Relics and Reverent Display: The Case of O'Donnell Hall

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The conversion of O'Donnell Hall, perhaps the most architecturally distinguished building on Lindell Boulevard and the former home of the Graduate School and the School of Public Health, into an art museum has occasioned much comment from the SLU community. The transport of art objects from various other sites on the SLU campus and the installation of two surprisingly abashed and diminutive lions to guard the museum entrance caused many of us to wonder what the role of the new museum in the university community would be. A series of interrelated questions come to mind: What image of the university would the museum project, and how would the objects it contained be displayed and interpreted? How would the museum function as a university institution? What would be its relationship to the cultural life of students, faculty and staff? In what way would it convey a Jesuit identity? A Saint Louis identity? And would it articulate a cohesive and comprehensible aesthetic?

The attention paid to the new museum became more intense when in the spring the media began to report a conflict between the trustees of the Museum of the Western Jesuit Missions in Hazelwood and the Jesuit community of Saint Louis. Newspaper accounts described how historic objects currently housed in the Hazelwood museum were claimed as the property of the Jesuit community, and how the Board of Trustees of the Hazelwood Museum was seeking to retain these objects. At this writing the dispute has escalated into a lawsuit filed by the Jesuit community against the Hazelwood board. By all accounts tempers have been raised, and the struggle for control of the relics in question may go on for a long time.

This essay does not seek to address the question of the rightful ownership of these objects. Nor do I wish to enter into the debate about the possible motives of Father Lawrence Biondi, who is said to be seeking to move the relics to Lindell Boulevard. I am privy neither to court documents nor to the decision making process that led to the current situation, but must merely pause to wonder if these objects could not come to Lindell Boulevard on "permanent loan," a common practice among museums. Instead, I will try to contribute another perspective to the discussion that to my knowledge has not received much attention in the controversy. University presidents, more than most persons, have the potential to leave a personal mark on their surroundings. The dramatic transformation of the SLU campus in the past decade has drawn a wide range of reactions, most of which quite fairly direct their praise or blame to Father Biondi. The assembling of the collection to be housed in O'Donnell Hall certainly reflects the taste and intentions of SLU's president, but the inclusion of Jesuit memorabilia, if it takes place, would also be the most recent manifestation of a heritage of the Jesuits stretching back to their earliest days, that of the collecting and displaying of relics.
Founded in the sixteenth century, the Society of Jesus was from its inception on the front lines, both literally and metaphorically, of the struggle to revitalize a Catholic Church challenged by the Protestant Reformation. Jesuit teachers and missionaries lived and died as witnesses to their faith, and their relics—bones, articles of clothing, or other objects that the had used—were venerated by living members of the Society and by laypersons alike. While the tradition of veneration of relics reaches back to more than a millennium before the establishment of the Society, the Catholic institutional culture promoted by the Council of Trent gave new impetus to this practice. The concrete nature of the relic harmonized well with the physical dimension of Jesuit spirituality, a dimension that glories in dramatic performance, ambitious architecture, public debate and the beauties of nature as expressed by G. M. Hopkins and other Jesuit writers. While relics themselves were not to be made the object of worship, they were the focal point of devotional practices and were believed to work miracles by providing a connection between the seen and concrete and the unseen and divine. Relics of St. Ignatius, it was claimed, could even raise the dead.

Nor did Jesuits limit themselves to the promotion of relics of their own. Jesuit preachers and missionaries fostered many other relic cults, including that of St. John Nepomuk, whose "tongue" (actually a brain fragment), displayed in a jeweled case, was kissed by thousands of pilgrims until it turned black. Wherever possible these physical manifestations of mortal virtue and piety were displayed for the edification of the masses, with Jesuits at hand to provide an interpretation of the meaning of the object.

Cut to 2002, St. Louis. The Jesuits, like other Catholic orders, have been experiencing a dramatic decline in vocations over the past few decades. In recent years Saint Louis University has also seen the passing of many older Jesuits who have helped define what this place is. Relatively few younger Jesuits are waiting in the wings to continue this role, while the official organs of the university proclaim endlessly, and it sometimes seems with an increased volume but with decreased precision, that we are a Jesuit university. The practical day-to-day implications of being a "Jesuit university" are often opaque and elusive. We seem committed to preserving our Jesuit heritage, but not always certain what aspects of this heritage we will retain. We speak of Jesuit service to others, but not always with the nuance that acknowledges that the "other" was sometimes a prince, and sometimes a peasant. We make much of the historic Jesuit interaction with non-European cultures without understanding many of the dynamics of this interaction. We memorialize famous Jesuits without much reflection on who they really were. A visitor to campus, unschooled in Jesuit lore, after passing Fusz Hall might conclude that Father DeSmet was a wasp waisted youth with very high cheekbones who liked to strike operatic poses while evangelizing Native Americans dressed for war. In reality DeSmet was a solid and stolid middle aged Belgian whose relations with the Plains tribes were characterized not by arrogant grandstanding but by a profound understanding of their own cultures.

In Slovakia, in a town called Trnava, is a church filled with mementos of the time when Trnava was the home to one of the most important Jesuit universities in Europe. In a place of honor in the church are two piles of human bones, a skull topping each. These
bone piles, gently veiled with gauze like the face of a bride, are the relic displays of two Jesuits who were killed in a failed attempt to return neighboring Transylvania to the Catholic Church. The cult of relics turned this defeat into a triumph to be recalled and retold for years to come, thereby shaping the self-image of the Jesuit community of Trnava as well as clarifying the sense of mission of hundreds of priests trained at the university. What to us might seem merely macabre was in the seventeenth century the expression of an aesthetic that used the starkly physical and broken to point beyond to the spiritual and the perfect. Through the collecting, assembling and displaying of relics death, to use St. Paul's phrase, is swallowed up in a victory that defines and guides the institution that displays the relics. Such a victory has considerable potency and power, and once put in place, is not easily altered.

If display and interpretation is to be the fate of the relics of DeSmet and other early Jesuits, we must take care in how this display and interpretation is undertaken, especially if the new museum ends up being the shrine to the founding personalities and principles of our university. We should ask, Is this representation the result of responsible historical scholarship? Can it inform the uninformed with regard to things Jesuit (i.e., most of us) about the nature of the university where we work? And finally and most importantly, What will we do with what we have learned from the display? For we are destined to be the first generation of educators in a mostly post-Jesuit SLU, and how we choose to interpret our heritage will have repercussions for many years to come.