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A Conversation with Seattle U Honorary Doctorate Recipient Fr. Thomas Reese, S.J.

Andru Zodrow, Managing Editor

Fr. Thomas Reese, S.J. is a towering figure in Catholic journalism. He was Editor-in-Chief of America Magazine during the late years of the pontificate of St. Pope John Paul II, a columnist for the National Catholic Reporter from 2015 to 2017 and has been writing about the contemporary Church since the mid-1970s. He now writes for the Religion News Service. He is well known for challenging the institutional Church to discern and respond to “the signs of the times” in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council and for his analysis of the Church’s interaction with the wider world.

Seattle University will be rewarding Fr. Reese with an honorary doctorate along with his brother Fr. Edward Reese, S.J. during the 2022 graduate commencement ceremony June 12. The following is the first half of an edited version of an interview with Fr. Reese conducted May 27. The second half of the interview will be posted to The Spectator’s website next week and will be linked here when available.

INTERVIEW:

AZ: You are receiving an honorary doctorate from Seattle University for renowned journalism and scholarship. Could you tell me a bit about how that came about and what it means to you to be receiving it alongside Fr. Edward Reese?

TR: Well, I just got contacted by the university and it was kind of a surprise. They were asking me to come and receive an honorary degree and to give the commencement address. I’m really happy to be honored by Seattle U. It’s a great school and an honor to be able to talk to students.

AZ: And you’ll be receiving that honor alongside Fr. Edward.

TR: Yeah well, you get two for the price of one I guess! Despite the fact that we are brothers, we’re very different, he’s on one side of the continent and I’m on the other, and that’s been pretty much all our lives as Jesuits. He has devoted his life to working with high school kids, first as a teacher, then as an administrator and now as president of Jesuit high schools for a few decades. I’m very proud of what he does—I couldn’t do it. High school is a time where young people are forming their own identity and dependent of their parents, they’re starting to experiment and starting to think for themselves, so the opportunity to guide them during this critical time is, I think, really unique. I have great admiration for people who are in high school work.



Jordie Simpson

The statue of St. Ignatius, located on Seattle University campus.

AZ: At the graduation ceremony in which you'll be receiving that honor, you'll be on stage with Seattle U's first lay president. As vocations to ordained religious life decrease, Jesuit universities have increasingly looked to lay partners in the mission to take leadership roles. Do you think that an increasing amount of lay leadership of Ignatian institutions has the potential to change the character of Jesuit education in the future, and if so, how?

TR: I think there's a good news and bad news aspect of this—the good news is that it shows that Catholic education has succeeded. The Church has trained laity who can step into these roles. The '50s was just the beginning of Catholics getting educated and joining the middle class. We came to this country as poor immigrants and we still have a number of immigrants coming to this country who need educational assistance for upward mobility. But now, large portions of Catholics have reached the middle class and are having an impact on our country. They are not only taking leadership positions in politics and industry, but also in education and the Catholic Church itself.

The decline in vocations is very disappointing to most priests and bishops in the Catholic Church—there may be another way of looking at it, and that is that it's God's way of telling us that we have to declericalize the Church. That this is the age of the laity, that it's time for them to step forward, us to step aside and for them to take their leadership role in the Church. I think that's what's happening in Jesuits schools across the country, especially with more women presidents of Jesuit colleges, universities and high schools. My brother spent twenty years at Brophy Preparatory in Phoenix, Ariz. and he was succeeded by a woman president. Fantastic! So it's a new world.

The caveat on that is that if you look at the Protestant colleges and universities that went from clerical to lay control, the religious aspects of them pretty much disappeared. Most of these Ivy League schools started as religious schools and now they're purely secular. They may have a divinity school connected to them that's over on the edge of the campus, but it's not at the heart of who they are. That's a challenge Jesuit schools are going to face in the decades ahead—can they maintain a Jesuit identity without Jesuits, can they maintain a Catholic identity without the clergy in control? Of course that doesn't mean they're imposing their religion on other people, because our schools often have large amounts of non-Catholic students, but is Catholicism presented in an attractive way, is it presented as an open religion, as an ecumenical one and one sensitive to inter-religious dialogue and conversation?

We believe with Pope Francis that God is a compassionate and loving God and that churches should be field hospitals, not country clubs. We have a moral obligation to be concerned about the poor, oppressed, marginalized, the environment and that protecting children is more important than protecting people's unlimited right to buy any gun. The challenge of Catholic universities is how do you prophetically proclaim your values without appearing to force people to accept as doctrine everything that we say? It's a delicate balance, it's a dance and that's what the Jesuits have tried to do since the Second Vatican Council, and it's what our institutions have to continue to do when we're no longer there. That's really hard because it takes buy-in by administrators, but also by the faculty, students and parents, and that's a free buy-in that you cannot compel. So it's an opportunity, but it's also a challenge.

