

## **“Harvard and Catholic ... are not incompatible”: Father William Porras’ Chaplaincy at Harvard University, 1954–1960**

*Federico M. Requena*

*In 1954, five years after the outbreak of the crisis involving Father Leonard Feeney and the St. Benedict Center, Boston Archbishop Richard J. Cushing appointed Father William Porras, a priest of Opus Dei, as chaplain to the Harvard Catholic Club. Throughout the six years of his chaplaincy (1954–1960), Father Porras fostered an active and integrated Catholic presence at Harvard and combated Catholicism’s perceived isolation. His initiatives were instrumental in bringing about the regular celebration of Mass on campus and the inauguration of the Charles Chauncey Stillman Chair of Catholic Studies, the birth of the magazine Current, and the beginning of more cordial relations between Harvard and the Boston Archdiocese. The study of Father Porras’ ministry in light of Father Feeney’s approach offers insights into the relationship between American Catholicism and secularization in the period prior to the Second Vatican Council.*

*Keywords:* Harvard University; St. Benedict Center; Harvard Catholic Club; Opus Dei; Porras, William; Feeney, Leonard; Cushing, Archbishop Richard J.

**T**he rapid growth of American Catholic higher education in the years following the Second World War is well-documented amidst the era’s educational expansion. With additional opportunities for Catholic education, Catholics, in the years immediately prior to the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), questioned whether they could attend non-Catholic institutions of higher learning or whether such schools represented spiritual and moral dangers to Catholics. This discussion, dating back decades, has been framed as an American Catholic dilemma, the necessity of choosing between “isolation” and “assimilation.”<sup>1</sup>

---

1. An exposition of this debate is beyond the scope of this article. See Philip Gleason, *Contending with Modernity: Catholic Higher Education in the Twentieth Century* (New York:

The attendance of Catholic students at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, near Boston, highlighted the difficulty. Father Leonard Feeney (1897–1978), chaplain to the St. Benedict Center—a Catholic student center located in Harvard Square—showed a strong isolationist tendency in guiding Catholic students at Harvard. He worked to create a separate cultural and social environment for Catholics at Harvard, while praising Catholics who, ostensibly to keep their faith, refused to attend Harvard because it was a secularized school.<sup>2</sup>

In 1954, five years after the outbreak of the crisis which pitted Feeney against his religious superiors and the Archdiocese of Boston (leading ultimately to his excommunication), Boston Archbishop Richard J. Cushing appointed Father William Porras (1917–1988), a priest of Opus Dei, as chaplain of the Harvard Catholic Club. Porras, unlike Feeney, was convinced that a Catholic could attend Harvard without fear of being absorbed by its secularized surroundings.<sup>3</sup>

---

Oxford University Press, 1995); Patrick J. Hayes, *A Catholic Brain Trust: The History of the Catholic Commission on Intellectual and Cultural Affairs, 1945–1965* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011). The latter describes in detail the discussion concerning Thomas F. O’Dea’s *American Catholic Dilemma* (1958). For more on the debate between “isolation” and “assimilation,” see Federico M. Requena, “The Impact of the Second Vatican Council on United States Catholic Historiography,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 33, no. 2 (Spring 2015): 103–132.

2. Mary Clare Vincent, *Keeping the Faith at Harvard: A Memoir* (Patersham, MA: St. Bede’s Publications, 2010), 16; see also Catherine Goddard Clarke, *The Loyolas and the Cabots, the Story of the Boston Heresy Case* (Richmond, NH: Saint Benedict Center, 1950); Gary Potter, *After the Boston Heresy Case* (Monrovia, CA: Catholic Treasures, 1995); George B. Pepper, *The Boston Heresy Case in View of the Secularization of Religion: A Case Study in the Sociology of Religion* (Lewiston, NY: E. Mellen Press, 1988); Jeffrey Wills, *The Catholics of Harvard Square* (Patersham, MA: St. Bede’s Publications, 1993), 93–95; James M. O’Toole, *The Faithful: A History of Catholics in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 254–255; and Patrick W. Carey, “Avery Dulles, St. Benedict’s Center, and No Salvation outside the Church, 1940–1953,” *Catholic Historical Review* 93, no. 3 (July 2007): 553–575.

3. Porras does not appear frequently in the literature about Harvard University except for brief mentions in Wills, *The Catholics of Harvard Square*, 95–96; and George H. Williams, *Divinings: Religion at Harvard from its Origins in New England Ecclesiastical History to the 175th Anniversary of the Harvard Divinity School, 1636–1992* (Göttingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), 286–287. Three accounts of the Harvard Catholic Club preserved in the Harvard University Archives mention him briefly. See Harvard-Radcliffe Catholic Club, formerly St. Paul’s Catholic Club, HUD 3762.5000, general folder, Archives of Harvard University.

The sources for this article are principally the Archives of Harvard University (HUA), the Archives of the Archdiocese of Boston (AAB) and the General Archives of the Prelature of Opus Dei, Rome (AGP). There is an abundant amount of documentation on the Catholic Club in the Archives of the Boston Archdiocese: St. Paul’s Parish, Cambridge, MA, Harvard-Radcliffe Catholic Student Center, Records, 1940–1995, box 1.

