

The Shame of the Jesuits

Exclusive: A spotlight has fallen on a shameful chapter in the history of Georgetown University's Jesuits, the 1838 sale of 272 African-Americans into Deep South slavery, but moral lapses didn't end there, says ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern.

By Ray McGovern

Anti-war prophet Rev. Daniel Berrigan, S.J., was onto something with his "hunch" – in his 1987 autobiography, *To Dwell in Peace* – that "the fall of a great enterprise," the Jesuit university, would end up "among those structures whose moral decline and political servitude signalize a larger falling away of the culture itself."

Berrigan, a Jesuit himself, lamented "highly placed" churchmen and their approval of war, "uttered ... with sublime confidence, from on high, from highly placed friendships, and White House connections. Thus compromised, the Christian tradition of nonviolence, as well as the secular boast of disinterested pursuit of truth – these are reduced to bombast, hauled out for formal occasions, believed by no one, practiced by no one."

But that "moral decline" among Jesuit institutions of higher learning may have had deeper roots than even Berrigan understood. One of those deep roots is drawing national attention, an 1838 decision by the Jesuit leaders of the Jesuits' Maryland Province and Georgetown College to improve the school's financial health by selling 272 African-American men, women and children as slaves into the Deep South.

As New York Times writer Rachel L. Swarns described the scene in Sunday's editions, "The human cargo was loaded on ships at a bustling wharf in the nation's capital, destined for the plantations of the Deep South. Some slaves pleaded for rosaries as they were rounded up, praying for deliverance. But on this day, in the fall of 1838, no one was spared: not the 2-month-old baby and her mother, not the field hands, not the shoemaker and not Cornelius Hawkins, who was about 13 years old when he was forced onboard."

Rev. Thomas Mulledy, S.J., the Provincial (head) of the Maryland Jesuits, sold the 272 enslaved African-Americans to Henry Johnson, the former governor of Louisiana, and Louisiana landowner Jesse Batey for \$115,000, the equivalent of \$3.3 million in today's dollars, according to the Times account.

Documents show that \$90,000 went to support the "formation" of Jesuits (the preparation of candidates spiritually, academically and practically for the

ministries that they will be called on to offer the Church and the world); \$17,000 to Georgetown College; and \$8,000 to a pension fund for the archbishop of Baltimore.

There is now a campaign among Georgetown professors, students, alumni and genealogists to discover what happened to those 272 human beings and whether Georgetown can do anything to compensate their descendants.

An Earlier Alert

But there is also a sad back story to this telling slice of Jesuit history, in which I became personally involved after I first learned of this scandal two decades ago from Edward F. Beckett, a young Jesuit who had the courage to speak out and summon his superiors to conscience. Beckett published his research in "Listening to Our History: Inculturation and Jesuit Slaveholding" in the journal *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* (28/5, November 1996).

Beckett and I became friends while working at the Fr. Horace McKenna Center where I volunteered at the overnight shelter for homeless men in the basement of St. Aloysius Church in the shadow of the U.S. Capitol. The Jesuits were quick to exult Rev. Horace McKenna, S.J., as "Apostle of the Poor" after he died, but – while alive – not so much. Fr. McKenna was known for being something of a pain; he once even wrote a letter to the Vatican complaining – using a sports analogy – that his superiors were "not throwing enough forward passes to the poor."

During the Great Depression, Fr. McKenna set up a food distribution system and other assistance to struggling farmers, and advocated vigorously for racial integration in churches and schools. He expressed "passionate impatience" toward go-slow approaches which were favored by some of his fellow Jesuits and priests.

After I got to know Beckett as we worked nights with the men in the St. Aloysius Church shelter, he gave me a copy of his booklet relating the history of how – in the 1800s – the Maryland Jesuits rebuffed ethical calls from other religious leaders who were pushing for the abolition of slavery. Instead, the Jesuits were more interested in how much money they could get for selling slaves.

It was, you see, an economic issue since the Jesuits no longer needed the proceeds from slave labor on their plantations in southern Maryland because they had received permission from Rome to reverse their longstanding tradition of free education and start charging tuition to the wealthy sons of plantation owners to attend Georgetown.

So, no longer needing the slaves to work the fields, the Jesuits decided to sell them into the Deep South to turn a tidy profit and invest the money in the "moral education" of young Jesuits while also providing a pension to the

Baltimore archbishop.

A Chance to Repent

After learning of this history two decades ago, I joined with a small group of activists to ask Maryland Provincial Rev. James R. Stormes, S.J., in effect, to seize a unique opportunity to confess and repent.

We thought our initiative was particularly well timed since President Bill Clinton had announced the appointment of a seven-member advisory board for his initiative on race to promote "a national dialogue on controversial issues surrounding race; to increase our understanding of the history of race relations and the common future people of all races share; to recruit leadership at all levels to help bridge racial divides, and to propose actions to address critical areas such as education, economic opportunity, housing, health care, crime and the administration of justice."

