60-Minute Conversations with Jesuit History Series

“So What?”: A Conversation with John W. O’Malley

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Abstract

John W. O’Malley, a member of the Society of Jesus, is currently a university professor in the Theology Department of Georgetown University, Washington, DC. He holds a PhD in history from Harvard University. His specialty is the religious culture of early modern Europe. O’Malley has written and edited a number of books, eight of which have won best-book awards. *The First Jesuits* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), perhaps his best-known work, received both the Jacques Barzun Prize for Cultural History from the American Philosophical Society and the Philip Schaff Prize from the American Society for Church History. It has been translated into twelve languages and its publication opened a new era in the study of the Society. Since then, the Jesuits have attracted greater attention from scholars of all disciplines on an international basis. O’Malley has continued to write about early Jesuits and the subsequent history of the Jesuits: his main essays on Jesuit history are now collected in the first volume of Brill’s Jesuit Studies series, *Saints or Devils Incarnate?: Studies in Jesuit History* (Leiden, 2013).

In the last few years, O’Malley published with Harvard University Press a trilogy on the three last councils in the history of the Catholic Church: *What Happened at Vatican II* (2008), *Trent: What Happened at the Council* (2012), and *Vatican I: The Council and the Making of the Ultramontane Church* (2018). A comparative view of the three councils is offered now in his most recent book, *When Bishops Meet: An Essay Comparing Trent, Vatican I, and Vatican II* (2019). O’Malley has lectured widely around the world to both professional and general audiences. He is past president of the Renaissance Society

of America and the American Catholic Historical Association. He holds the Johannes Quasten Medal from The Catholic University of America for distinguished service in religious studies. In 1995, he was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences; in 1997, to the American Philosophical Society; and in 2001, to the Accademia Ambrosiana, Milan. He holds lifetime achievement awards from the Society for Italian Historical Studies, the Renaissance Society of America, and the American Catholic Historical Association.

At the origin of the following interview there are three conversations Emanuele Colombo had with O'Malley in Chicago, in 2017 and 2018, as a follow-up of a lecture he gave on his life, "My Life of Learning," now published in *The Catholic Historical Review*.¹

Keywords

John W. O'Malley – Society of Jesus – Italian Renaissance – historical method – Jesuit history – teaching history

1 The Beginning

Colombo: *Why did you join the Society of Jesus?*

O'Malley: Well, it's a rather strange thing. I grew up in a small town, and the only priest I knew was the pastor. And when I was, maybe about just before my last year in high school, I really felt I wanted to be a priest. But I knew I did not want to be a diocesan priest and work in a parish. My mother had gone onto a convent school, and they had had some retreats for Jesuits, so that was a word that occasionally I had heard. Also, there was a cousin's wife's brother who was a Jesuit, but I never met him in my life. I read something about the Jesuits: they were teachers, they were missionaries, and it sounded attractive to me. And so, without ever having met a Jesuit, I wrote to the novitiate in Milford, Ohio and got back a letter saying, "If you're really interested, you should go to Cleveland and be interviewed." My parents of course knew nothing about this but, strange to say, they went along with it. They were sensible people, but I don't know how they saw this odd decision of their only child. We all went to Cleveland and I went to John Carroll University where I was interviewed. At first, they did not accept me because I had gone to a small public school and I had only two years of Latin. They were probably thinking, "Who is this kid?"

1 John W. O'Malley, "My Life of Learning," *The Catholic Historical Review* 93, no. 3 (2007): 576–88.

But they said that, if I was really serious, I should go to John Carroll and take an intensive Latin course. To be honest, I think they just wanted to look me over. But I went, just for a semester, and then they accepted me.

You mentioned you had great experience in the novitiate of Milford, Ohio, with the master of the novices...

