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Historical Models

Jesuit Universities as Sanctuaries?

An Interview with John W. Padberg, S.J.

By Julie Hanlon Rubio



John W. Padberg, S.J., spoke on the Society of Jesus after their Restoration in 1814. (Gary Wayne Gilbert) Courtesy of Boston College.

Rubio: For this issue of the magazine the national seminar members wondered: Have Jesuit universities been “sanctuaries for truth and justice” in other challenging times? What can you tell me about St. Louis University?

Padberg: In 1969, with all of the protests around the country, we had a protest here. Some of the alumni wanted the protesters put in jail, but the president refused to do that. Black students were saying that the university was treating them unjustly, didn’t take them seriously, and lacked diversity in its faculty and curriculum. It seemed to bother people here, but it

was a very minor disruption compared to what was going on elsewhere. At nearby Washington University, for instance, students burned down the R.O.T.C. building.

Rubio: What sort of protest was it?

Padberg: Some students occupied Kelly Auditorium and surrounding rooms where large classes met. There were threats to burn down Verhaegen and Dubourg that never materialized. Who knows whether any of the students really intended to do that? Faculty patrolled the buildings 24 hours a day, just in case.

Rubio: How did it end?

Padberg: (University president) Fr. Paul Reinert was calling the shots with a lot of consultation with other administrators and faculty. We set up a committee to talk with the students. One of students said, “You Jesuits! Every time something happens, you have a Mass.” And we did. We had an outdoor Mass in the quadrangle. That calmed down the campus. To put this in context, when faced with student protests at Notre Dame, (President) Fr. Theodore Hesburgh said that students who were involved would be given 15 minutes to stop it, and after that appropriate action would be taken. Some in St. Louis wanted Fr. Reinert to do the same.

Rubio: Why didn’t he?

Padberg: It would have inflamed the campus. We’re an urban campus, in the middle of a city with a large black population. It’s not South Bend.

Rubio: It sounds like the university was responding to protests led by black students who were influenced by the racial justice struggles of the 1960s. But was SLU proactive?

Padberg: Not before these demonstrations. Not in the 1960s. But in 1940s, Reinert was determined to integrate

the place. There was some opposition from Jesuits within the faculty. But there were also strong supporters who were heavyweights. Some in St. Louis were not happy about us taking black students. We lived all too comfortably with segregation then. We attempted to fix this as well as we could. Yet we were as ignorant as any place in the country about how to do that. Archbishop John J. Glennon was the oldest active archbishop in the United States at the time. The university became proactive about recruiting black students. We had to tell him. It was clear that he thought that in justice it ought to be done. But certainly they (black students) would not be involved in social activities – parties, dances, and so forth. He couldn't see that. The university quietly ignored that concern. Glennon was a great man who did an immense amount of good for the archdiocese, but time had passed him by. He didn't understand.

Rubio: Can you think of other times when the university did stand up to social injustice or became a kind of sanctuary, as the UCA Jesuits in El Salvador did in the 1980s?

Padberg: I don't know of any university that declared itself a sanctuary. They would not have wanted police to come on campus. In 2014, SLU President Fred Pestello said, "We say we are a Jesuit university. Let's act like one." Certainly that sentiment was growing in the 1960s. Emerging social concern in the documents of the Jesuits contributed to that sensitivity. The Institute for Social Order was founded here in St. Louis to do something about obvious inequities. We didn't think in terms of sanctuaries. There were proactive Jesuits and other faculty, but they were not the

majority, and they faced strong public opposition. You won't find this place or any other serving as a sanctuary in the 1960s.

Rubio: Why do you think Jesuit universities weren't more proactive?

Padberg: Before Vatican II, the Jesuit novitiate kept Jesuits separate from the world. The U.S. was particularly closed. Religious life was a kind of "leaving the world." As early as 1946 there was explicit acknowledgement in Jesuit documents of social concern as one of vocational duties of Jesuits. But then all of the sudden in the 1960s the publication *The Social Order* started appearing on the desks of each one of us. We were very surprised. Some articles were very critical of society. We wanted to make a commitment to justice education. But in practice, what did that mean?

Does the university stand as some kind of a beacon? Well, yes, in relation to integration. When SLU integrated, Washington University and the University of Missouri were still segregated. We were a beacon. It called people's attention to the social injustice and racial inequality. A number of Jesuits were passionately involved in poor parishes in black communities. This was real but peripheral to life of universities. This was true of every one of our universities. I'd be hard put to name one that was proactive about social concerns, especially racial concerns, even in 1960s.

Rubio: Do you think the response will be different now? Will universities become sanctuaries in a new way?

Padberg: We're much more aware right now of injustice and the idiocy of what's going on, especially on im-

migration. If universities are going to stand for something, they have to stand on that question. Universities have not been sanctuaries the way churches have. Governments are very reluctant to invade churches, but I don't think they would be as reluctant to do it in a university setting. You would need to identify a particular place on the campus (as a sanctuary).

Rubio: Are Jesuit universities called to figure this out? To be more radical?

Padberg: Should we be a university like Ignacio Ellacuria talked about in El Salvador? Yes, but how? Most don't think of the current situation (in the U.S.) as overwhelmingly oppressive. You would lose a lot support of more traditional Catholics. SLU already alienated these Catholics (during the fall of 2014 when protestors occupied the campus). We could do a lot more. But it is a difficult time on this campus. We've just had a lot of layoffs. We'll figure it out as we practice it. In that way, perhaps President Trump will play a role in helping our universities figure out what sanctuary means.

John Padberg, S.J., is former professor of history and Academic Vice President at St. Louis University. He has written extensively on Jesuit education and was the founder of the National Seminar on Jesuit Higher Education.

Julie Hanlon Rubio is professor of Christian ethics at St. Louis University. Her most recent book is Reading, Praying, Living Pope Francis's The Joy of Love: A Faith Formation Guide (Liturgical Press, 2017); it is reviewed on page 48 of this issue and noted on our website.

This interview has been edited for clarity.