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Brenna Moore

Fordham University, brmoore@fordham.edu

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A Tribute to John W. O'Malley, Teacher and Mentor Extraordinaire

Brenna Moore
Professor of Theology
Fordham University
brmoore@fordham.edu

As a historian of Catholicism, John W. O'Malley is richly deserving of his many accolades, and these awards are only augmented by the quieter role he played as a champion of younger scholars. This support, for many of us, was life changing. There are many in the field of Catholic history today who had maybe once imagined church history as a rather dull narration of bishops writing decrees in Rome, and it was hard to feel points of connection. But John O'Malley showed us something else entirely. With him, church history felt thrillingly free. There were constraints, to be sure. He always pushed languages, insisted on reading original sources, and taught us never to go beyond the evidence. But there was a freedom in a sense that there was so much to uncover in the Catholic past, so many people who could be studied with heart and soul. He showed us a much broader and deeper history than I ever imagined, one that took me into Catholicism's deep myths, its wonders, its artists, heroes and their yearnings for God, along with its blind spots, dullards, and stumblings too.

It was a wonderful stroke of luck to have gotten my doctorate at Harvard Divinity School while John was still teaching at Weston Jesuit Seminary, then located just on the other side of Harvard Square. There were open enrollments and I could take as many classes at Weston as I wanted. Shuttling between these two campuses gave me an ideal intellectual in-betweenness that to this day remains important to me, one foot in a thoroughly Catholic seminary setting, and the other in a more secular approach where questions of diversity, critique, and inclusion took center stage. I took John's course on the First Jesuits in 2004 and another on Trent and Vatican II in 2005.

This was back when I had no real ideas about what kind of scholar I wanted to be. Studying at a Divinity School, I just had a swirling of inchoate feelings that I didn't quite belong in either

traditional secular history or in systematic theology. John pointed me to a path that took seriously "spirituality" not as an esoteric inner sanctum, but something to be studied in relationship to the world in its complexity and depth. He encouraged me when I told him I was interested in spirituality and history in modern Europe, and sent me to read things I never would have discovered on my own, like Lucien Febvre's classic book of essays, *A New Kind of History*.¹ It described the history of emotions and the inner life as legitimate categories to analyze as we understand the past. It was fresh, exciting. When John learned I was becoming interested in the years just before Vatican II, he photocopied an article that the young Stephen Schloesser, a fellow Jesuit, had published, which would end up in Steve's award-winning book *Jazz Age Catholicism*. John's pointing me to Steve's work was critical, and Steve was just as generous as John was (and I would later learn, like me, influenced by John deeply). Steve served on my dissertation committee and he became an invaluable mentor and friend.

I remember the first paper I wrote for John where I let my thinking off the leash a bit, wrote on the early modern Jesuit Pierre Favre, and combined biography, history, spirituality, without worrying about much about disciplinary boundaries. I focused on Favre as a person, and had so much fun experimenting with a fuller and more human way of thinking about Catholicism. And I can still feel the thrill when he returned the paper with the word *BRAVISSIMA!!!* in all caps and exclamation points. This encouragement meant the world to an anxious graduate student. I forged ahead.

Some of John's encouragement was less direct, not even necessarily intended. For instance, one of the great lessons John imparted to us as students was that we fail to understand content at its deepest level if we fail to take style into account.

John's own style as a teacher was warm, funny, self-deprecating. It was a style I liked. It was a style that made me feel at home. He spoke like people I knew growing up in Michigan, in language that was straightforward, concrete, warm, and sometimes made me laugh out loud. It was also style that often stood in stark contrast to his subject matter. I remember a lecture comparing the papacies of Pius XII and John XXIII. As he was describing the most elite realms of Catholic power, I studiously took notes. "First thing," John said, "is to take a look them. Pius is skinny, reserved, shy, rarely smiling, somber. And John XXIII, you see, is fat, smiling, often joking around, looking happy and huge. Their theologies, their ecclesiologies just really kind of follow from there." *That* is how an intellectual talks and thinks? Hmm, I thought, maybe there's room for a Midwestern girl like me too. Of course, I wrote it all down, smiling from ear to ear.

