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The Kennedys' Jesuit

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Journalist Thomas Maier's *The Kennedys: America's Emerald Kings*, which chronicles the Kennedys through the lens of their Irish-Catholic roots, received significant press when it was released late last year because of its revealing portrait of Jackie Kennedy's deteriorating mental health in the spring of 1964, after her husband's assassination. Interviews conducted by Maier with a counselor to Jackie reveal her despair at her family's loss. Her husband and her young son Patrick had both died within a few months of each other, and in her depression, she was contemplating suicide. In the crowded field of Kennedy biographies, Maier's book clearly had the magic touch—a nugget of insight from a previously untapped source. Most new Kennedy books have to settle for the travails of a previously unbiographed family member, such as last spring's *Sweet Caroline*, a biography of Caroline Kennedy that offered such delectable gossip as “a spellbinding account of the surreal years she spent as the stepdaughter of Aristotle Onassis” and “the times she, too, cheated death.” Maier's book, on the other hand, holds the trump card: Jackie, whose fame as a style icon nearly eclipse her husband's political career.

The catch is that Maier relied chiefly on discussions with a priest, the late Richard T. McSorley, S.J., a longtime Georgetown Jesuit and peace activist, who told the historian the story of his relationship to Jackie and showed him his annotated correspondence with her and other family members, which he had donated to Lauinger Library. Maier used the material for a chapter in his book, and the research caused such a stir that Maier was featured on several national news programs late last year. In November, University Librarian Artemis Kirk announced that McSorley's letters would be available to the public through the Special Collections room, describing them as a “unique historical window.”

The announcement was met with appeals from Sen. Ted Kennedy (D.-Mass) and others to respect the privacy of Jackie's relationship with her priest, and that outcry was followed by a University announcement that the display of the documents was actually a “one-time event.” The situation has now reached a strange truce. Archivists at Lauinger are combing through McSorley's letters to determine which can be placed in the archives and which contain information that should not be made public. But Maier's book was published in October, and McSorley's recounting of the story is now forever in the public realm. McSorley, however, passed away in late 2002, before all but a handful of people were aware that he had spoken with Maier.

Richard McSorley's connection with Jackie Kennedy was not arbitrary. As a priest active in civil rights campaigns, McSorley had close ties to the Kennedy family before his conversations with Jackie. He was born in Philadelphia on Oct. 2, 1914 into a Catholic family that included 15 children. He was the second oldest. McSorley's upbringing was devout; his family prayed the rosary nightly, he attended Mass every morning with his father at 6:30, and his parents both continuously emphasized the value of a religious life. Eight of their children joined religious orders. In 1932, at age 18, Richard joined the Society of Jesus following a suggestion from his mother that he learn about the Jesuits. After he received his degree in 1939 he was sent to Manila to teach at a Jesuit school.

In December of 1941, McSorley was captured by Japanese forces invading the Philippines, and he spent the duration of the war in an internment camp with other Americans. He survived, and went on to be ordained and assigned to a church in Ridge, Md., where he was confronted with a segregated parish in which blacks and whites worshiped and took communion separately. Years of diligent insistence on the integration of his parish and the surrounding communities brought McSorley fully into the civil rights movement.

That connection eventually helped cement McSorley's relationship with the Kennedy family, which began when he met Robert and Ethel Kennedy in 1961, soon after he began teaching at Georgetown. McSorley had played tennis at seminary, and already knew the University's director of athletics, who asked him to be the tennis coach. McSorley, though surprised, happily agreed. The decision proved fortuitous; a week later, McSorley received a phone call from Ethel Kennedy's secretary, asking if he would teach the Kennedy children tennis.

Tennis lessons quickly expanded to nightly tutoring sessions for Joe and Bobby Jr., the couple's two sons. McSorley eventually became somewhat close with Robert Kennedy though their shared passion for the civil rights movement, and met President Kennedy, his wife and their children.

As the 1960s passed, McSorley maintained ties with the Kennedy family, including his discussions with Jackie following her husband's death in 1963. After Robert was assassinated in 1968, he consoled Robert and Ethel's children, and assisted at the funeral Mass at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York.

Throughout, McSorley continued his involvement with the civil rights movement, marching with Dr. Martin Luther King, sharing a jail cell with Dr. Benjamin Spock (about whom Thomas Maier has also written a biography) and assisting in voter registration drives.