An extensive account of Porras’ chaplaincy at Harvard, written in Spanish, is Federico M. Requena, “Fr. William Porras, un capellán católico en la Universidad de Harvard (1954–1960),” *Studia et Documenta: Rivista dell’Istituto Storico san Josemaría Escrivá* 12 (2018): 317–380.

This study of Father Porras' ministry at Harvard from 1954 to 1960, in comparison to the approach of Father Feeney, offers insights into the relationship between American Catholicism and secularization in the period prior to the Second Vatican Council.

### Father Feeney and the Crisis at the St. Benedict Center

The controversy that surrounded Father Feeney and the St. Benedict Center has been viewed as an encounter between traditional faith and secularization. George B. Pepper in a study from the 1980s defined the encounter as a reaction to the Church's moving away from the ideals of a religious past to the realities of a secular present. Pepper situated Feeney in this broader context, shunning a simplistic interpretation while admitting that behind Feeney's extreme positions one can see the decline of the experiment of an "integrally Catholic culture."<sup>4</sup>

The project to create a Catholic culture had attempted to show the compatibility between Catholicism and American culture during the end of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. At the end of the 1940s and beginning of the 1950s—from the time that Catholics ceased to be a marginalized minority in the social, political and economic life of the country—one can see the difficulties of putting Feeney's model into practice, "a separatist, isolated Catholic community, a virtual counter society."<sup>5</sup>

While a full discussion of Father Feeney's work at St. Benedict Center is beyond the scope of this article, a summary of the evolution of the St. Benedict Center and Feeney's relation to the students at Harvard will help establish a point of comparison with the figure and vision of Father Porras as Harvard chaplain. The St. Benedict Center arose in 1941 as an initiative of some students and faculty members at Harvard, assisted by the efforts of Catherine Clarke who operated the nearby St. Thomas More Bookstore. From the beginning, it enjoyed the approval of Father Augustine F. Hickey, the pastor of nearby St. Paul Parish, and of the chaplain of the Harvard Catholic Club, Father Francis J. Green. The center was situated across the street from the parish and included a conference room, space for discussion groups, and a library.<sup>6</sup>

In 1942 Father Feeney, then forty-five years old, became active at the St. Benedict Center. After ten years of teaching at Boston College, he was at the

---

4. Pepper, *The Boston Heresy Case*, 82, 84–85.

5. Pepper, *The Boston Heresy Case*, 82–83; quote at 83.

6. For a history of the St. Benedict Center beyond the anecdotal, see Pepper, *The Boston Heresy Case*, 1–64. An abbreviated version can be found in Wills, *The Catholics of Harvard Square*, 95–96.

height of his literary and academic career. Known as a charismatic speaker who attracted large crowds, Feeney taped radio broadcasts, wrote best-selling books, and authored poetry which became mandatory reading in parochial schools. In 1945 Feeney was named full-time chaplain of the St. Benedict Center and soon became its recognized leader: its heart and soul.

The future Cardinal Avery Dulles (1918–2008), a Harvard student and a pioneer of the St. Benedict Center, recalled the atmosphere of the center during Feeney’s early years before the crisis erupted: “Thursday nights were special, because they were reserved for Father Feeney’s weekly lectures on theology. The Center was vastly overcrowded that night, with people on the street leaning into the doors and windows. By the summer of 1946 the Center was a beehive of activity. Scores of students became converts to Catholicism, and many others, who had drifted away, returned to Catholic practice.”<sup>7</sup>

Throughout 1947 Father Feeney and those who frequented the center began to lay a heavy stress on what they saw as an incompatibility between the Catholic faith and the increasingly secularized American culture. On the theological level they propagated an extreme, literal interpretation of the Church’s teaching: “*extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*” (“outside the Church there is no salvation”). Thus, according to Dulles’s memories, “the atmosphere changed and the St. Benedict Center got into conflicts with Harvard, then with the Jesuit Provincial, and finally with Rome and the archbishop.”<sup>8</sup>

Archbishop Cushing, who had been a high school classmate of Feeney, had tried to resolve the situation without resorting to extreme means, but this became impossible. In 1949 after Father Feeney refused to accept the directives of his religious superiors in Boston, he was expelled from the Society of Jesus and forbidden to teach. Ultimately, the ensuing controversy, which some have dubbed the “Boston Heresy Case,” became the occasion for a consultation between the Holy See and the Archbishop of Boston.<sup>9</sup>

These events created a crisis among some Catholic Harvard students. In the words of former Harvard chaplain Father Green: “a somewhat personal and overzealous atmosphere arose in which students were encouraged to leave Non-Catholic Universities.”<sup>10</sup> This approach was confirmed by one of

---

7. Wills, *The Catholics of Harvard*, 123–124.

8. Wills, *The Catholics of Harvard*, 124.

9. In 1953, the Holy See excommunicated Feeney. St. Benedict Center carried on its activities for some years in Cambridge until 1958 when Feeney and a small group of his followers who called themselves the Slaves of the Immaculate Heart of Mary moved to a nearby location. Father Feeney was reconciled to the Catholic Church in 1972.

