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REFLECTIONS ON THE LIVING TRADITION

## Keeping Faith with the Future

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It is easy to imagine that as Fordham Prep's archivist and school historian, I spend a good deal of the day with my head planted firmly in yesteryear, occasionally emerging from the far recesses of the Prep's literal and metaphoric cellars just long enough to shellac the artefacts of some gilded age [that probably wasn't so gilded in the first place] or to catalogue the minutia of some school year long-forgotten. [Ah, yes, lunch menus from 'Aught Five. Coming right up. Is that 1905 or 2005?].

To be fair: I have made more than one sojourn back to the Fall of 1887,<sup>1</sup> the supposed semester of Fordham's *Rebellio Sciurorum*, or Great Squirrel Rebellion.<sup>2</sup> And, yes: I have spent several evenings perusing 1963, the

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- 1 Also, during the 1886–87 academic year, after nearly a half-century of candles and oil lamps, Fordham students were given the advantage of a new modern convenience: the electric light! In fact, it is possible that Fordham was the first electrified institution in the Bronx. Rather than waiting for the embryonic electrical grid to reach rural Rose Hill, Fr. Thomas Freeman, S.J., who taught science and math on the College level, installed a Weston dynamo electric machine in the basement of Thébaud Hall and the school began to produce its own power.
  - 2 They used to tell a story about a Second Division student, or early Prepster, who was confronted one afternoon by a dray of angry squirrels [great word, *dray*, no?], who were upset with all the construction that had been taking place on Rose Hill in those days. As the tale goes, the agitated rodents naturally demanded Latin homework as tribute from the lad, which he gave fearing for his life, leading to the first utterance in Fordham history of the phrase, “Father, a squirrel ate my Latin homework.”

year that my own Prep Greek teacher, Jack Foley,<sup>3</sup> graduated Alma Mater: a truly fascinating time in school history. And I freely admit that I have intentionally [and fondly] lingered in 1977, the summer that my father took me to see *Star Wars* at the Valentine Theater on Fordham Road—an event in my childhood which impacts the seniors in my comparative mythology classes even today.

Still, in the end [or the beginning?], much of what I do is not really about the past at all. As any half-way decent storyteller can attest: we are all under Scheherazade's spell. Sure, the tales we tell may take place a long time ago (and sometimes in galaxies far, far away), but really, we tell those stories to sustain us in the here-and-now, and, in fact, to ensure our survival—for another day, or another 1,001 nights, or, in Fordham Prep's case, for [at least] another 184 years. [From my keyboard to God's eyes].

And speaking of stories: one from '16. [That's 2016, for those keeping track.]

Early one October morning, just about 20 minutes before homeroom, freshmen J.R. and Michael were sitting in my classroom on their devices deeply engaged in a time-honored Fordham Prep tradition: figuring out when the next day off was coming.

Ah, such fine Maroon-blooded young Rams.

[Kids today! They have it way too easy! Back in our day, we had to find a real calendar and do mental math to determine how far off a holiday was. That's when looking forward to slacking off was real work!]

The pre-schoolday calm of the morning was shattered by J.R. and Michael's shocking discovery: "Um, Mr. DiGiorno, why are there classes on All Saints Day? Don't we get holy days of obligation off? What unCatholic madness is this?!"

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This recount of the *Rebellio* been attributed to one of Fordham Prep's great storytellers and lovers of words, the Rev. Robert G. Cregan, S.J., who served two terms as a Prep faculty member. As a scholastic, Fr. Cregan had taught English and French from September of 1959 through June of 1962, and would return to the Prep in 2002 as a teacher of English and Latin, and also as Faculty Chaplain. Between his two stints at Rose Hill, Father would remain involved with the Prep as a member of the Board of Trustees. During his long career in Jesuit high school education, Cregan would also serve as the president of Canisius High School in Buffalo and taught English at Xavier, Regis, and his own alma mater, Saint Peter's Prep. He passed away in January of 2009, after suffering with lymphoma for many years. Though often in pain, he was active until the very end of his earthly life, teaching, telling his wonderful stories, and tossing sourballs to his students.