John Hope Franklin, an eminent historian and educator, whose writings included the 1946 landmark study *From Slavery to Freedom*, was appointed chair, and Judith A. Winston was named Executive Director of this "One America Initiative," with a senior staff of national civil rights leaders as senior staff.

As the initiative was getting off the ground, our small, diverse group met with Ms. Winston, herself a graduate of Georgetown University Law School, who was clearly delighted with what we proposed. We told her that we were not about blaming, but rather about acknowledging, apologizing, and reconciling, and said we were approaching then-Georgetown President Rev. Leo O'Donovan, S.J. and Maryland Provincial Stormes as follows:

"We have a vision of Georgetown's most prominent alumnus standing up before the cameras at Georgetown University this spring (1998) and being able to say, in all sincerity, that he has never been prouder of his alma mater and the Jesuits who run it. He might tell a bit of the story of Georgetown's origins and then, jointly with Fr. Stormes and Fr. O'Donovan, announce the establishment of a foundation to promote the education of the descendants of the Jesuits' slaves. President Clinton could then cite this as precisely the kind of action he had hoped would spring forth from his Initiative on Race, and could call upon others to follow the courageous example of the Maryland Jesuits. We think this could be a welcome boost for the President's Initiative."

But our optimism was misplaced. Even though many of us had learned at Jesuit hands about acting in a just way and doing recompense for injustice, we were told that we had no "standing," as what the Jesuits call "externs" or outsiders who have no right to hold them accountable. We still cannot figure out exactly

why the Jesuit leaders were so offended by our initiative and they wouldn't tell us. We were denied an audience with Stormes – and without Stormes's *nihil obstat*, there was no hope for support from O'Donovan.

The final nail in the coffin for our own initiative (as well as Bill Clinton's) came in early 1998 as his trysts with Monica Lewinsky and his lies about them deprived him of any pretense to moral leadership. The whole Initiative died an inconsequential death.

By chance I found myself sitting next to Judith Winston on a plane a few years ago. She saw my name, recognized me, and recalled our ill-fated common effort. Neither of us could do much more than simply shake our heads.

Jesuit Universities

Perhaps even more sadly, the behavior of those Jesuit leaders in 1838 was not entirely an aberration. As Fr. Berrigan noted in this autobiography, Jesuit institutions have often traded ethics for clout, preferring to hobnob with the great and powerful rather than act as moral critics of social wrongs, such as slavery, war and – in recent times – even assassinations and torture.

Among its graduates, Georgetown University churned out CIA Director George Tenet, who offered “slam dunk” deceptions to justify the invasion of Iraq, and Vice President Dick Cheney's torture-excusing lawyer David Addington, who graduated *summa cum laude*.

Nor is Georgetown alone as a Jesuit institution in this dubious position of training people to engage in jesuitical arguments to justify the unjustifiable. My *alma mater*, Fordham, which has forever been trying to be “just like Georgetown,” produced CIA Director John Brennan, an ardent, public supporter of the kidnapping/“rendering” of suspected terrorists to “friendly” Arab intelligence services for interrogation.

Brennan also defended the use of U.S. secret prisons abroad, as well as “enhanced interrogation techniques” (also known as torture).

But Brennan was a big shot in the White House and Fordham's Trustees were susceptible to the “celebrity virus.” So, Fordham President, Rev. Joseph M. McShane, S.J., invited Brennan to give the university commencement address on May 19, 2012, and to be awarded – of all things – a Doctorate of Humane Letters, *honoris causa*.

Several graduating seniors, who were aware of and cared about what Brennan represents, did their best, in vain, to get him dis-invited. They saw scandal in the reality that the violent policies Brennan advocated remain in stark contrast

to the principles that Fordham University was supposed to stand for as a Catholic Jesuit University.

Controversy on campus grew, catalyzed by two protest petitions created by Fordham students and multiple articles in the school newspaper, *The Ram*. Eventually, Fordham senior and organizer, Scott McDonald, requested a meeting with university president McShane to discuss why Fordham's trustees could not be trusted to invite someone more representative of Fordham's core values.

McDonald met with McShane, Vice President Jeffrey Gray and university secretary Margaret Ball, but McShane dismissed Scott's qualms about torture: "We don't live in a black and white world; we live in a gray world."

Then McShane announced that what was said at the meeting was "off the record...not to leave this room." But McDonald had not agreed to that. He left the meeting wondering if the moral theologians at Fordham would agree that torture had now become a "gray area."

We who attended Jesuit institutions decades ago were taught that there was a moral category called "intrinsic evil" – actions that were always wrong, such as torture, rape and slavery. At Fordham, at least, torture seems to have slipped out of that category.

Now that the issue of the 272 slaves has again surfaced, Georgetown University needs to acknowledge its institutional guilt, apologize and find some way to make restitution to the descendants of those African-Americans.