10. Wills, *The Catholics of Harvard*, 94.

Feeney's collaborators: "As student after student made the decision to resign from college—giving frankly in his resignation to the college his reason for doing so—Father [Feeney] was tremendously proud of them."<sup>11</sup>

After the outbreak of the crisis at the St. Benedict Center, two priests who enjoyed the greatest trust of Archbishop Cushing successively led the Harvard Catholic Club: Father Lawrence J. Riley (1950–1952), who at the time of the appointment was Cushing's secretary and served on the faculty of St. John's Seminary; and Father Vincent McQuade, O.S.A. (1952–1954), founding president of Merrimack College, in Andover, Massachusetts. These were provisional solutions because neither was able to dedicate much time to the Harvard chaplaincy. It was in this context that in October 1954 Archbishop Cushing appointed Porras as chaplain.<sup>12</sup>

### Father Porras Before Harvard

Guillermo Jesus Porras Muñoz was born in El Paso, Texas on July 22, 1917, and was baptized a few months later in Sacred Heart Church in that city.<sup>13</sup> His parents were from the state of Chihuahua, Mexico and the family returned there when young Guillermo was in high school. He finished high school at the Instituto Científico y Literario operated by the Jesuits in Chihuahua. His later studies took place in non-Catholic institutions, generally of a secular bent. Once he had finished high school, he obtained a law degree from the Escuela Libre de Derecho in Mexico City. At the same time, his interest in history led him to take part in humanities studies at the Colegio de México and the National Autonomous University of Mexico. Between 1944 and 1946, he published articles on Mexican history in the *Revista Chihuahua* and the *Boletín de la Sociedad Chihuahuense de Estudios Históricos*.<sup>14</sup>

In 1946, Porras was awarded a scholarship from the Instituto de Cultura Hispánica and moved to Spain. He carried out research in various archives,

---

11. Clarke, *The Loyolas and the Cabots*, 61. Sister Mary Clare Vincent recalled, "(Feeney) asked her (Catherine Clarke) do you think, then, that Catholics should not go to Harvard? She answered; I don't think anyone should go to Harvard. He was delighted with her answer." Vincent, *Keeping the Faith at Harvard*, 16.

12. See Wills, *The Catholics of Harvard*, 205.

13. Record of priestly ordination, series E.1.7. leg. 74, carp. 2, AGP. See also "Porras Muñoz Guillermo," *Diccionario Porrúa de Historia, Biografía y Geografía de México*, vol. III (Editorial Porrúa, S. A., México 1995), 2771, and Rubén Rodríguez Balderas, "Guillermo Porras Muñoz (1917–1988), a los 20 Años de su fallecimiento. Breve semblanza de un connotado historiador," *Historia Desconocida: Libro Anual de la Sociedad Mexicana de Historia Eclesiástica* (México, 2008), 272–280.

14. Alfonso Martínez Rosales, "Don Guillermo Porras Muñoz, 1917–1988," *Historia Mexicana* 38 (1988): 171–172.

including the National Archives of Spain, the Archivo de Indias, and the Archive of Simancas. His humanities studies culminated in earning a doctorate in history from the University of Seville.<sup>15</sup>

While in Spain, he met several persons who belonged to Opus Dei, and who were also involved in research on Latin American history. He was attracted to this Catholic organization, which consists primarily of laypersons, but also priests, and which proposed to him the goal of seeking Christian perfection in the middle of the world through the sanctification or professional work, contributing in this way to the evangelizing mission of the Church. In July 1947, Porrás joined Opus Dei.<sup>16</sup>

After finishing studies in theology, he became a priest of Opus Dei and was ordained in 1951. The founder of Opus Dei, Josemaría Escrivá, asked Father Porrás to help its development in the United States, which had begun two years earlier.<sup>17</sup> Father Porrás arrived in Chicago in August 1951 as chaplain of the Opus Dei student residence, Woodlawn Residence, near the University of Chicago. From the time he arrived in the U.S., he took the name of William and was known as Father Bill. A year later, he moved to Boston, where he helped start a new Opus Dei student residence, Trimount House. He contacted Archbishop Cushing shortly after arriving and periodically informed him about his work with college students. For example, in June 1954, Father Porrás informed him of “the [spiritual] development we are seeing.” “I told him,” Porrás continued, “about the days of recollection we have organized and also about the young man from Harvard who made his First Communion.”<sup>18</sup> In October 1954, Archbishop Cushing came to bless the chapel of Trimount House, and to take part in the residence’s official opening. It was during the inauguration of the residence that Cushing proposed to Father Porrás that he become Harvard’s chaplain.<sup>19</sup>

---

15. Porrás wrote a dissertation about *El gobierno y Capitanía General de la Nueva Vizcaya*, under the supervision of professor Antonio Muro Orejón.

16. Porrás to Josemaría Escrivá, July 25, 1947, series M.1.1. 233-B1, AGP. For an historical introduction to Opus Dei, see John F. Coverdale, *Uncommon Faith: The Early Years of Opus Dei, 1928–1943* (Princeton, NJ: Scepter, 2002).