3 See the bio of John J. "Jack" Foley on the Fordham Prep Hall of Honor, <https://www.fordhamprep.org/alumni/hall-of-honor/inductees/single-post/~board/hall-of-honor/post/foley>, accessed December 9, 2024.



Figure 1: Thomas Freeman, S.J. with Wimshurst Electrical Machine, 1891.  
Photo courtesy of Fordham University Archives.

So I set about explaining it as Gus had explained it to me—digressions, tangents, asides, and all. By Gus, of course, I mean Mr. August Stellwag '49, longtime Prep librarian and school historian.<sup>4</sup>

It was in the months leading up to his 2010 retirement, that Gus had slowly begun to train me as his replacement. As for how Gus had come to choose Yours Truly as a successor in the first place, now that is quite the tale, indeed! It spans three decades and involves two snake plants from New Rochelle, an arcane *arrosoir*, the vocatives of second declension masculine Latin nouns, and the late Mrs. Louise DiGiorgi, Prep treasurer from the late 1970s through 1994. [Maybe I'll write that up sometime before I

4 August A. "Gus" Stellwag (1931–2019) served as Fordham Prep librarian, archivist, and school historian from 1970–2010. See Stellwag's bio on the Fordham Prep Hall of Honor, <https://www.fordhamprep.org/alumni/hall-of-honor/inductees/single-post/~board/hall-of-honor/post/august-a-gus-stellway-class-of-1949>, accessed December 9, 2024.

retire. “The Accidental Archivist.” Check in around the time of Fordham’s bicentennial, God willing.]

Yes, the master’s training did briefly involve an actual lightsaber [a toy confiscated during the Unauthorized Senior Jedi/Sith Battle of Hallowe’en 2008]. But mostly, it was a slow, careful, and decidedly un-epic wade through over a century and a half of files [and more files, and more files on top of those.] Now as engaging as daily attendance records from 1918 can be [stifled yawn], they were, of course, only a pretense. The real training was listening to the stories that Gus told along the way.

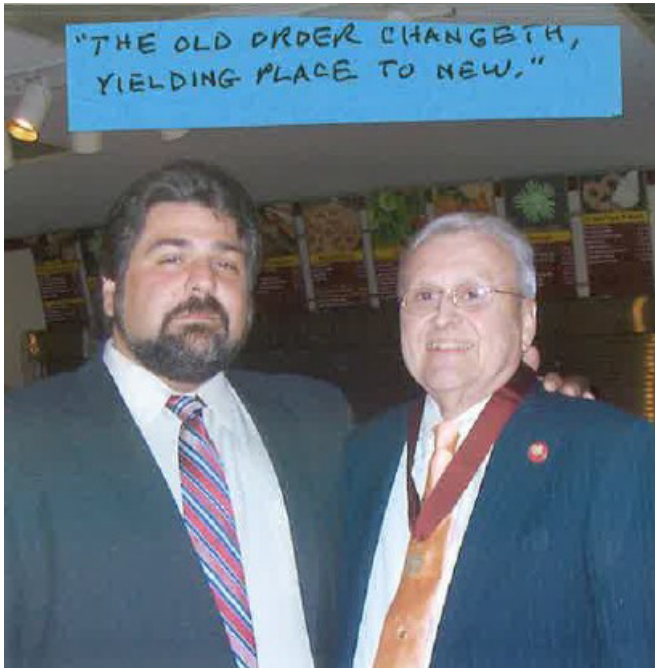


Figure 2: Photo of Louis DiGiorno and Gus Stellwag with manually added captioning from Stellwag himself.

There were stories from the '40s—sometimes the 1940s, sometimes the 1840s, sometimes both at once—and from all the years that came before, and from all the years that came after. They always went the long way around. No reason to rush to the point without taking the metaphoric scenic route.

I listened.

It was May by the time we had gotten through everything, including the contents of the old wooden cabinets in Intermediate Storage. I would never have imagined that we had eyeglasses from the 1800s in our collec-

tion [possibly President Lincoln's backup pair?! Really?!], or that someone had been mindful enough to store the coach's scorebook from Vin Scully's stint as a Prep centerfielder. [Pretty cool, huh?]