He also continued to teach classes at Georgetown, offering such courses as "War and Peace" and "The Nonviolent Revolution of Peace." His classes were popular, and he gained further notoriety on campus for his unsuccessful attempt to get the Reserve Officer Training Corps removed from the University.

McSorley's involvement in the anti-war movement at Georgetown placed him in the company of Daniel and Philip Berrigan, two priests who received national attention for stealing Selective Service records from the Cantonsville, Md, draft office and burning them in the parking lot while they prayed nearby. In his memoir, written in the early '90s, McSorley recounted being invited to participate in the protest. At the time he was sensitive about losing his teaching post at Georgetown, and argued that he would be a more effective activist if he continued teaching. The Berrigans were unconvinced, and McSorley himself later questioned his reasoning. "Three decades after the event, I have no clear answer," he wrote. McSorley continued to teach at Georgetown until 1985, when he turned 70 and was required by University policy at the time to retire.

It was McSorley's relationship with Bobby Kennedy that originally caused Maier to seek an interview. As Maier began researching for his book, he was pointed to McSorley from three different sources—from Kathleen Kennedy Townsend, then Lieutenant Governor of Maryland, from a Jesuit professor at Fordham University, and from Senator Ted Kennedy's personal assistant. "McSorley was mentioned to me as Bobby Kennedy's family priest," said Maier. "All three of these people mentioned him. And they urged me to talk to him."

Maier first met with McSorley in December of 2000. About ten minutes into their conversation, Maier asked McSorley a question about the aftermath of the assassination.

"I asked, 'Father, did the Kennedy children ever ask you if there is a loving god, why did these awful things happen in their lives?' He paused, and he said the children never asked, but Jackie did. And that took me by complete surprise. I asked him, 'How so?' He proceeded to tell me the story of how at Bobby and Ethel Kennedy's suggestion, he had tennis lessons in the backyard. Under the guise of giving tennis lessons, essentially, he would counsel Jackie."

Those lessons began in April of 1964, five months after the assassination, at the hard court at Bobby's Hickory Hill estate in McLean, Va. Clearly, the best-known part of their recently revealed discussions was Jackie's consideration of suicide in the wake of her husband's death. But their conversations as recounted by McSorley are also interesting for revealing how unfamiliar (or disinterested) Jackie was with her own faith. McSorley answered some very basic questions about Catholic doctrine for Jackie. When she asked, "Do you think I will ever see him again?" McSorley responded by noting the resurrection of the body. "Oh, that's just one of those myths," replied Jackie. "It never really happened. Nobody ever really came back from the dead."

It seems as if their conversations gradually moved away from such topics, towards her regrets about the past—McSorley felt she blamed herself for their marriage's shortcomings—and even towards the future. By the summer, she had decided that for her and her children's health, she needed to leave the memories of Washington and move to New York City. Her correspondence with McSorley continued. He made several visits that fall and winter to their Fifth Avenue apartment, taking John Jr. to the world's fair and answering some of his questions about death.

During Maier's first interview with McSorley, the priest related that he was very concerned at the time for Jackie Kennedy's health.

"One of the first things that McSorley says to me is that he's very aware historically of what had happened to Abraham Lincoln's widow after the assassination." Mary Todd Lincoln lapsed into a lifelong depression after her husband's assassination.

"As he's telling me this story, he's telling me how much he struggled, and he mentioned the papers at the Georgetown library. Of course as a journalist, as an author, for me, documentation is vital. It is essential. So as soon as he mentioned that, I said, 'Well, where are these papers?' He said, 'They're in Lauinger Library at Georgetown.' He made arrangements at the library for me to come down and see these papers."

Later that winter, one of Maier's children had a weekend soccer tournament in Washington, and he came down a day early to visit Lauinger and see the papers, which covered several years of correspondence between Jacqueline Kennedy and McSorley.

Many letters included detailed notes from McSorley. Maier was excited; library staff had read him a few of the letters over the phone, so he "knew that this was really substantial stuff." The visit provided most of the material Maier would use. "There was a level of detail that really made this period come alive. It really provided a window, a real historical window into this extraordinary time in American history," he said.

