?

A Jesuits from the very beginning of the order have been assiduous students of their history. Especially since Vatican Council II, they have sought even more assiduously to understand and define the charism of the order, a charism found not only in official documents but also in the lived traditions of the order, especially when those traditions were promoted by our founder, St. Ignatius.

For me the charism of the Society stands on two feet. The first is, of course, the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius. The other is the cultural engagement that Ignatius' momentous decision to undertake running

Q Why is it important for Jesuits to engage in intellectual labor, i.e. research, writing, and scholarship? As the number of Jesuits decreases, aren't priests and brothers more needed in administration, teaching, and pastoral ministries?

A Books influence people, and if they are important books they can influence a whole culture. Scholars write books. Their books can sometimes seem remote from the concerns of ordinary people, but again, if they are important books, they will sooner or later make their way to a large segment of the popu-

Q Can you describe the historical significance of the intellectual apostolate to the



schools brought with it. Other orders of course have engaged in intellectual apostolates and run schools. But what is especially characteristic of the Jesuits has been their willingness to break out of what I call “churchy” scholarship into scholarship that deals with seemingly secular disciplines like archaeology, mathematics, paleontology, science, literature, film, and so forth.

In the history of the order, all its ministries, even the foreign missions, were affected by this commitment to scholarship. A good example is the Jesuits’ mission to China in the 16th and 17th centuries. The Jesuits got entry into the highest circles because of their academic attainments, and those same academic attainments gave them the insight and freedom to go about missionary work in an entirely new way, never before used by the church.

Q As a writer, how do you see written material, such as books, articles, and papers, furthering the mission of the Jesuits?

A Father John Powell is a member of the Chicago Province whose books have reached millions of people, that’s millions more than

he could reach through retreats and sermons or even the classroom. If writing books and articles does not further the mission of the Society of Jesus, I’m rather at a loss to say what does. If I may again refer to my own experience, I’m convinced from the many letters I received that my book *The First Jesuits* affected not only scholars’ understanding of the Society of Jesus but also affected a lot of people on a deep, spiritual level.

Q What are some difficulties in maintaining the intellectual apostolate of the Society of Jesus in today’s very specialized and pluralistic intellectual climate? Is it possible any longer to have “encyclopedists” —intellectual giants in many fields?

A Specialization can indeed tend to seal scholars off hermetically from one another and create little academic fiefdoms out of which they rarely venture. To a large extent, however, I think that is mostly a caricature. What I’ve found is that in pursuing some seemingly narrow subject I’m forced into fields about which I know nothing but in which I must do a “crash course.” The age of the encyclopedists is over —and I’m

tempted to add, thank goodness. My experience has been that in knowing something about everything the encyclopedists do not know much about anything.

Q How important is it to the Society and the Church to keep the intellectual apostolate from deteriorating by continuing to ask Jesuits to devote their lives to study, research and writing?

A The challenges to Christianity are many, but the front lines of the battle are ultimately intellectual. That’s difficult to prove, and it’s certainly not a popular view in the United States today. I happen to think it is correct, and therefore think it’s of the highest importance that those who can engage in the intellectual apostolate do so. That apostolate is obviously related to “the apostolate of higher education,” but they are not the same thing, and I’m not taking them here as the same thing. Even aside from the universities, I maintain, it’s essential that some priests be capable of holding their own with the intelligentsia if the church’s message is to maintain credibility. I think that’s what the Society of Jesus is particularly called to do. ■

ANDY SPREITZER