On his last day in the Library, Gus left me with a bit of wisdom. I jotted down his advice on an index card that afternoon and it has been in my top desk drawer ever since. It went something like this:

Make no mistake. You don't keep track of the past for the sake of the past. You keep track of it for the sake of the future. Otherwise, the present wouldn't know if it were coming or going! And believe you me, the present always needs as much help as it can get. It needed it then, it needs it now, and it'll still need it when all this is some tomorrow's yesterday. It's very forward-looking and optimistic, this archiving business. It's not all mere sentiment and nostalgia, you know.

Stellwag's estimation of legacy and history as more than simple sentimentality—in fact, as essential to institutional survival—could not be more true when it comes to this apostolate that we call Jesuit education.

Both as a parent and out of professional curiosity, I have been to open houses at high schools of all stripes. Institution after institution, the promise seemed to be fairly similar: they touted what their programs would do for prospective students *in the future*: fantastical college experiences and fabulous careers thereafter—certainly good and worthwhile things; no arguments there.

But while our schools may prepare our students for just such outcomes, this has never been the focus of our mission—not since Messina. Promises for the future just don't cut it.

Rather, what those of us lucky enough to be a part of the mission of Jesuit education know is that the strength of our principles allows us to look squarely into the faces of tomorrow and offer them a yesterday as few other institutions can.

Join us, we might say, and become part of the legacy of a mystical Basque knight who taught us to look everywhere for the Æternal Force that surrounds us and penetrates us and binds everything together: the Living God who calls us all His own sons and daughters and expects us to treat each other as the cosmic heirs we are. Walk with us, we can offer, and become part of a tradition of scholarship and service that the Christian humanist companions of said knight knit into a *Ratio Studiorum*, a comprehensive plan for proceeding, the warp and weft of which continues to be rewoven and strengthened with both new and time-tested threads as the tapestry unfolds.

Moreover, even as Mt. Manresa provides the bedrock upon which our entire educational tradition rests, all of our schools can also boast their own unique and inimitable characters born of the circumstances of history and geography in which they were established and formed—continuities of cultures that must be celebrated and sustained and passed along proudly and intentionally.

Here in the Bronx at Fordham Prep, for instance, my students and colleagues and fellow alums and I are links in a chain that includes our founder, Bishop Hughes,<sup>5</sup> whom they used to call Dagger John [what a story!] on account of his fiery defiance of the anti-Catholic sentiment that was so rife in his day—a faith that does justice, one might call it: part of our institutional DNA.

And then there was the vision of Fr. Patrick Dealy, S.J.,<sup>6</sup> an alum himself, Prep Class of 1846, our first graduating class, who later returned to Rose Hill and took stock of the school as a member of the Faculty and Administration and realized that Dagger John's enterprise would need to adapt to the rapidly changing world of the late 1800s if it were to remain open. Just as crucial, Father understood, Fordham would need to stay true to its character if it were to remain Fordham. Luckily, Paddy from the Class of '46 was able to accomplish both. Talk about keeping faith with the future! [A future which, if you think about it, is technically our now.]

But not if I had ten tongues could I tell of myriad triumphs (and sometimes tragedies) of the thousands upon thousands of young men whose time here has added to the fullness of the Fordham Prep experience under the caring and watchful mentorship of the hundreds of men and women who have served them in various capacities—each one of them a part of the legacy we pass on to the boys we welcome to campus September after September.

This is what we can offer to the future: a past, a story, a history: yesterday as front matter for tomorrow.

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5 See the bio of John J. Hughes, D.D. in the Fordham Prep Hall of Honor, <https://www.fordhamprep.org/alumni/hall-of-honor/inductees/single-post/~board/hall-of-honor/post/pst-rev-john-j-hughes-dd>, accessed December 9, 2024.

