

5-2017

Report of the Working Group on Slavery, Memory, and Reconciliation to the President of Georgetown University. Washington, D.C. Summer 2016

J. Leon Hooper
S.J., jlh3@georgetown.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://epublications.regis.edu/jhe>

Recommended Citation

Hooper, J. Leon (2017) "Report of the Working Group on Slavery, Memory, and Reconciliation to the President of Georgetown University. Washington, D.C. Summer 2016," *Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal*: Vol. 6 : No. 1 , Article 17.
Available at: <http://epublications.regis.edu/jhe/vol6/iss1/17>

This Resources is brought to you for free and open access by ePublications at Regis University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal by an authorized administrator of ePublications at Regis University. For more information, please contact epublications@regis.edu.

Report of the Working Group on Slavery, Memory, and Reconciliation to the President of Georgetown University. Washington, D.C. Summer 2016.

J. Leon Hooper, S.J.
Director, [Woodstock Theological Library](#)
Georgetown University
jlh3@georgetown.edu

In 1804, in the face of a possible restoration of the 40-year-suppressed Society of Jesus, John Carroll, the first bishop of English-speaking America and himself a former Jesuit, skeptically wrote:

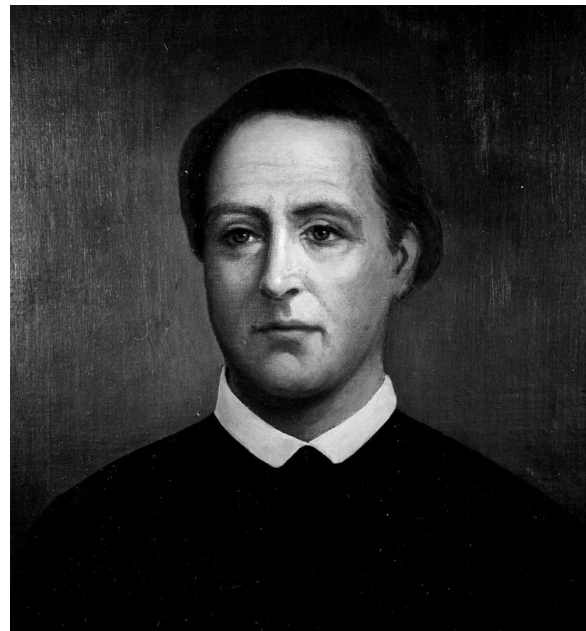
It is very uncertain how long the spirit of the Society will be kept alive, at least in (America)... We have been so much employed in ministries foreign to our Institute; we are so inexperienced in government; the want of books, even of the (Jesuit) Constitutions and decrees of the Congregations, is so flagrant, that you cannot find one Jesuit among us sufficiently qualified ... to fulfill the duties of Superior.

Carroll made this claim even after he had founded Georgetown College (1789), staffed in part by ex-Jesuits.

Behind Carroll's lament lay several issues that required the firm and insightful leadership that he sought. There was Jesuit reliance on manors and plantations to financially support the new College (the management of the same, Carroll thought to be "foreign to our institute"). There was the use of slaves on farms and for the building of Georgetown, as well as the owning of slaves for breeding as a means of raising income.

Jesuit involvement with slavery and the slave trade is, of course, the focus of the [Report of the Working Group on Slavery, Memory, and Reconciliation](#). Under more specific examination are two Jesuit presidents of Georgetown, Thomas Mulledy S.J. and William McSherry S.J., for their involvement in the selling of at least 272 slaves to relieve the College's debt. As defined by that Working

Group, the Report is an attempt to face honestly and even bluntly into Georgetown College's past (slavery), to incorporate that past into the University's current self-understanding (memory), and to move into a future in ways that will attempt to make amends for past exercises of brutality, and to work to make similar brutality less likely (repentance).