Yes! His name was William J. Young, S.J., and he was a very well-educated man. He had studied theology in Spain, and then he went to Oxford; he never got a degree there, but he made constant reference to his experience at Oxford. He became the dean of the humanities program and then the master of the novices. He was one of the first people in the United States to translate Ignatius's letters; he was the first to translate into English the so-called "autobiography" of Ignatius and he also translated the French life of St. Ignatius by Paul Dudon, S.J.² So, he was ahead of his time, he was a pioneer in the United States, and was a good friend of Louis J. Puhl, S.J., who did an excellent translation of the *Spiritual Exercises* that I still use. I didn't realize it at the time, but that was extremely formative for me. The interest in Jesuit history, that was developed relatively late in my career, was probably there, like a seed, since my time in the novitiate.

It is like your interest for the Reformation: its roots are in your youth...

Exactly. I grew up in a small town in Ohio, where half of the population was Methodist, and half was Catholic. In our family, we were much closer and much more congenial to our non-Catholic relatives than to our Catholic ones; we spent much more time with them. At school, it was the same: we were ecumenical before the word "ecumenism" was created. The question "Why be a Catholic?" was always with me, even if I did not realize it. Then, later, when I was studying theology—during the 1950s—the ecumenical movement was very active and later, when Vatican II opened, I was already at Harvard studying the Reformation.

What happened after the novitiate? What are the most important experiences that fueled your interest toward history?

2 *Letters of St. Ignatius of Loyola*, trans. and ed. William J. Young, S.J. (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1959); *St. Ignatius' Own Story as Told to Gonzalez de Camara [sic]: With a Sampling of His Letters*, trans. William J. Young (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1956); Paul Dudon, *St. Ignatius of Loyola* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1949).

My Jesuit training included three years of teaching history in high school. I was assigned to St. Ignatius High School in Chicago, an experience that helped me in making complex topics more comprehensible. Then, I studied theology at West Baden Springs, Indiana, where I had outstanding teachers. At that time, both faculty and students felt the upheavals in the Catholic Church, especially in Germany and France, that would lead to Vatican II. Finally, I was sent for a year in Austria, to perfect my German. At that time, together with my superiors, we decided that after Austria I would have applied to a PhD in history. I had many options, since I was accepted at the four universities where I applied: Princeton, Ohio State, Harvard, and the University of Bonn. The most logical place where to go was the University of Bonn, where I could study with the great church historian Hubert Jedin [1900–80]. But, during my time in Austria, I realized how important it was to integrate church history with secular and cultural history. For this reason, I decided for what at the time appeared to be the most illogical and strange option, namely going to Harvard. I am very happy about this choice, because in the following years and until now, the incorporation of church history with cultural history became more and more relevant in my understanding of history. But something even more interesting happened at the end of my year in Austria, something that redirected my interest, from German history to Italian history. I called it the *gelateria* experience.

2 Harvard and the Italian Renaissance

Was it a sort of conversion?

Yes. Let's put it in this way: Luther [1483–1546] had his Tower Experience, I had my *gelateria* experience. I knew only one American in Austria, and he persuaded me to travel to Italy for a week before going back to the United States. At that time, I didn't know a single word of Italian and I was not interested in going to visit the country; but my friend insisted so much that, at the end, I accepted to go with him. We went to Venice, Verona, Florence, and Rome; as you can imagine, I was thrilled by the beauty of the cities and, of course, by the food. In Florence, I entered a *gelateria* and was able to get a cone of gelato without saying a single word in Italian. And it was then, while I was linking away my gelato cone, that I thought: "This is a good country; why don't you go to Italian history?" This intuition remained with me during the following years, while I was at Harvard.

Tell me more about your experience at Harvard...

