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Remembering John O'Malley, S.J.

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John W. O'Malley, S.J., was a gift to each of us. Our lives have been enriched, elevated, and enlivened by this very special man—by the kind of scholar that he was, by the kind of friend and colleague that he was, and most especially, by the kind of Jesuit that he was.

I wish to contribute three brief reflections about John.

First, John is the giant among giants among the extraordinary Jesuits who, following the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, made the “way of proceeding” of St. Ignatius accessible to all of us.

I remember working groups, study sessions, retreats, as an undergraduate and graduate student—with other lay colleagues—in the 1970s and 1980s—trying to penetrate this tradition—this way of proceeding.

We knew there was something different about being at a Jesuit university, but what was it? The spirituality was not accessible through reading the *Spiritual Exercises*. No one we knew had engaged the 19th Annotation. We didn't know “spiritual” directors. We had the *Autobiography of Ignatius*—but on its own, it has its limits.

There were many contributors whose work was beginning to open up the tradition.

For me, a big breakthrough came with a retreat at St. Louis University in 1986, designed for lay people involved in administration at Jesuit colleges and universities. It was offered by two Jesuits, Fr. John Padberg, S.J., and Fr. Howard Gray, S.J. After that week at the SLU retreat house, I remember coming back to Georgetown and asking a member of our Jesuit community with whom I was very close: “Why don't you tell us this stuff?” and his response: “We are just learning how.”

That learning continued. There were many breakthroughs in the years that followed, all inspired by the call of Vatican II. Perhaps the most significant was the publication of *The First Jesuits* in 1993. John provided all of us with this most extraordinary gift. Ignatius came alive in ways we had not experienced before. We discovered new companions—Nadal, Xavier, Favre, Polanco. We learned that the work of the Society of Jesus—at its core—is to “help souls.”

I imagine that many of us remember the first time we read these words of John's in *The First Jesuits*:

But of such expressions none occurs more frequently in Jesuit documentation—on practically every page—than “to help souls.” In the *Autobiography*, *Constitutions*, and his correspondence, Ignatius used it again and again to describe what motivated him and was to motivate the Society. His disciples seized upon it and tirelessly repeated it as the best and most succinct description of what they were trying to do... “To help souls.” By “soul” Jesuits meant the whole person.¹

Where would all of us be today without *The First Jesuits*?

Second, beyond enriching our grasp of the Ignatian tradition, John offered so many extraordinary insights—we understand the Councils of Trent, Vatican I, and Vatican II in ways we didn't before his scholarship. His monographs with St. Joseph University Press stand as original contributions to art history. His essays... always direct, precise, and accessible.

For me, one insight of John's for which I am most grateful came with his unpacking of the *Formula for the Institute*—the mission statement of the Society of Jesus, written by Ignatius himself.

I first heard John use the phrase “civic spirituality” in a talk he gave at Wheeling College nearly two decades ago. We were panelists at the installation of the new president. It was a moment I have not forgotten.

In the years that followed, John deepened this insight—that Ignatius offers a spirituality for civic life—for civic engagement. In his unpacking of the *Formula*, which went through a few drafts, John emphasizes the closing words:

Moreover, the Society should show itself no less useful in reconciling the estranged, in holily assisting and serving those who are found in prisons or hospitals, and indeed in performing any other works of charity, according to what will seem expedient for the glory of God and the common good.²

These are the closing words to the *Formula of the Institute*: “for the glory of God and the common good.”

John finds the origin—the inspiration—for these words in Ignatius’ reading of Cicero’s *De Officiis*, often translated as *On Public Responsibility*. These are words of Cicero’s that he and his companions knew by heart:

We are not born for ourselves alone...we, too, as human beings are born for the sake of other human beings; that we might be able mutually to help each other. We ought, therefore to contribute to the common good of humankind by reciprocal acts of human kindness, by giving and receiving from one another

and thus by our skill, our industry and our talents work to bring human society together in peace and harmony.³

In 2013, in the ceremony to establish our first new school at Georgetown in 60 years, the McCourt School of Public Policy, I shared John’s insight and I said: “*Father O’Malley calls this the foundation of a civic spirituality.*”

This is a spirituality that animates the work of our Jesuit colleges and universities.

Third, beyond these incredible gifts that have shaped our understanding of our world—beyond the brilliance of his scholarship—29 books, 150 articles, the 67 years in the classroom, the homilies, lectures, and talks—if John had never pursued a life in the Academy—if he never published a word—our lives would still have been as deeply enriched by his presence. He was so much more than his extraordinary contributions to our understanding.

John was always first—and foremost—a Jesuit.

He lived his vocation in the Academy but also in the Chapel, and especially in community, among his fellow Jesuits.

He had an incomparable gift for friendship. Knowing you were going to be in John’s company was a source of joy. Just the mention of his name brought a smile to all of our faces.

How graced we all are—we had John O’Malley in our lives. ✠

Notes

¹ John W. O’Malley, S.J., *The First Jesuits* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 18.

² O’Malley, *The First Jesuits*, 5.

³ John W. O’Malley, S.J., ed., *The Jesuits II: Cultures, Sciences, and the Arts, 1540-1773* (Toronto, CA: University of Toronto Press, 2006), xxxii.