Though clearly whatever is done will fall into the category of way-too-little and way-too-late, confession of this earlier sin might finally put the brakes on the steady moral decline of what once was an important social as well as religious institution – the Jesuit university.

Ray McGovern works with Tell the Word, a publishing arm of the ecumenical Church of the Saviour in inner-city Washington. He graduated from Fordham Prep (just 41 years after Horace McKenna did), earned B.A. and M.A. degrees from Fordham University, and finds it difficult to un-learn what he learned there.

Ray McGovern to Gov. Brown on Prisons

In recent weeks, prisoners in California's over-crowded prison system have been on hunger strikes demanding more humane treatment. This crisis has prompted Jesuit-schooled, former CIA analyst Ray McGovern to write an open letter an appeal for justice to California Gov. Jerry

Brown, who also received Jesuit training.

By Ray McGovern

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Dear Gov. Brown,

I'm thinking that the Jesuits who educated you probably told you, as they did me, that Ignatius of Loyola required all Jesuits, including the highly educated ones, to empty bedpans at local hospitals and prisons on a regular basis.

The current crisis in California prisons brings this to mind and prompts my appeal to you to remember what you and I learned in high school and college in the Fifties. A huge opportunity has been dropped on your doorstep to bring Justice for those in prison.

Ignatius wanted to ensure that his followers in the Society of Jesus would not forsake the society of ordinary, often marginalized, folks like the ones Jesus of Nazareth hung out with.

Ignatius, you may remember, was all too familiar with the kind of suffering and oppression in hospitals and prisons. The bedpan requirement was his way of warning his followers not to trade Jesus's preferential option for the poor for the allure of ivory towers, or for governors' mansions, for that matter.

Let me fast-forward to one of Ignatius's more recent successors, Hans-Peter Kolvenbach, S.J., who led the Society from 1983 to 2008. Like so many Jesuits Kolvenbach was over-educated in the Academy. By the time he became Superior General, though, he had gotten Jesus's main thrust exactly right, saying this:

"Personal involvement with the injustice others suffer is the catalyst for solidarity. This, then, gives rise to intellectual inquiry and moral reflection."

And so did Ignacio Ellacuria, S.J., get it right. Speaking last November on the 21st anniversary of the murder of his six Jesuit colleagues in San Salvador, their housekeeper and her daughter, Ellacuria warned:

"Cuando la situaci3n hist3rica se define en t3rminos de injusticia y opresi3n, no hay amor cristiano sin lucha por la justicia." ["When the historical situation is defined in terms of injustice and oppression, there is no Christian love without a fight for justice."]

Very much in the same tradition is Dean Brackley, S.J., who was a professor at my alma mater, Fordham University, and also a community organizer in my native Bronx. Dean left immediately for El Salvador to replace one of the slain Jesuits, and has been there ever since. Before he left, Dean put his theology in language we Bronxites could readily grasp:

"It all depends on who you think God is, and how God feels when little people get pushed around."

Governor Brown, I believe I know "where you're coming from," as folks say these days. At Fordham Prep and College during the 1950s in the Bronx, I experienced the best of the *Ratio Studiorum* and the college curricula the Jesuits had to offer. You had a similar, if not identical, experience in high school and college in California.

But nothing is perfect. I've since become aware of one earlier misunderstanding. In Moral Theology we were taught that the basic thing to remember was the mandate to "Do good and avoid evil."

Taking refresher courses in theology at Georgetown several years ago, I learned that this formula is only half-right. We are not called to avoid evil; we are called to confront it, in the prison system, and anywhere else injustice reigns.

Again, I think I know where you're coming from, but I cannot say I know where you're going. It's hard to see you now in the same frame with bedpans, the ones at Pelican Bay, for example. This may be metaphor, but it is, I would suggest, a telling one. And I would urge you to reflect on it.

Are you afraid that, if you rise to Kolvenbach's invitation to "personal involvement with the injustice others suffer," this might leave you no option but to act prophetically, and take the political flak? Please don't get tied up in political knots. I'm guessing you still believe that the eventual reward for a prophetic stance will be out of this world, so to speak.

I guess what I am really asking you is to go back to your roots. Pay heed not only to the example of Jesuits like Kolvenbach, Ellacuria and Brackley, but also to Bishop Oscar Romero, who so often repeated to the oppressed Salvadoran people what Jesus repeated with similar frequency: "Don't be afraid." Romero was quite specific in his challenge:

"Hay cristiano hoy en dia significa no temer, no callar por miedo." ["To be a Christian today means not being afraid, not silenced by fear."]

Silence, inaction are not options for followers of Jesus and Ignatius, both of whom mandated preferential concern and care for the marginalized, prisoners, for example.

You are in a unique position to do Justice. Do it, Jerry, *ad majorem Dei gloriam*, *AMDG*, the emblematic Jesuit motto.

In Truth, Justice, and (then) Peace,

Ray McGovern

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The Ecumenical Church of the Saviour

Washington, DC