17. José Luis Múzquiz to Escrivá, January 2, 1951, series M.1.1. 1141-B01, AGP. Concerning the beginnings of Opus Dei in the U.S., see Federico M. Requena, “We Find our Sanctity in the Middle of the World’: Father José Luis Múzquiz and the Beginnings of Opus Dei in the United States, 1949–1961,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 32 (2014), 101–124, and John F. Coverdale, *Putting Down Roots: Father Joseph Múzquiz and the Growth of Opus Dei, 1912–1983* (New York: Scepter, 2009).

18. Notes of Porrás, June 15, 1954, series M 1.1. 1147-B1, AGP.

19. The events that led to this appointment can be found in Requena, “Fr. William Porrás.”

## The New Chaplain's Vision

Father Porras quickly went to work mobilizing small groups of students and forming them spiritually and intellectually to impact the university community.<sup>20</sup> In doing so, he worked closely with Cushing. During his first year as chaplain, he met with him four times, informing him about his projects and asking his advice. He kept up this same rhythm of appointments in the following years.<sup>21</sup> Cushing supported the new chaplain's vision. "He said," Father Porras noted, in reference to Cushing, "the idea of small groups is very good. The Club has been run like a Holy Name Society trying to get everybody there which is impossible and has failed. Small groups of lay apostles may work."<sup>22</sup> Porras avoided appearing as the representative of Catholics at Harvard and fostered an increased sense of responsibility of the students themselves in making Catholicism present on campus.

It seems that Father Porras was able to transmit his vision of the lay apostolate to the members of the Harvard Catholic Club. In the article, "Lay apostolate on the secular campus," written by one of the Catholic club members, Robert Derro, the author wrote: "There is on the campus today a great opportunity for the development and practice of this type of active faith. . . . The results of lay apostolate, although often not noticeable, are certainly the most effective."<sup>23</sup>

The new chaplain's vision can also be clearly found in a letter sent to Father John McCabe, an American priest living in Rome who was then writing his doctoral thesis on the danger of non-Catholic colleges for Catholic students.<sup>24</sup> "I believe," Porras wrote to McCabe, "that secular colleges are a fertile field of apostolate for true Catholic young men and women." He continued,

There is always a number of converts (and also a number of vocations). The danger is to have Catholics with very little formation come here; they are influenced by the environment instead of being an influence on

---

20. "I considered it impractical to try to contact each student individually, and have concentrated my efforts in training leaders who could be—and have been—an influence not only on other students but on the environment itself." See Report (1954–1958), 1 (see note below).

21. Besides the information that Father Porras gave the bishop by word of mouth, he also sent written reports. See Report on Catholic Activities at Harvard University 1954–1958, (Rev.) William M. Porras, Chaplain, Catholic Activities at Harvard University, Chancery Office, at M-1322, AAB. There are also other reports from the 1958–1959 and 1959–1960 academic years. Henceforth we will quote them as Report, followed by the corresponding years in parentheses and the page number.

22. Notes of Porras, Boston, November 30, 1954, series M.1.1, 1146-B4, AGP.

23. Robert Derro, "Lay apostolate on the secular campus," *Current* (February 1956): 4.

24. John McCabe to Porras, May 13, 1955, Corr. Fr. Porras officers, 1954–1955, St. Paul's Parish, box 1, AAB.



**Father William Porras at Trimount House, 1954 (Courtesy of the General Archives of the Prelature of Opus Dei, Rome).**

it. The solution as I see it and try to give it, is to help toward their spiritual development, encourage their apostolate, make them active Catholics; then if they get into trouble they have adequate means to overcome it. Any Catholic is apt to lose his faith if he lacks spirituality and lives in a non-Catholic environment, whether it be a college, an office or digging ditches.<sup>25</sup>

This vision led Father Porras to establish a robust spiritual program for students, encouraging the students themselves to transform the university culture.

### **A Spiritual Program for the Harvard Catholic Club**

Father Porras was convinced that the key to helping lay Catholics exert a positive influence on the campus' secularized atmosphere was "spiritual development, encourag[ing] their apostolate, make[ing] them active Catholics."<sup>26</sup> For Porras, spiritual development meant seeking Christian holiness according to one's state in life. The students who sought the chaplain's counsel frequently heard Josemaría Escrivá's advice: "Your duty is to

---

25. Porras to McCabe, June 9, 1955, Corr. Fr Porras officers, 1954–1955, St. Paul's Parish, box 1, AAB.

26. Porras to McCabe, June 9, 1955, Corr. Fr Porras officers, 1954–1955, St. Paul's Parish, box 1, AAB.



sanctify yourself. Yes, even you. Who thinks that this task is only for priests and religious? To everyone, without exception, our Lord said: 'Be ye perfect, as my heavenly Father is perfect.'"<sup>27</sup> "An hour of study, for a modern apostle, is an hour of prayer."<sup>28</sup> "Student: form yourself in a solid and active piety, be outstanding in study, have a strong desire for the 'professional' apostolate. And with that vigor of your religious and professional training, I promise you rapid and far-reaching developments."<sup>29</sup> "You have got to be a 'man of God,' a man of interior life, a man of prayer and sacrifice. Your apostolate must be the overflow of your life 'within.'"<sup>30</sup>