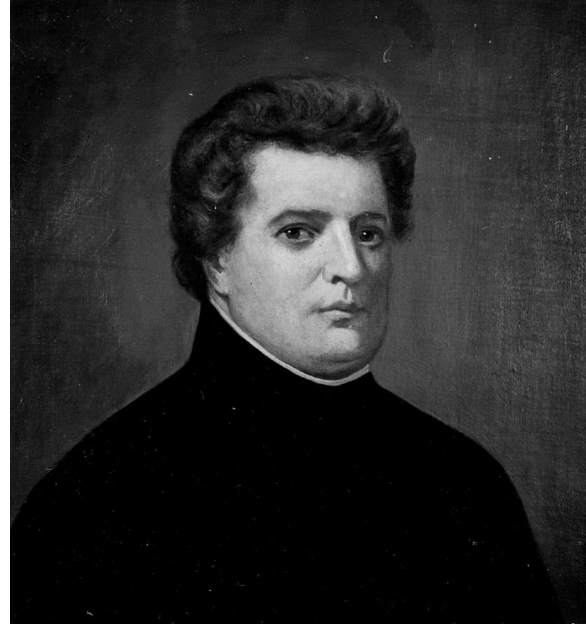
William McSherry, S.J.
Image @ University Art Collection, Booth Family Center for Special Collections, Georgetown University Library

Here I will not review the *Report's* discussion of enslavement as practiced by some 19th-century Jesuits, nor will I outline current attempts to own up to the University's past, which the *Report* embodies. Accompanying my article in this issue of *Jesuit Higher Education* is another by Thomas Foley. Foley outlines much of the historical details that are included in the *Report*, and further informs us of the fine work underway in shaping online digital presentations of primary 19th-century

archival sources, as well as documents generated by the Working Group and by descendants of Jesuit-owned slaves. Foley presents these clearly and briefly. Here I will only mention one other study of Restoration American Jesuits that adds a further note of complexity to our understanding of Georgetown's owning of slaves.

It is ironic and worthy of reflection that the two principal Jesuit perpetrators of the 1838 sale of 272 slaves in support of the Georgetown College were thought to be, and were trained to act as, modernizers and reformers. As the Slavery, Memory, and Reconciliation Project was gearing up, the *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* published Anthony Kuzniewski's brief examination of American early-Restoration Jesuits entitled, "Our American Champions."¹ The principal issue taken up in Kuzniewski's study is, again, that of Jesuit leadership. Kuzniewski outlines the bringing in of foreign Jesuits, particularly an Irishman, Peter Kenney, and a Pole, Francis Dzierozynski, to make up for the lack that Carroll highlighted. Both men were to varying degrees successful in their abilities to adapt to the strong American sense of independence, and both appreciated that an American Catholic Church would need to look different from its European beginnings. To move beyond the agrarian world of their pre-suppression confreres, Kenney insisted that new, young Jesuits would best be sent to Rome for schooling and some ministry, with its exposure to cities and rich cultures, before being given leadership roles in the States.

Six Jesuits, including McSherry and Mulledy, were sent to Rome as "Our American Champions." A decade later they returned with strong convictions that the future lay in American cities, not in the manors. As they took on the jobs of president or provincial, both men questioned the wisdom of owning slaves.




Thomas F. Mulledy, S.J.

Image @ University Art Collection, Booth Family Center for Special Collections, Georgetown University Library

And, yet, they were the ones who moved toward modernity by selling the slaves, not by freeing them. They were efficient as businessmen, but showed little interest in Rome's insistence that slave families not be broken up and that their Catholic faith be nurtured. Kuzniewski mentions several personal factors that got in the way of McSherry's and Mulledy's responding to a growing sense of the ethical and religious immorality of the holding of others in bondage, including McSherry's struggling with stomach cancer and Mulledy's abiding arrogance, as well as the pro-South sympathies of their and Georgetown's backgrounds.

I suspect that further explorations of this first generation of new Society Jesuits would lead us to appreciate more deeply what "Our American Champions" were lacking, namely, a strong sense of the humanity of the slaves and their descendants. And this call for a retrieval of a "sense" of the humanity of both slaves and descendants is probably the most hopeful path opened by the *Report*. It is a path that could move the current incarnation of Georgetown University as a Catholic and Jesuit institution and community through — and then beyond — concerns of retributive and even restorative justice to the

realms of mercy as insisted upon by [Pope Francis](#). In Francis's sense, mercy is not so much a forgiveness, but rather a hermeneutic stance that makes possible the perception of the humanity and divinity, particularly of those who differ from us, even when that difference has been augmented by our own enslaving and enslavement. Personal compassion can of course help us notice what is out there in environments that are strange and threatening. But a sense of mercy can move us into realms of justice, and that perception of the other is what the *Report* calls for. 

Notes

¹ Anthony J Kuzniewski, S.J. "Our American Champions": The First American Generation of American Jesuit Leaders after the Restoration of the Society," *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 46, no. 1 (Spring 2014).