

2002

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Recommended Citation

Joseph A. O'Hare S.J., *A Dean for All Seasons*, 70 Fordham L. Rev. 2185 (2002).
Available at: <http://ir.lawnet.fordham.edu/flr/vol70/iss6/11>

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A DEAN FOR ALL SEASONS

Joseph A. O'Hare, S.J.*

The twenty years of John D. Feerick's leadership as Dean of Fordham's School of Law will be judged by history to have been not simply a period of progress but a time of transformation. Fordham's School of Law is a different place, in terms of its resources and aspirations, than it was twenty years ago, and this is, in large measure, the result of Dean Feerick's success as an indefatigable fund-raiser, even while he recruited an ever more distinguished faculty and served as a role model and mentor for generations of young Fordham lawyers.

For eighteen of these years, it has been my privilege to work with John, and I welcome the opportunity to thank him on behalf of the entire Fordham University community for the historic contribution he has made not only to the development of our Law School but also to the renewal of the mission of the University in this, its 160th year. On a personal note, I look back with fondness on what can only be called the adventures we have shared on the golf course during the Mulligan Tournament in July and the many times we have walked up Fifth Avenue together at the head of the Fordham contingent in the St. Patrick's Day parade, with John, on occasion, steering a stroller carrying one of his grandsons.

We are all familiar with Dean Feerick's practice, in paying tribute to an alumnus, of reading from the individual's original application to Fordham's School of Law. As Dean Feerick prepares to retire from his office, I could not resist the temptation to consult John's own file to see how he defined his aspirations when, as a senior at Fordham College in 1958, he filled out the application to the Fordham University School of Law, located at 302 Broadway, all answers to be written by the applicant "in his own *handwriting* and in *ink*."

At the age of 21, John David Feerick identified three qualities as essential for a successful lawyer, intellectual competence, interest and perseverance and, finally, character, which he described as "respect for others" and "high moral principles—principles that are not easily sacrificed." In rating himself according to these three criteria, John concluded his application by stating that he possessed the necessary "intellectual abilities to an extent"; that he had the necessary

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“interest, diligence and perseverance to a greater extent”; and that he possessed the necessary “character to an even greater extent.”

In looking back over the past four decades of John’s legal career, most observers, I think, would conclude, after considering his contributions to the law, including his magisterial work on the 25th Amendment, that he may have underestimated his own intellectual gifts on that application. But it is certainly true that the foundation for the great respect with which John is held in the legal profession is the uncompromising integrity that is the defining mark of his career as a labor lawyer and mediator, educator and scholar, public servant and Jesuit collaborator.

We are all familiar with John’s work as Chairman of the New York State Commission on Integrity in Government; his leadership as President of the New York City Association of the Bar, only the second law school Dean to be so honored, as well as the unusual confidence placed in his mediating skills by both the owners and the players of the National Basketball Association. Many of you know better than I the many times he has been honored, in both formal and informal manner, by the legal profession on both the regional and national level.

I would like to address a dimension of John Feerick’s leadership that may not be as readily recognized by his many friends and colleagues in the legal community but is, in my judgment, an important source of John’s defining commitments. I refer to Dean Feerick’s own sense of his collaboration in the Jesuit mission of Fordham University.

More than once in recent years, as John and I would meet at the end of the year to discuss his plans for the future, he has told me that his decision to leave Skadden, Arps and accept the Deanship of our Law School was greatly influenced by a conversation with my predecessor, the late Father Jim Finlay, who urged John in 1981 to accept the invitation of the Search Committee that was looking for a candidate to succeed Dean Joe McLaughlin. John has told me that he saw this as an opportunity to contribute to the work of the Jesuits at Fordham, his alma mater for both his undergraduate and law degrees.

Today American Jesuits talk frequently about the need to work with other colleagues in advancing the apostolic mission of our Order, whether in educational institutions or on a number of other fronts where the service of faith and the promotion of justice are pursued. Since, as John Cogley once wrote, every little movement has a Jesuit all its own, I expect that different Jesuits have different ideas about what a model Jesuit collaborator should be. Some, I suspect, may look for a loyal listener and docile disciple. My own model for such collaboration would be John Feerick, whose independence of mind, manifested from time to time in discussions about the University budget, would never let him become a church mouse or faithful

acolyte, but whose deep commitment to the Jesuit mission of faith and justice has defined his leadership of a school that has very deliberately dedicated itself to “the service of others.”

John has received and will receive many honors, including an honorary doctorate from Fordham University at this May’s Commencement. On the occasion of the annual Law Alumni Luncheon on March 2, 2002, it was my privilege to present John with a more particular symbol of the gratitude and admiration of the Jesuits at Fordham, past, present and to come: Fordham University’s Insignis Medal. First awarded in 1955, the Medal evokes the aspirations of Ignatius of Loyola, Spanish nobleman, courageous knight and founder of the Society of Jesus: the Jesuit Order. Insignis is a term that connotes for Jesuits the distinctive experience of the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius. It stands for a disposition of soul, a fundamental attitude that the pedagogy of the Exercises seeks to evoke in those who submit to its discipline. Insignis is not so much about concrete achievements and specific deeds, but something more profound and more elusive: a spirit that can have different names: magnanimity or great-heartedness, a generosity of spirit, a commitment that goes beyond calculation, a restlessness that seeks always what is the greater glory of God, not satisfied with what is but imagining always what could be and should be, daring to dream of great deeds done for God’s Kingdom, understood as the possibilities of the human person, for the human person fully alive, the Fathers of the Church told us, was the greatest glory of God.

I believe all of these terms, “great heartedness, magnanimity, insignis,” describe more fully not only what young John David Feerick called “character,” when he applied to Fordham Law School forty-two years ago, but also the singular way in which he has pursued his vocation in all the years since. With deep gratitude for his service to God’s people and Fordham University, it was my privilege to present the Dean with the Insignis Medal, inscribed to John David Feerick, A Dean for All Seasons, March 2, 2002.

Notes & Observations