In the 1950s it was not unheard of to propose holiness to the laity as the way to effectively carry out the Church's mission. In the mid-twentieth century, American Catholicism gave rise to several lay movements that aspired to a deeper spiritual life and a greater consistency between religious observance and daily life, along with increased efforts to imbue society with Christian principles.<sup>31</sup> At the same time, these efforts were not well known to most Catholics. In fact, for many young Catholics at Harvard, to hear their chaplain say that they were called to strive for sanctity and to spread the Gospel, not in spite of being at Harvard, but precisely through their being there—including their intellectual work, professional relationships, and friendships on campus—was new and attractive.<sup>32</sup>

### **An Iconic Achievement: Mass in Harvard Yard**

Nearby St. Paul parish was the natural place for Catholics at Harvard to attend Mass. At the same time, Father Porras showed interest in offering the Catholic students at Harvard the possibility of attending Mass on campus.<sup>33</sup>

---

27. Josemaría Escrivá, *The Way* (Chicago: Scepter, 1954), 291.

28. *Ibid.*, 335.

29. *Ibid.*, 346.

30. *Ibid.*, 961. For a broader and more detailed exposition of the principal ideas on Catholic life spread by Opus Dei in these years see Requena, "We Find Our Sanctity in the Middle of the World," and Coverdale, *Putting Down Roots*.

31. See Joseph P. Chinnici, "The Catholic Community at Prayer, 1926–1976," in James M. O'Toole, ed., *Habits of Devotion: Catholic Religious Practice in Twentieth-Century America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), 41–51; James J. Hennesey, *American Catholics: A History of the Roman Catholic Community in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 255, 265–266; Claire E. Wolfteich, *American Catholics through the Twentieth Century: Spirituality, Lay Experience, and Public Life* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2001), 26; and James M. O'Toole, *The Faithful: A History of Catholics in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 158–198.

32. Some testimonies can be found in John Arthur Gueguen, Jr., "The Early Days of Opus Dei in Boston as Recalled by the First Generation (1946–1956)," *Studia et Documenta: Rivista dell'Istituto Storico san Josemaría Escrivá* 1 (2007): 75, 100, 109.

33. The first references are from June 1955. See Porras to Michael Curtin, July 15, 1955, series M.I.I. 1149-A3, AGP.



Archbishop Richard J. Cushing and Father William Porras in the chapel at Tri-mount House, the Opus Dei residence and center near Harvard (Courtesy of the General Archives of the Prelature of Opus Dei, Rome).

By September 1955, after conferring with Cushing, the pastor of St. Paul, and the authorities at Harvard, Porras wrote, “The Archbishop gave me permission to celebrate at Harvard. This is quite a victory because there has never been Mass there. . . . For now it is only the case of celebrating there on the First Fridays but the Archbishop left it up to me to decide.”<sup>34</sup>

The first Mass Father Porras celebrated at Harvard took place in a room at Philips Brooks House in October 1955.<sup>35</sup> The new chaplain would have liked to have celebrated Mass in the University Chapel, Memorial Church, but he could not obtain permission. Thereafter, he celebrated Mass once a month in the Philips Brooks House.<sup>36</sup>

While there was a symbolic and real value to offering Harvard students the possibility of attending Mass on their campus, Porras’ overall spiritual

---

34. Porras to Escrivá, September 30, 1955, series M.1.1. 1149-B1, AGP. Hence, Father Porras’ words “there has never been Mass there” referred to the “old yard” at Harvard, not to the campus in general. In 1917, three days after having received his doctorate *honoris causa*, the then cardinal archbishop of Boston, William H. O’Connell, had presided at the first Mass in Harvard Stadium. See Wills, *The Catholics of Harvard*, 211, fn 97.

35. Porras to Joseph Muzquiz, October 9, 1955, series M.1.1. 1149-A3, AGP.

36. Notes of Porras, July 23, 1956, series E.4.2. 91-1, AGP.

program was broader. His priorities included: a) putting the Catholic chaplaincy on level ground with other chaplaincies at the university; b) arranging for an on-campus location for his work; c) creating a more participative, open, and inclusive setting for the Harvard Catholic Club; d) increasing the number of the club's student members; e) publicizing the club and its activities among members of the academic community; and finally, f) coordinating a cultural program with a strong philosophical and theological emphasis.

## A Chaplain and Colleague

Father Porras began his work as chaplain just three years after ordination. He was thirty-four years old and practically his whole adult life had been lived in a secular university environment, whether in Mexico or Spain. Consequently, Father Porras considered it natural to enter fully into campus life.

He began attending meetings of the ministerial association, "United Ministry to Students." As he explained to Cushing: "Their object is to work together in helping the students at Harvard, their one bond in common."<sup>37</sup> At that time, Harvard had twelve Protestant chaplains and one rabbi. Each year one of them was chosen to be president of the ministerial association. In 1957 he wrote that they had been insisting for two years on his presiding over the group.<sup>38</sup> In 1956 the United Ministry to Students decided to invite a Catholic to speak before a student forum. At Porras' suggestion, Bishop John Wright of Worcester spoke about the virtue of hope and was well received.<sup>39</sup>

At the same time, Father Porras built ties with college administrators. "Little by little, I got to know and deal with the deans and directors of the dorms. . . . These ties resulted to the benefit of the students since there were some problems that I was able to speak with the dean about and that worked out well. They also invited me to be a part of a commission that met weekly to discuss the concrete problems of the students. That was good because in many cases the students ask for—and respect—the chaplain's opinion."<sup>40</sup> He informed the archbishop that he had contacted the deans of the college, the registrar, house masters, and student tutors and proctors to offer his assistance to any student.<sup>41</sup>

---

37. Report (1954–1958), 14.

38. Memorandum (1957), 6.

39. Porras to John Joseph Wright, April 13, 1956 and September 29, 1956, Corr. Fr Porras officers, 1956–1957, St. Paul's Parish, box 1, AAB.