Maier hoped at the time to meet with McSorley again and record his story on video. However, the rest of his research beckoned, taking him to Ireland and Rome. Meanwhile, in the fall of 2002, McSorley's own health was deteriorating. He died on Oct. 17 in Georgetown University Hospital of coronary artery disease at age 88, having donated his papers to the library. One year later, press coverage of Maier's upcoming book would bring television crews from CNN, 20/20 and CBS Evening News to Lauinger Library to film Maier paging through McSorley's letters.

McSorley's decision to reveal his story to Maier remains somewhat of a mystery. According to Maier, McSorley felt it was appropriate to speak about his relationship with Jackie because of the rich historical importance of their discussions. Certainly, the information's historical value—and its allure for the public—is hard to dispute. But McSorley's right to publish that information is less clear, if it exists at all. Had Jackie's thoughts been revealed to McSorley through confession, Catholic doctrine is quite clear: the bond of the confessional is inviolable. However, McSorley's story as told to Maier indicates that all his discussions with Jackie were over games of tennis. She had shown little interest in attending Mass with her husband, and there is no evidence from McSorley's story that he even once acted as her confessor.

Yet such a technical discussion obscures the natural relationship between priest and parishioner. The relationship is a protected one under the law—a priest cannot be compelled in a court to reveal private information about a parishioner, just as a doctor cannot reveal information about a patient. While priests are not expected to say nothing whatsoever about the people they counsel, Catholics naturally assume that priests will keep sensitive

conversations private. Ironically, Maier himself notes that McSorley served as a counselor to Jackie precisely because of his trusted relationship to the family.

“Bobby knew that Father McSorley, who had been to his house so many times, could be trusted,” Maier wrote in his book. “The family secrets would be safe with him, especially the little-known cracks in the former first lady’s shattered psyche.”

The University’s abrupt about-face, while not enough to keep the research from becoming public, has at least calmed critics. The release of the papers in the first place seems to have been the result of miscommunication between the library and the Jesuit community about McSorley’s papers.

“The library was not aware that the Jesuit community would need to be consulted about access to Rev.. McSorley’s papers,” noted Rev. Brian McDermott, S.J., rector of the Jesuit community. “It appears that McSorley did not inform the library of this.” What remains somewhat puzzling, however, is the time lag in the University’s response. By last fall, Maier’s book had received a great deal of press-the chapter on Jackie and McSorley had even been excerpted in Redbook-but it wasn’t until the library’s press conference in late November announcing the availability of the documents that the Jesuit community contacted the library’s staff about reviewing the material. According to Georgetown Director of Media Relations Laura Cavender, “the library and the Jesuit community are in the process of developing protocols for handling donations to special collections that might come from a Jesuit.”

Perhaps not surprisingly, Maier would like to cast the decision as an attack on academic freedom at a Catholic university.

“I am kind of surprised at least at the way in which the University has responded here,” he said. “I understand, on a human level, the candidness and the emotions involved in these papers, but of course our history, American history, is often written from exactly these kinds of letters and diaries that are contained in special collections. If each of these libraries were to impose, after the fact, retroactive decision making that has been employed here I think the pursuit of history, the academic freedom for researchers that Georgetown itself has signed on to, would be severely hampered.”

Beyond its controversial material about Jackie, Maier’s book contains a remarkable amount of research (with far more historical value) into the enduring connections between the Kennedy clan and the Vatican, information that, had it been public in the late 1950s, would probably have prevented Kennedy from winning the presidency. The book received strong reviews, and, despite Maier’s aim to break down the “Camelot” myth, its account of the Kennedys is extremely positive. Maier himself is back at Newsday, hoping for “at least a little bit of an extended vacation.”

Archivists at the library, meanwhile, are at work on cataloging McSorley’s documents. He left nearly 60 boxes of letters and notes to the library’s Special Collections-by no means the largest donation to a catalog that measures its authors’ works by the linear foot, but a considerable amount of paper nonetheless. The process should take several months, at which point the papers deemed appropriate for public access will be made available, and the rest will be boxed away, never to be seen again.

1 Comment until now



Eric Jon Phelps November 22nd, 2008 (#):

Jesuit Richard McSorley was a conscious conspirator in the assassination of President Kennedy and subsequent cover-up. He is one of the most devious Jesuits ever to disgrace the United States, feigning to comfort Jackie when he was in collusion with his masters at Georgetown University who oversaw the CIA’s executive action. May his name be consigned to infamy—forever!

Eric Jon Phelps

Author, Vatican Assassins: “Wounded In The House Of My Friends”

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