As I mentioned, the other real choice was the University of Bonn with Jedin. He was a great scholar but, in the end, I am so glad I didn't go there because he taught at a theological faculty and I would have plunged into some canon law, which I didn't want to because I had already studied it. Harvard, instead, forced me to take basic courses that I really needed so badly. During my first semester there, I took a class with Heiko Oberman [1930–2001] on Calvin's *Institutes* [1536]. And then I took his seminar on late medieval nominalism, and I did very well because my Latin by that time was very good, better than about anybody in the class, and I also had some background in medieval Scholasticism. Apparently, I made a big impression on Oberman! During the second semester, I worked with my future mentor, Myron Gilmore [1910–78]. I didn't know anything about the Italian Renaissance, but Oberman had convinced Gilmore that I knew something, so I slid through his seminar on Niccolò Machiavelli [1469–1527]. At Harvard, seminars were really exciting and terrifying. Gilmore was a great scholar and a great man; he was a humanist in the sense that Erasmus [1466–1536] was one of his great heroes and made him one of my great heroes. We met with him every Monday evening, at his home, for three hours; there were just four students, so it was difficult to disappear; for the entire semester I just smiled all the time, pretending I knew something about Italian Renaissance and Humanism, but I did not! I remember coming home on Monday nights, walking across the Massachusetts Avenue Bridge and saying to myself: "Maybe a strong wind will come and just blow me in the Charles River. People would say, 'That John O'Malley, he had some promise, but boy...'"

Then another "accident" happened; there are all these accidents in life... One day, I was outside the History Department office, waiting for it to open because it was closed at lunch time. There was a poster of the "Fellowships to the American Academy in Rome." I did not know anything about it, but I decided to apply, and I told Gilmore only after I had applied, because I needed his letter of recommendation. He asked me, "Do you know what you've done? Do you know what the American Academy in Rome is?" And, of course, I said "No." He must have written a very good letter because I got the fellowship and I was the second priest ever to have a fellowship, and the first one to live in the Academy.

Was it another important step for your career?

Absolutely! Every time I left the United States for an extended period, I came home changed. When I went to Austria, for instance, it was difficult to adjust to the culture of the place and to people so different. In the whole house, there were about fifty people and only two Americans. It was not always easy to

socialize. This condition, however, helped me in getting under my surface and looking at the unexpressed assumptions—assumptions that often are so deep that one does not know they are there.

At the American Academy, I had an important encounter with art history. We shared three meals a day and there were many fellows who were art historians. One of them was a very good friend of mine and today we live very close to one another in Washington, DC. Also, distinguished art historians used to visit the Academy. That was the beginning of a series of relationships and exchanges with art historians. Many of them read my book on Egidio da Viterbo [1472–1532] and thought it could be a key to understand the Sistine Chapel ceiling or the *stanze* of Raphael [1483–1520].³ John Sherman [1931–2003], a very distinguished British art historian (who eventually became the chair of the Fine Arts Department at Harvard and we became good friends) wrote me about how much he liked the book, and we started a correspondence. In his second letter, he was more honest and wrote: “Yes, you’ve written a very good book; but it has done a lot of harm.” And what he meant was that the art historians had applied the book too closely. Later, I spent two years at Villa i Tatti, where the conversations with art historians continued and were extremely stimulating.

Then I wrote *Praise and Blame in Renaissance Rome*, that provides a picture of the kind of preaching that was going on in the Sistine Chapel.⁴ And, again, it attracted the attention of art historians, as a contribution for the understanding of the context of the frescoes. I began to receive many questions from art historians, and my friendship with John Sherman developed even more. When the Vatican published a book on the Sistine Chapel (a book translated into German, French and Italian, and eventually also in English), they asked me to write a chapter on the ceiling. And I said, “Well I’m not an art historian,” but John Sherman, who was behind the project, insisted. So, I authored the section on the ceiling.⁵ I kept getting dragged into these art history projects, including the book on *The Jesuits and the Arts*: it was supposed to be the English version

3 John W. O'Malley, *Giles of Viterbo on Church and Reform: A Study in Renaissance Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 1968).

4 John W. O'Malley, *Praise and Blame in Renaissance Rome: Rhetoric, Doctrine, and Reform in the Sacred Orators of the Papal Court, c. 1450–1521* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1979).

5 John W. O'Malley, “The Theology Behind Michelangelo's Ceiling,” in Carlo Pietrangeli et al., *The Sistine Chapel: The Art, the History, and the Restoration* (New York: Harmony Books, 1986), 92–148. The first edition, in Italian: *La cappella Sistina: I primi restauri; La scoperta del colore* (Novara: Istituto Geografico de Agostini, 1986).

of an Italian book, but then we were so fascinated that we produced a new book, almost twice as big as the original one.⁶

3 Writing History

The list of your publication is huge. Do you have a favorite book among your works?