40. Memorandum (1957), 4.

41. Report (1954–1958), 14.

## The Development of the Harvard Catholic Club

In the absence of a proper building for the Catholic Club, Father Porras wished to have a location on campus, however small, where he could meet with students and where the staff of the club could carry on their work. Porras asked for space in the Philips Brooks House and later in the Harvard Business School, spaces used by various Harvard chaplaincies.<sup>42</sup>

In June 1955, the Philips Brooks House faculty committees voted to allow all members of religious organizations at Harvard (and Radcliffe College—a nearby women’s liberal arts college) to use an office that would become available that autumn.<sup>43</sup> With time, the celebration of Mass and occasional seminars would also take place in Philips Brooks House. But for most of its activities, the club required other locations with greater capacity, often the Lamont Forum Room in Lamont Library.

To present Catholicism at Harvard the chaplain gave priority to persons, their formation and motivation, over buildings. “To my mind,” Porras related, “further recognition can only be gained through the personal apostolate of the Catholic leaders and the Catholic students at Harvard; for this we need a better prepared laity, well informed Catholics. The center would, of course, be a great instrument in reaching or instructing our own people.”<sup>44</sup>

In this vein and in keeping with his legal background, Father Porras tried to provide the Harvard Catholic Club an organizational framework that would reflect this vision. He informed Archbishop Cushing of a new constitution and by-laws.<sup>45</sup> The new guiding documents promulgated in the spring of 1955 and revised and amended a year later expressed the chaplain’s idea of reaching out first to all the Catholics at Harvard and then to the greatest possible number of non-Catholics. The new constitution began: “The purpose of the Organization shall be to bring Catholics of Harvard University into closer relationship with one another and with other students,

---

42. Report (1954–1958), 2. The efforts made during Father Porras’ chaplaincy to have a separate building for the club are outside the scope of this study. See Requena, “Fr. William Porras”; and Cornelius de Witt Hastie (Graduate Secretary) to James McMurphy (president of the Harvard Catholic Club), May 17, 1955, Corr. Fr. Porras officers, 1956–1957, St. Paul’s Parish, box 1, AAB.

43. Letter from Cornelius de Witt Hastie (Graduate Secretary) to James McMurphy (president of the Harvard Catholic Club), May 17, 1955, Corr. Fr Porras officers, 1956–1957, St. Paul’s Parish, box 1, AAB.

44. Porras to James E. Manahan, June 16, 1957, Student centers report correspondence on a proposed new center, 1952–57, St. Paul’s Parish, box 1, AAB.

45. Report (1954–1958), 5.



**Phillips Brooks House, the on-campus home for Catholic activities at Harvard, including the celebration of Mass, meetings, and lectures (New England News Company).**

to foster the religious and cultural development of its members, and to spread better understanding of the Catholic religion at Harvard.”<sup>46</sup>

The structure aimed at the greater participation of Catholics and openness to non-Catholics. The new organization added three permanent committees (publicity, activities, and membership), together with the already existing executive committee. Each committee was composed of ten to twelve members.<sup>47</sup> With this new structure, there were at least forty students engaged actively in running the Harvard Catholic Club.

Father Porras’s reform tended toward openness. He reported, “Except for a few business meetings to which only the members are called, all of the activities are open to all the Catholic students in the university and some are held for the University community at large.”<sup>48</sup> This also created new categories of members, making room for non-Catholics who according to the new by-laws could form part of the club as associate members. Likewise, fac-

46. Harvard Catholic Club, Constitutions and By-Laws, Revisions 1955–56, St. Paul’s Parish, box 1, AAB.

47. Harvard Catholic Club, Constitutions and By-Laws, Revisions 1955–56, St. Paul’s Parish, box 1, AAB. The by-laws noted, “The Chaplain shall be appointed by the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Boston.”

48. Report (1954–1958), 11.

ulty and alumni could become honorary members. Creating new categories of members and opening most of the activities to non-members made the Harvard Catholic Club the opposite of a closed, elitist association. In fact, for some people, the very concept of membership lost its significance.<sup>49</sup> This risk, which Father Porras seems to have foreseen and, in some ways, sought, did not keep him from working to increase the number of members.<sup>50</sup>

This effort paid off. According to the figures that Father Porras sent to the archbishop, the academic year 1954–1955 began with 89 undergraduate members and concluded with 156.<sup>51</sup> Soon the member numbers swelled to 200 and by 1960, to nearly 300.<sup>52</sup> During these years the number of Catholics at Harvard oscillated between 481 and 516. The club grew from 20% of the total number of Catholics in 1954 to more than half of Catholics on campus in 1960. Graduate school members, traditionally less active in the club, increased from 27 members to 53 by 1960.<sup>53</sup>