AZ: Some on the more progressive end of the spectrum in the Church argue that the decline in youth who identify as Catholic and the decline in vocations to religious life are due in part to the poor choices of members of the Church hierarchy, who seem to have generally embraced a set of culture-war values which were most recently exhibited by Archbishop Salvatore Cordileone in San Francisco, Calif. From your perspective as a Jesuit who had personal tussles with more conservative clergy including Cardinal Ratzinger, do you agree that these more conservative tendencies of the two previous papacies before the current Holy Father, as well as the general conservative direction of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, have made the faith less appealing to young people?

TR: It is a complex question. Why is there a decline in vocations? When I entered, my entrance class had almost 50 first-year novices just in California. Now, if on the whole west coast we can get 10 [in a year] we'll be dancing for joy. Of those that enter, they're not all going to stay all the way through, so there's been a real decline. The decline started before John Paul II and Benedict XVI, so you can't blame it all on them. The conservatives will blame it on the Second Vatican Council and say 'if we just stayed in the Church of the 1950s, everything would be fine.' Well I don't think so, in fact I think a lot left because the Church was trying to stay like the Church of the 1950s. If you look at public opinion polls, most Catholics, including conservative Catholics, like Pope Francis. They and non-Catholics love Pope Francis. The difficulty is when people go into a Catholic Church, they don't hear Pope Francis from the pulpit. What they hear is boring or it's a diatribe on some culture war issues that young people aren't interested in and find repugnant.

So you have to get them into Church. When I was growing up in the '50s we thought if we didn't go to Church on Sunday, we were going to go to hell— nobody believes that anymore, so you can't force them into Church. We used to have the highest Church attendance rate in the country, better than Protestant churches. Now Catholics go to Church at a lesser rate than Protestants, mainly because most of the Protestants are evangelicals and tend to go to church. I agree with my liberal friends that much of what the bishops are emphasizing is turning-off young people. On the other hand, if people are leaving us and joining the evangelicals, that doesn't fit with the liberal view of what is happening. The data shows that about half of people who leave the Catholic Church become unchurched, the 'nones,' and the other half become Protestant, two-thirds of which become evangelicals. Well, those people are not leaving the Church for a more liberal experience. I think they are leaving the Church for a more biblical and entertaining religious experience, because one thing you can say about evangelicals is that they aren't boring. The preaching and music are not boring, and they know how to market their Sunday services to the people. Catholic priests have been spoiled because we had a monopoly—you had to come to us for salvation if you were Catholic—no one believes that anymore. We're like the old IBM, if you wanted a computer, you had to come to us. Well, then this thing called Apple came along, and these other Silicon Valley startups came around, and they ran circles around IBM. This is what's happened to the Catholic Church. The evangelicals are much more entrepreneurial. If you can't get people into Church you aren't going to get vocations.

AZ: Does that mean to attract people back to the faith we will need to decenter the Eucharist and start having evangelical-style concerts for masses? Does it mean that the felt banners and guitars of the post-Vatican II era that conservatives so dread are the way to go, and that we should further emphasize a celebratory liturgy? Or is there another way to go?

TR: Christianity has to be enculturated into local culture. We learned that in Asia and in Africa, you can't just impose a European model of what Catholicism is on African or Asian culture. The same thing is true in the U.S., but the U.S. is a multicultural environment. There's not one answer to how we should present Catholicism in the U.S.. You have to look at each congregation and parish, you may have a different kind of mass at 8 a.m., 10 a.m., 12 p.m., 5:30 p.m., 7 p.m. and a different Saturday night vigil, because you've got different kinds of people, especially if you have Hispanic, Vietnamese and Black Catholics in your parish. Each of those populations is going to require a very different kind of ministry and presentation of Catholicism. We're not used to that, we think that one size fits all, and it doesn't, we have to learn that. We train our priests that if they memorize the catechism of the Catholic Church, they will have the answer to every problem that arises in their parish, and they don't. We do not train priests to be creative, we train priests to follow rules, so it's tough. It's especially tough if you limit ordination to celibate men—you've just cut off about 90% of the population for the priesthood! We know that there are lots of married men who would be interested in being priests, we see married men functioning very well in other Christian churches, we know that there are lots of women who would like to minister, and we see that in Protestant churches that women are doing fantastic work as ministers, so we have to look at this situation and say 'is God trying to tell us something here?' He seems to be calling these people to ministry, and the bishops are saying no, and then we're surprised that there are so few priests in the Catholic Church.

The second half of this interview will delve into the nature of contemporary Catholic news media, the future impact of the Church upon American politics and the ongoing Synod on Synodality.