6 Patrick F. Dealy, S.J. (1827–91) served as the 13<sup>th</sup> Rector of St. John's College from 1882 to 1885, which would later be renamed Fordham Prep and Fordham University. Dealy was the first alumnus to enter the Society of Jesus as well as the first alumnus to serve in the president/rector role. See Dealy's bio on the Fordham Prep Hall of Honor, <https://www.fordhamprep.org/alumni/hall-of-honor/inductees/single-post/~board/hall-of-honor/post/dealy>, accessed December 9, 2024.

Many of those who have been specifically charged with keeping our school on course for the past eighteen decades—namely the school's rectors, or as we call them today, presidents, Dealy's successors—have understood this well, and have done their parts to make sure the story continues to be told.

As early as the 1880s, with Fordham just approaching its 1891 semi-centenary, Father Rector, the Rev. John Scully, S.J.,<sup>7</sup> saw the importance of taking time to reflect on the still-young school's story theretofore and commissioned the composition of *A History of St. John's College, Fordham, N.Y.*<sup>8</sup> by Thomas Gaffney Taaffe, an 1886 Prep grad who would stay on at Fordham after high school and was working towards his master's degree at the time of the jubilee.

A half-century later, Fr. Robert Gannon,<sup>9</sup> the president of Fordham Prep and University from the late 1930s through the end of Stellwag's high school years, not only kept the school aware of its roots throughout the years of his presidency, but would go on to pen his own history marking the school's 125th anniversary in 1966: *Up to the Present: The Story of Fordham*.<sup>10</sup>

After the 1969 separation from the University and the subsequent move across Campus from Hughes Hall, many of the Prep's connections to its long and storied past were broken, or at least stretched to their limits. With the newly-financially-independent school always just about one missed mortgage payment away from closing its doors forever throughout the 1970s, all eyes were constantly trained on the future, watching and waiting for what would happen next. There was simply not enough energy to be mindful of where we'd come from as well.

For a time, we thought we could pay for survival at the price of our legacy. But it nearly cost us everything. The veterans on the Faculty and Staff—acolytes of that old Hughsian defiance—pushed back. Was it even worth keeping a school open if we didn't know what school it would be?

By the grace of God, with Fordham's sesquicentennial approaching, Fr. Edward Maloney, S.J.,<sup>11</sup> president from 1980 through 1996, saw an op-

7 John Scully, S.J. (1846–1917) served as the 15<sup>th</sup> Rector from 1888 to 1892.

8 See Thomas Gaffney Taaffe, *A History of St. John's College, Fordham, N.Y.*, (New York: Catholic Publication Society Company, 1891).

9 Robert I. Gannon, S.J. (1893–1978) served as President from 1936 to 1949.

10 Robert I. Gannon, S.J., *Up to the Present The Story of Fordham* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1967).

11 Edward Maloney, S.J. (1923–2003) served as President from 1980 to 1996. See Maloney's bio on the Fordham Prep Hall of Honor, <https://www.fordhamprep.org/alumni/hall-of-honor/inductees/single-post/~board/hall-of-honor/post/rev-edward-f-maloney-sj>, accessed December 9, 2024.

portunity to renew the school's ties to its roots, and to reinject a sense of tradition and heritage into the school's culture.

With a nod from the President's Office, Stellwag and longtime member of the History Department, Frank Holbrook,<sup>12</sup> Class of 1945, undertook the task of researching and writing *When September Comes*, the first official history of Fordham Prep, beginning with its origins as the Second Division of St. John's College.

Luckily, Gus had had the foresight to put the 130 years that had come before into mothballs and had stowed it all away in Intermediate Storage for safe keeping. The time had come to bring it all back into the light.

The Long Maroon Line leading all the way back to 1841 would once again be drawn. Fordham Prep would remain Fordham Prep.

Fr. Maloney's successor, Fr. Joseph Parkes, S.J.,<sup>13</sup> continued the work of rebuilding the past for the sake of the future by compiling a comprehensive database of all living Prep alums. These records, too, had been somewhat lost in the separation from the University, and the time had come to reestablish connections with the old boys, and to let them know that they were still part of the Prep family, and always would be.