Yes, with no doubt: *Praise and Blame in Renaissance Rome* is my favorite child, even if people don't talk a lot about it. It was an inspired book. After I published my dissertation on Egidio da Viterbo, I was invited by Charles Trinkaus [1911–99], from Ann Arbor, to give a paper at a conference on religion in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. I accepted, but I did not know what topic to propose, since I could not talk again about Egidio. I spent a few weeks in the Vatican Library, desperately looking for materials, and someone suggested to read some miscellanea in which there were reform proposals. I was reading all these miscellanea from the early sixteenth century, and I could not find anything! I kept reading homilies and sermons preached at the papal court during the Renaissance, but I could not see anything new in them. After three weeks, when I was really discouraged, I thought: "Wait a minute: these homilies, these sermons are absolutely different from what I have been led to expect. They are not Scholastic, academic sermons; nor are they popular penitential sermons." I found about fifty sermons, and they all had the same style. Later, a suggestion by Paul Oskar Kristeller [1905–99] helped me look at the rhetorical form of the sermons, and not only at the contents. The form became the main object of my attention, and it was worthwhile to look at it.

Working on this topic, I had to deal directly with the relationship between Humanism and its medieval antecedent, Scholasticism. In *Praise and Blame*, I traced the transformative effect that the introduction of humanist rhetoric had on the mood, aim, religious, and cultural sensibilities, and even on the content of preaching, moving it from its medieval styles to a style quite different. I began to see something with new clarity: *how* things were said was just as important as *what* was said, even though the *how* and the *what* could never be neatly separated.

Later, when I studied the Reformation, I had a similar experience. In the debate between Erasmus and Luther on free will, for instance, the difference

6 *The Jesuits and the Arts, 1540–1773*, ed. John W. O'Malley, Gauvin Alexander Bailey, and Giovanni Sale (Philadelphia, PA: Saint Joseph's University Press, 2005).

seemed to me more profound than their respective ideas on free will and grace. They talked and write in very different styles. *How* they spoke was as different as *what* they said. This difference in style pointed to deeper differences and to their incompatible assumptions.

I developed this topic later, in my book *Four Cultures in the West*, where I showed that these differences of styles were part of different cultures that sometimes completed each other, at other times were in conflict.⁷ The four cultures, that originated in the ancient Mediterranean world of Athens and Jerusalem, are the prophetic, the academic or professional, the rhetoric-humanist, and the artistic culture.

Why did you publish a trilogy on the last three councils in the history of the church?

During my years teaching at the Weston School of Theology, I realized the importance of the connections between Trent and Vatican II. When people studied the two councils separated, they were extremely boring. But when the two councils were connected, there was a sort of combustion, and the role of history became clear. Later, I realized that something that I would call a “basic book” in English on these two crucial councils was missing. A basic book, meaning a book where you provide a clear understanding of the story, describing the historical context and using the primary sources, without being superficial. When I am able to do that, I am pleased with myself. The titles express this simple idea: *what happened* at these two councils?⁸ Historians should always look at continuities and fractures: as I see it, the continuities are always deeper and more profound than any discontinuities. But things happen, and I am fascinated by the idea of describing what exactly happened.

And then, somehow unexpectedly, I decided to publish a book on Vatican I.⁹ I always thought I would have never done so, but here we are. I could not have written this book without the Italian Jesuit scholar, Giacomo Martina [1924–2012], and his three volumes on Pius IX [1846–78], and the German Jesuit scholar Klaus Schatz [1938–], with his three volumes on Vatican I. They are both excellent and first-rated works; they are wonderful for me and for other scholars, but how many people are going to read them? They have some great

7 John W. O'Malley, *Four Cultures in the West* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), also in Italian and Chinese.

8 John W. O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), in seven languages; O'Malley, *Trent: What Happened at the Council* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), in five languages.