I was sitting in one of his seminars on April 19, 2005, when Cardinal Ratzinger was elected pope. One of the Jesuit scholastics had turned the livestream of the conclave on his computer during class. When we heard "Habemus Papam" and then Joseph Ratzinger's name, there was an audible gasp, palpable disappointment and shock. We looked to John, and there were no pronouncements from on high, no screeds against conservatives. And this was just around the time when his *Four Cultures of the West* had come out. I remember thinking about that book as I saw John react in this moment, how clear it was that he was not the type for prophetic pronouncements, comfortable with conflict. His style was humanistic, artistic even, and he taught us about Catholicism by pointing out inspiring and beautiful alternatives to the ones who so often let us down. We got back to the work at hand in the seminar, work that pointed us to a different Catholicism that used poetics instead of legalism in its language, that inspired rather than condemned. It felt like a counter to the clouds gathering overhead in Rome in 2005, clouds that already had darkened over Catholic Boston since the sexual abuse case broke in 2002. Without ignoring all of this, John helped us hang in there by pointing out not the fantasy of another kind of church, but its reality, its history, its people. It was life-giving when many Catholics were desperate for signs of life in the church. I'm not sure I

would have hung in there without the kind of Catholicism John was showing us.

And when it came time to do my own research project, I tried to remember John's style that was honest, relaxed, straightforward, neither conformist nor condemnatory, nor anxious or showy. When I began to do archival research, I started to have my own epiphanies and a sense of liberty in being in the archives—touching letters and photographs—and started to write about the things that just honestly interested me, things I liked. In the spirit of my teacher, I tried at the outset, and still do, to study the authors and protagonists of Catholicism as *people*, and focus on their friendships, their aspirations, their anxieties, and look for some personal spark beneath the formal polish of their theological prose.

The year that John left Boston for Georgetown in 2007 I was finishing my dissertation on my own, a lonely and tough time, missing so many of the fuller days of conversations in graduate seminars at Harvard and Weston. So, I was thrilled in 2007 when Nelson Minnich published an essay of John's, "My Life of Learning," an intellectual biography of sorts, in the *Catholic Historical Review*. Reading it, I had my teacher's stories back in my life again. I laughed reading his words, reminding me why I loved him so. In describing his mother's family who lived along the Ohio River, "The whole clan lacked ambition and was intent simply on enjoying life as much as possible, as long as not too much exertion was required in doing so.... The Eastons were as unpolitical as they were unchurched, except that they for good reason kept a wary eye on local elections to see who might be elected sheriff."² When he described how he made his way to Harvard for graduate school to a seminar with Myron Gilmore, "For three and a half months every Monday evening I pasted a knowing smile on my face to try to conceal that I had absolutely no idea what anyone was talking about."³ The sorts of smiles and laughter that comes when reading John's work or listening to his lectures is the kind of laugh that also points to somewhere deeper, something bigger. He poked fun at himself, but still described, triumphantly, the feeling as he was finishing his first big project:

I now knew what it was to know
something that had taken me to the edge

where nobody had been before. Ah, yes a razor-thin little edge, but nonetheless I was alone there. What I said on that edge was not an act of faith in what others had said, but an affirmation of what I myself had discovered and now put out to the world as my stance. I felt that in a new way I knew what it was to know. The process of getting there had tried my soul and, I think, purified it by making me constantly reexamine my assumptions, even my values, and putting me through the painful process of reassessing them. It had shaped me up by forcing me into a physical and psychological discipline I had never known before to such a degree.⁴


I read those words just as I was finishing my own massive project on Raïssa Maritain, a project he had inspired in so many ways in style, method, and what I might call mood. But I had to get to that edge, that affirmation of what I saw in her life, an affirmation that was mine alone. I had to get it done. It was just what I needed to hear. There was no one else to do it for me, it was me alone. Buoyed by his words, I pushed onward. I finished.

A few years ago, I found one of the last papers I wrote for John. In it, I quoted something from

Notes

¹Lucien Febvre, *A New Kind of History: From the Writings of Febvre*, ed. Peter Burke, trans. K. Folca (New York: Harper and Row, 1973).

Michel Foucault. The exact line escapes me now, but it was something about how when we say “it has always been this way,” that seals exits, closes doors. But the work of history can point to cracks, fissures, other possibilities that have been there all along. It is disruptive and transformative. “YES!” he wrote to me in the margins. YES. I can see his handwriting now. I was onto something. He showed me a clearing in the woods. The clearing was a path for *me* to go down, with *my own* scholarship. It was a way for me to handle the religious sources that I discover and deal with evidence, analyze it, think about the world through them, affirm my stance, say why it matters. I am still on that path today.

Remembering the teaching and influence of John O'Malley has been a *ressourcement* of sorts, that word I first learned from him so many years ago. It is to go back to the sources of my own intellectual and spiritual formation, the deepest sources of vitality and life. For so many of us working in Catholic history today, John was a “source” in the most wonderful and profoundly theological sense of that word. He completely changed my life. My gratitude is boundless. 

² John W. O'Malley, S.J., “My Life of Learning,” *The Catholic Historical Review* 93, no. 3 (2007): 577

³ O'Malley, S.J., “My Life of Learning,” 577.

⁴ O'Malley, S.J., “My Life of Learning,” 586.