Archivist Stellwag worked on this project extensively. The fruits of his labors? A good deal of support for the school from unexpected precincts, from alums who were overjoyed to be reconnected to the story. Their support would carry the school into the new millennium. [Now that's straight-up advancement there; not backward-looking at all.]

Moving into the presidency in 2004, Fr. Kenneth Boller, S.J.,<sup>14</sup> would pick up where Parkes left off, expanding the Prep's Hall of Honor and establishing Alumni Hall on the Prep's second floor, where, thanks to the research of the Prep Archives and the extraordinary efforts of Mr. Larry Curran '77, then- director of alumni relations, the names and pictures of every graduate from the Class of 1846 are proudly displayed. As Fr. Boller once remarked, "When you are involved in a school this young, you always have a foot in the past even as we live in the moment and plan for tomorrow."

More recently, celebrating the Prep's dodransbicentennial in 2016, our 35th rector, or president, Fr. Christopher Devron, S.J., also heeded the ex-

12 See the bio of Francis X. "Frank" Holbrook on the Fordham Prep Hall of Honor, <https://www.fordhamprep.org/alumni/hall-of-honor/inductees/single-post/~board/hall-of-honor/post/foley>, accessed December 9, 2024.

13 See the bio of Joseph P. Parkes, S.J. on the Fordham Prep Hall of Honor, <https://www.fordhamprep.org/alumni/hall-of-honor/inductees/single-post/~board/hall-of-honor/post/rev-joseph-p-parkes-sj>, accessed December 9, 2024.

14 See the bio of Kenneth J. Boller, S.J. on the Fordham Prep Hall of Honor, <https://www.fordhamprep.org/alumni/hall-of-honor/inductees/single-post/~board/hall-of-honor/post/rev-kenneth-j-boller-sj>, accessed December 9, 2024.



ample of his predecessors [and the advice of his school historian, I might add]: as he worked to shore up the school's endowment, so too, he built a museum in the entranceway to display Prep artifacts of the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries—not just for the alums who come home for a visit, and not just for the boys of today, so that they might know exactly where they are, but for prospective students, as well. Father President understood that the most astute boys and their families would want to come to Fordham Prep not just for a future, but for a past they would choose to make their own.

Ensuring the legacy, indeed. It's not all mere sentiment and nostalgia, you know.

All of which brings us back to J.R. and Michael, naturally.



Figure 3: Michael Adair (left) and J.R. Coster (right). Photo courtesy and permission from their families.

In getting to the reason behind our non-holiday holydays that morning in 2016, I told stories from the '80s—sometimes the 1980s, sometimes the 1880s, sometimes both at once—and from all the years that came before, and from all the years that came after. We took the long way around. No reason to rush to the point without taking the metaphoric scenic route. But we finally got there, and I explained how our schoolwide Masses on holy days of obligation were actually a nod across the centuries to our days as a boarding school from 1841 to 1920, when there would have been no option but to go to Mass together.

J.R. and Michael listened. The Force was strong with these two. They knew it was their story, too. [Such fine Maroon-blooded young Rams.]

### Further Reading:

“Father Patrick F. Dealy.” *Woodstock Letters* 20, no. 2 (1892): 261–63.

Taafe, Thomas Gaffney. *A History of St. John’s College, Fordham, N.Y.* New York: Catholic Publication Society Company, 1891.

Hassard, John R.G. *Life of the Most Reverend John Hughes, D.D.: First Archbishop of New York with Extracts from his Private Collection.* New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1866.<sup>15</sup>

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15 J.R.G. Hassard was a Fordham Prep alumnus, a member of the Class of 1855. During his time at the Prep he was known for his charm, wit, thoughtfulness, chivalry, unselfishness, and devotion to the spirit of the school, lending his time and talent to many intutional endeavors, including the co-founding of the *Goose Quill*, the first school newspaper. After graduation, he would go on to become the editor of several publications including the *New York Tribune* and *Catholic World* and would serve as the secretary and official biographer to Archbishop John Hughes, the founder of Fordham Prep. All his days, Hassard was known as a passionate defender of Catholicism against religious bigotry and prejudice, a true patriot, and the most loyal of Fordham’s sons.