9 John W. O'Malley, *Vatican I: The Council and the Making of the Ultramontane Church* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), also in French and Italian.

intuitions and make some connections with the present, but these intuitions are almost buried in these huge volumes. In my book, I show the relevance of Vatican I for understanding the church today. The book opens with a quotation by William Faulkner [1897–1962]: "The past is never dead; it is not even past." And that is also the last line of the book. The First Vatican Council has more influence now than it had until the first half of the twentieth century.

4 Historical Method

How would you describe your approach to writing history? What is your method?

Let me tell you a story, first. In 2013, I was in Leuven and the Jesuits at the Centre Sèvres in Paris wanted me to go there and give a talk. I accepted, but in addition to the talk, they wanted me to teach a seminar on my method. "My method..., gosh!" It was difficult for me, because I had not reflected too much on my method. On that occasion, I was obliged to think about my approach. I have the notes that I used on that occasion: there are eight short sentences, and I am happy to share them with you.

Would you like to comment on them?

Yes, of course.

First. "The continuities are stronger and deeper than the discontinuities, but the latter must be taken into account to answer the question whether anything happened."

If you look at any historical event, even the most cataclysmic (the French Revolution, the American Revolution), many things remain the same: French people remained French, their deep identity remained the same. This is also true with us: there is a deep identity that does not change. At the same time, you need to take a look at what happened. In the nineteenth century, there was a bias in the church that history did not count: it changed, but it did not affect the church.

Second. "The sources are mute. To make them speak I must ask them questions. Thus, begins a dialectic between me and the sources. I must assume that my questions are the wrong questions or at least not precisely put. The source then speaks back to me, helping me to find the right questions, or at least better ones."

This “battle” with the sources begun with my dissertation on Egidio da Viterbo. I wanted to work on him as a reformer; I had my questions, and I was becoming very frustrated. The kind of questions I had, the idea of what a reformer was supposed to be, came from my assumptions of what a reformer was in the twentieth century. I was terribly frustrated because I did not get the feedback I was expecting. For this reason, I started to believe that Egidio was not a reformer. At a certain point I thought: “Wait a minute: I am asking the wrong questions. What he thinks he is doing is not what I thought he was supposed to do.” It was a breakthrough, and, after that, everything started to fall into place. This is the process: you begin with questions, and your questions are often twenty-first-century questions; then there is a long back-and-forth: I talk to the sources and the sources talk to me, again and again; at a certain point you get closer and closer to what the sources were trying to say. The sources have to be questioned and “beaten.”

Third. “Historical events do not fall out of the heavens. They have a pre-history. To understand them, it is essential to understand the pre-history (e.g., the ‘long nineteenth century’).”

Let’s look at the five volumes by Giuseppe Alberigo [1926–2007] on Vatican II. They are a wonderful achievement. The big lack there is that they begin in 1959. So, all at once, Vatican II seems to have fall out of the heavens. My book on Vatican II is very dependent on Alberigo’s work, but I wanted to talk about the “long nineteenth century” (it is the second chapter of the book), showing the continuities and discontinuities. Vatican II was, at the same time, the fulfillment and the rejection of the long nineteenth century. I have done the same in my book on Vatican I, showing the pre-history of that council—the eighteenth century.

Fourth. “If I really understand what is going on, I can explain it to an intelligent ten-year-old child. Thus, I want everything I write to be comprehensible on the first reading.”

I think I learned this approach from my parents. They made clear to me that if I could not express something simply, it was a clear sign that I did not understand. This idea grew in me over the years. I think that there is a danger there, the risk of oversimplification. Explain a complex idea to a ten-year-old requires simplification; but what is not a simplification is the basic insight. The clarity on the basic insights is crucial for going deeper into the topic. I never had a problem

with this approach: at Harvard, at Weston School of Theology, and in my scholarship. But what I would like to emphasize here, is that this approach is a form of correction to myself: I have to be humble enough to acknowledge that, if the ten-year-old does not understand, it means that, deep down, I did not understand.

Fifth. "My experiences in the present help me as a historian because history is the story of human experiences. History is the story of how we got to be the way we are. That is what makes it so important. It is key to understanding our present situation. I write in order to throw some light on how we got to be the way we are. That is what gives me my professional energy."