Among the chaplain's priorities was that of giving a greater visibility to the club's activities. One of the means chosen was initiating a publication. It began with a very modest, six-page mimeographed *Newsletter* in October 1955 and developed into a high-quality, twenty-page magazine, *Current*.<sup>54</sup> The monthly was mailed free of charge to all the Catholics at Harvard and to some parents and alumni. Soon 1,000 copies were being printed and mailed; by 1959, 2,000 copies were being distributed.<sup>55</sup> Porras reported, "The Harvard *Crimson* [the Harvard student newspaper] gave considerable attention to *Current* this year."<sup>56</sup> In the presentation of the new publication, it was made clear that it was not necessary to be Catholic to collaborate with *Current*. "But the magazine as a whole," the presentation follows, "will deal with current controversies and developments in a manner that is both Harvard and Catholic. These two traditions are not incompatible."<sup>57</sup>

---

49. See Draft of the message of President Manahan, 1957, Revisions 1955–56, St. Paul's Parish, box 1, AAB.

50. *Current*, November 1955.

51. Report (1954–1958), 3, 7.

52. Report (1954–1958), 7; Memorandum (1957), 3; Report (1954–1958), 10; Report (1958–1959), 1; Report (1959–1960), 1.

53. Report (1958–1959), 2; Report (1959–1960), 1.

54. Almost the complete collection of these publications can be found in HUD 3762.5255 A, Catholic Club-Current, HUA.

55. Report (1954–1958), 4.

56. Report (1959–1960), 3.

57. "About the Current," *Current* (October–November 1959), 2.

## A Cultural Program with Philosophical and Theological Content

In Father Porras' vision, the Catholic club's intellectual and cultural efforts had to be inseparably united to its spiritual program since faith demands dialogue with reason. Porras stressed the laity's need for a good philosophical and theological formation to be able to enter into constructive dialogue with a secular culture. During Father Porras' tenure, the cultural program grew rapidly soon reaching three events every week, including frequent lectures and seminars by priests and laity. Some attracted a large attendance. A February 1957 lecture by the English Jesuit Martin D'Arcy was attended by 850 persons.<sup>58</sup> In Father Porras' view, the priority was not the number of attendees but the quality of the presentations. Whether laypersons or clerics, he sought "outstanding intellectuals."<sup>59</sup>

The seminars touched principally on questions of philosophy and theology. In February 1956, for example, Father James F. Redding, a professor at Emmanuel College and an alumnus of the Harvard School of Education, conducted a seminar on philosophy. There were also seminars given by Father Frederick McManus, an important leader in the liturgical movement and the dialogue between Catholics and the Orthodox. Father William Haas, O.P., from St. Stephen Priory in Dover, Massachusetts, gave a course on Thomistic Philosophy during three successive semesters in 1958-1959. Judging from the large number of Catholics and non-Catholics who attended, it was a success.<sup>60</sup>

It is possible to document the impact produced by some of these presentations, like that of Dr. John Doyle, who spoke on two different occasions on how "A Catholic Doctor Looks at Birth Control." In March 1956 the president of the club expressed gratitude in these words: "The majority of your audience was comprised of non-Catholics. And from their later remarks, I know that many of them went off with a different attitude towards the Church. (. . .) Thank you again for taking time from your busy schedule to explain the Church's position on birth control."<sup>61</sup>

The list of significant scholars who were invited to Harvard by the club is lengthy. Examples included John Correia-Alfonso, S.J., a well-known Indian academic, who spoke about "Hindu Spiritualism Today, Materialism

---

58. Porras to Muzquiz, February 22, [1957], series M.1.1. 1157-A12, AGP.

59. Memorandum (1957), 4.

60. Report (1958-1959), 1.

61. Lames M. Murphy to John Doyle, March 14, 1956, Corr. Fr Porras officers, 1956-1957, St. Paul's Parish, box 1, AAB.

and Modern India.” Father John M. Oesterreicher from the Institute of Judeo-Christian Studies, Seton Hall University, and editor of the magazine *The Bridge*, spoke about “The Heirs of Two Testaments.” Oesterreicher, a leader in the movement for the reconciliation between Jews and Catholics and one of the architects of the Vatican II document *Nostra Aetate*, wrote to Father Porras thanking him for the invitation: “I’m sure you realize how much I enjoyed my visit. The fact that I begged to be invited again shows how much I felt at home and how congenial I found the intellectual and spiritual climate of the club.”<sup>62</sup> The names and topics show the strong presence of philosophy and theology in the cultural program at the Harvard Catholic Club, but literature, law, and history were not neglected. The lectures illustrated the attempt to dialogue with other religions as well as with elements of the secular culture.