Emphasizing the relationship between the past and the present can be dangerous, I realize that. I have to be very austere with myself in that regard, I need to be careful not to force this connection with the present. However, when I study or write about the past, I want to see and understand if what happened is a step along the way to where we are. So, for instance, papal infallibility: this is now part of the Catholic identity, that's where we are. I am not interested in historical archeology: my professional energy always goes into something that allows me to understand more the present. I love history, I love dealing with the past; but I always wonder how this has affected the course of history or at least some little aspects of history. Where does this go? Why is it worth studying? Why is it worth saying something about?

Sixth. "We professional historians should not leave reaching a popular audience of non-professionals. In the right hands, there is nothing wrong with 'the grand narrative.'"

Yes, there are these big changes in history: there are patterns, there are big movements, and it's very important to see them. I feel responsible not just to talk to other historians. We often need a big picture and the answer to the question: "So what?" "So what?": that's really my question.

Seventh: "It is important to practice the hermeneutic of compassion as well as the hermeneutic of suspicion."

It is easier, today, to understand the "hermeneutic of suspicion"; more difficult is the "hermeneutic of compassion." History is a human experience and I believe that people basically want to be good. The hermeneutic of compassion means to take into account this basic need of the human beings, and not

simply approaching every human expression as somehow badly motivated or self-serving. For instance, when discussing Vatican II, the so-called minority is often dismissed: they were wrong, they did not understand. Well, take another look at it. The so-called progressive, the majority, were asking a lot of these people, they were asking them to change things they had learned and taught for decades. I understand the minority, sometimes I found myself in a similar position. So, I have sympathy for those people, there are human reasons that explain their views.

Eight. "As Mark Twain said, 'The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between a lightning bolt and a lightning bug.' Therefore, revise, revise, revise... and keep asking yourself at each word, 'is this word necessary?'"

Yes, I revise a lot my work and read out loud, and often say: "It doesn't work"; "It's so boring!" I often realize that I could say something more clearly, more simply, and get rid of many qualifications. I believe that you do not really have a clear thought until you have the right word. The thought is developed in the act of writing: sometimes you are writing a sentence, and you realize that, deep down, you do not really know what you want to say. You revise, and at a certain point you say: "This is really what I think, what I want to say!" There are paragraphs or pages in my books I have revised seven or eight times. One fellow Jesuit minted a definition for me: "John O'Malley, that archenemy of the superfluous word."

5 Jesuit Studies and the Society of Jesus

Why did you decide to study the first Jesuits?

For a long time, I had the desire to write something about Jesuits, but I was working on different projects and always postponed the plan. When I was at the Weston School of Theology, I was invited to participate to the Seminar on Jesuit Spirituality in St. Louis, an ongoing in-house seminar that the Jesuits were running for themselves to study their history and spirituality. But my interest for the history of the Society was reawakened by some contemporary events within the Society. After Vatican II and during the generalate of Pedro Arrupe [1907–91; in office 1965–83], there were some tensions between the Society and the Vatican. First, there was General Congregation 32 [1974–75], with a long back-and-forth with Paul VI [r.1963–78]. It went on for three and

a half months, and it was an extremely difficult time. We felt every move we made was not right; and I am not blaming anybody, it was just a very difficult moment. Then, after Vatican II and after the encyclical *Humanae vitae*, many Jesuits left, so there was a crisis within the Society. The questions "Who are the Jesuits?," "What is our identity?," were very important in those years. At the seminar, they often asked me to publish something, but I was working on *Praise and Blame* and I always refused to start a new project. When in 1979 the book was published, I did not have any excuse. In 1981, another shocking event happened to the Society: on August 7, after a long trip to Asia, Arrupe suffered a stroke, and it soon became clear that, though he would survive it, he would never be able to return to his position. In that scenario, the vicar general, at that time the American Jesuit Vincent O'Keefe [1920–2012], was supposed to take the leadership of the Society and to prepare the election for a successor. However, John Paul II [1978–2005] decided to appoint a different Jesuit, the Italian Paolo Dezza [1901–91], as a vicar for that delicate moment. Thanks to Dezza's prudent and wise management, the Society was able to resume its normal procedure within two years. But in the meanwhile, we were shocked and terrified. "Is this the end? Is this another suppression? What is going on?" When we met with the seminar, we discussed whether we should publish something on that matter; we were especially interested in understanding the real nature of the fourth vow—the vow that professed Jesuits take, of obedience to the pope "regarding missions," in addition to the three vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. I accepted to write an essay on this topic, and I was surprised from how little had been written about it. I began reading the sources and I found out that the real nature of the fourth vow was mission. They did not have the word *missionaries*, so they found a different way to express it.¹⁰ On that occasion, I read many documents by Jerónimo Nadal [1507–80], a key figure in the history of the first Jesuits, at that time almost unknown to the scholars. The more people asked me "Who is Nadal?" the more I was fascinated by him; but I soon realized that a book on Nadal was not what was needed. What was needed was a basic book, to allow people to understand better the early history of the Society of Jesus. This is the origin of *The First Jesuits*.¹¹ The book explains the documents of the early Society and its ministries—I was teaching

10 John W. O'Malley, "The Fourth Vow in its Ignatian Context: A Historical Study," *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 15, no. 1 (1983): 1–59.

11 John W. O'Malley, *The First Jesuits* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), in twelve languages. See also, O'Malley, *Saints or Devils Incarnate?: Studies in Jesuit History* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), also in Spanish; O'Malley, *The Jesuits: A History from Ignatius to the Present* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014), in six languages; O'Malley, *The Jesuits*

at Weston, a school of ministry! Ministry of the word, sacraments, works of mercy; and then, the schools that I consider the transforming experience for the early Jesuits, an experience that changed everything: if it did not happen, in a couple of generations the Jesuits probably would have not been distinguished from other religious orders. I dedicated the book to the Jesuits: it was a tribute of thanksgiving for what the Society had meant to me, in the hope that my fellow brothers could know more about our history.

Are we in a new phase of the life of the Society of Jesus? Do you see a continuity or a discontinuity with the past?

I see five foundations of the Society of Jesus, with all the continuities and discontinuities: 1534 in Paris when the seven took the vow, that was in a sense the first founding; 1540, the official approval; 1550, when Jesuits went into the schools, which brought to a transformation of the Society; 1814, the restoration after the 1773 suppression; and then Vatican II [1962–65] and the generalate of Arrupe, which begun at the end of the council. Arrupe and his advisors were trying to put together what it meant for the Jesuits building on their history. By the early twentieth century, we had all the corpus of Ignatius's writings in critical editions, the *Monumenta Historica*; in the second half of the century there was a reflection on the history of the Society facing Vatican II. I was present at the General Congregation 32, and I had the opportunity to meet Arrupe; he was a wonderful man, but we should not forget the people behind him, who really did the job. When Arrupe was elected, his Assistants realized that they needed to give him really strong support.

And what about today? In 2015, you wrote a short book on the history of the Society, inspired by the fact that, for the first time, a Jesuit was elected pope. How do you see the Society of Jesus today?

Today we are facing a big challenge, especially in Europe and in North America. There are so many institutions, schools and universities, founded by Jesuits, where at the beginning a large portion of the faculty were Jesuits. Today it is over. My fear is that the Society will revert to the first ten years, before Ignatius started to promote the schools. In this way, we would be almost indistinguishable from other religious orders. From what I know, that does not seem to be true about Africa, India, and Latin America. So maybe the cultural mission of

and the Popes: A Historical Sketch of Their Relationship (Philadelphia, PA: Saint Joseph's University Press, 2016), in five languages.

the Jesuits—what really makes the Jesuits distinctive—can be better carried on in these countries.

6 New and Recent Projects

What are your most recent projects?

Last year, I published an article for *Theological Studies* entitled "Theology before the Reformation; Renaissance Humanism and Vatican II."¹² Here is the way the standard history of theology goes: we have the Middle Ages, with Aquinas [1225–74], Bonaventure [1221–74], and the golden age of Scholasticism; then, you go to the late fifteen century, with Luther, considered a product of late medieval Scholasticism; Luther breaks with that tradition and throws a new light on the world. From Scholasticism to the Reformation, what is missing? Italian Humanism! Why is it missing? For several reasons: one reason is that the students of the Reformation who wrote this history were Lutherans (and Catholics just mimicked them), and all they knew was Luther. The other reason is historiographical: Italian Renaissance was considered a pagan renaissance and in terms of religion it was seen as superficial, because it talked only about the Scholastics. So, Humanism and the revival of the classics has often been considered a revival of pagan ideas. That's not true at all, we know it now. Lorenzo Valla (1407–57), for instance, who was the great symbol of the pagan renaissance, was a profound Christian theologian. So, we can find many parallels between Renaissance Humanism and Vatican II. Like many theologians at Vatican II, the humanists were dissatisfied with Scholasticism; their central source was the Bible, but they wanted to emphasize its value for the present; they made frequent references to the church fathers; and, of course, for them the role of rhetoric was key.

I have also published a long article, entitled "How We Were: Life in a Jesuit Novitiate, 1946–1948."¹³ It is not a memoir, but a sort of guided tour in a Jesuit novitiate before the Second Vatican Council, in which I show continuities and changes with the present.

You just published a book with Harvard; can you say something about it?

12 John W. O'Malley, "Theology before the Reformation: Renaissance Humanism and Vatican II," *Theological Studies* 80, no. 2 (2019): 256–70.

13 John W. O'Malley, "How We Were: Life in a Jesuit Novitiate, 1946–1948," *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*, 51, no. 2 (2019).

It is entitled *When Bishops Meet*, and it is an essay comparing the three councils: Trent, Vatican I, and Vatican II.¹⁴ It is a companion to my trilogy on the last three councils, and there are no footnotes, because you can always go back to the three books. In the first chapter, titled “What is a Council?,” I discuss the problem of style. The next chapter is “Who’s in Charge?,” and describes the relationship between the bishops and the popes during the three councils. And then the other chapter, “Did Anything Happen?,” where I summarize the history of the three councils. And then I compare: what is the role of theologians? What about the role of the laity?

One thing I realized even better—it was not new to me—is the special quality of Vatican II, that was a real break in what a council was. Vatican II was no longer a legislative judicial body; it was a meeting in which the church stood back to explore its own identity in more depth to rediscover its most precious values and to proclaim the destiny of humanity to the world. It is a very different definition of what a council is. The very definition of a council changed: this is why it is so difficult to understand it, because historians and theologians interpret Vatican II in the same way they have interpreted the other councils. You need an all different hermeneutic to understand it.

Are you working on a new project?

At present, I am working on an article with Timothy O’Brien, S.J., tentatively entitled, “The Twentieth-Century Construction of Ignatian Spirituality”; I am also writing a series of essays for a possible collection on different aspects of Catholicism.

7 Teaching

Let’s conclude with a question on teaching. You have been teaching for a long time at Georgetown university; what kind of classes did you enjoy the most?

I preferred teaching undergraduates. They are livelier, more honest, and they usually do not pretend they know. They tell you when they don’t get it. Graduate students are a little more cautious.

Do you enjoy teaching? What does it mean for you?

14 John W. O’Malley, *When Bishops Meet: An Essay Comparing Trent, Vatican I, and Vatican II* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019).

I like to see the excitement in my students when they see something, and I am so happy if I realize that I can help them do so. In teaching, there is, so to say, an "erotic" element: it is a form of love that you share with your students. I get excited telling the story despite the fact, believe it or not, that I have a terrible memory. So, I have been preparing every year for my classes, often reading my own works! And I realize that, without the students and without preparing for my classes, I would forget even the contents of my own books. In class, I love questions: there is nothing better than an ignorant but intelligent question; and that is often what you get from students. Yes, they are ignorant on what you are teaching, otherwise they would not have to take the course; but they ask questions and I think, "Oh yes, that's a good question! How can I really answer that?" And they help my scholarship. I would have never written a book on Vatican II had I not been teaching a course on the council.