Beginning in 1959, a new development in the cultural and doctrinal program was possible thanks to the Jesuit Fathers studying at Harvard. Porras reported, “This consists in our so-called ‘Houses Meetings’ organized by the students living in each house. (. . .) Some students would get together over dinner in the private dining room of their houses, with one of the Jesuit students who moderated their discussion about a topic of common interest.”<sup>63</sup>

### Professorship of Catholics Studies

Father Porras and the Harvard Catholic Club were the principal promoters of a chair of Catholic studies at Harvard.<sup>64</sup> In April 1956, Father Porras and the club’s executive committee had visited Archbishop Cushing to introduce several projects, including the possibility of establishing a chair of Catholic studies at Harvard. “He very much liked all this,” Father Porras commented.<sup>65</sup> After the first positive reactions on the part of the president of Harvard and of the Archbishop of Boston, the club’s alumni council, a new organization inspired by Father Porras, considered the chair’s establishment at its first meeting, May 1956.<sup>66</sup>

---

62. John M. Oesterreicher to Porras, March 1958, St. Paul’s Parish, box 1, AAB.

63. Report (1959–1960), 2.

64. The Harvard Catholic Club is acknowledged as one of the principal promoters of the Charles Chauncey Stillman Guest Professorship of Roman Catholics Studies, but what has not always been appreciated is Father Porras’ crucial role. See Daniel Callahan, “Christopher Dawson, 12 October 1889–25 May 1970,” *Harvard Theological Review* 66 (1973); Wills, *The Catholics of Harvard*, 98–98; Christina Scott, *A Historian and His World: A Life of Christopher Dawson, 1889–1970* (London: Transaction Publishers, 1984); Gueguen, “The Early Days of Opus Dei in Boston,” 269–271. For additional details, see Requena, “Fr. William Porras,” 366–371.

65. Notes of Porras, April 23, 1956, series E.4.2. 91-1, AGP.

66. Minutes of the first meeting of the Alumni Council, May 29, 1956, Harvard Catholic Club, Alumni Council, 1956–1962, St. Paul’s Parish, box 1, AAB.



During the summer of 1956, Father Porras thought that the project was ripe and commented to Josemaría Escrivá:

In Harvard we have two big projects for which we almost have the approval of the Archbishop and the university authorities. One is that of using the university chapel to offer Mass [This project never found approval]. The other project is further along and we only need the money to carry it out. This is the plan to set up a Chair of "Catholic thought." The hardest part here is to get the University to support it and we have already received that. This is a victory that will have repercussions all over the country because Harvard is the oldest and the model for many of the smaller universities. It won't be hard to produce a chain reaction and see that others do something similar.<sup>67</sup>

In a second meeting of the alumni council in October 1956, the secretary read correspondence from the archbishop and Harvard President Nathan Pusey and Porras informed the council that he and Dr. Frederick Rogers, the club's faculty advisor, would contact key alumni regarding funding for the chair.<sup>68</sup> Ten days later, Father Porras wrote of his meeting with a potential donor, a Harvard alumnus and convert to Catholicism: "Had supper with [Chauncey Devereux] Stillman at his apt. (72nd St. at 5 Ave, beautiful place) and we talked at length on the chair at Harvard. He is definitely planning to endow it on his own. . . . After supper his lawyer arrived and we went through it all over again. I think it will work out much better this way."<sup>69</sup> Before the end of 1956, Porras saw that things were moving more quickly than they had hoped: "My conversation with Archbishop Cushing seems to have precipitated things: Stillman is coming to see him on Jan 2nd to discuss the Chair—if he is going that far it seems certain that he will give the money. Rogers has asked me to have dinner with him and Stillman that evening."<sup>70</sup>

In January 1957 Father Porras wrote, "The Chair of theology at Harvard is already a fact. Those who are giving the money have met with the Archbishop who had fully approved the plan so there will not be any difficulties. One can expect criticism of some who will not understand but since that will always be the case, we don't need to pay much attention to them. This will have great repercussions because it will be a model that other universities will follow."<sup>71</sup> A few days later he confirmed that "Stillman's visit to Archbishop

---

67. Porras to Escrivá, August 15, 1956, series M.1.1. 1152-B1, AGP.

68. Minutes from the second meeting of the Alumni Council, October 17, 1956, Harvard Catholic Club, Alumni Council, 1956-1962, St. Paul's Parish, box 1, AAB.

69. Porras to Muzquiz, October 26, 1956, series M.1.1. 1152-B, AGP.

70. Porras to Muzquiz, December 18, 1956, series M.1.1. 1152-B1, AGP.

71. Porras to Escrivá, January 4, 1957, series M.1.1. 1157-A12, AGP.



Archbishop Richard J. Cushing, Father William Porras (right), and Father Joseph Muzquiz (left) at the entrance of Trimount House (Courtesy of the General Archives of the Prelature of Opus Dei, Rome).

Cushing was very successful; since then he has talked with Pusey. Both men are very pleased, the money is ready and only the finishing touches are pending.”<sup>72</sup> In February 1958, the Divinity School inaugurated a chair of studies named for Chauncey Devereux Stillman’s father, Charles Chauncey Stillman. The first guest professorship of Roman Catholics Studies was the British historian Christopher Dawson (1889–1970).

### **Building Bridges between Harvard and the Boston Archdiocese**

Porras established a closer relationship between the university and the Boston Archdiocese, beginning with a cordial relationship with Harvard President Pusey. Upon being named chaplain, Porras asked for a meeting with Pusey. Porras wrote, “There was no precedent for that. When they agreed and I went there, his secretary (a Catholic) told me ‘this is the first time I have seen a priest come into this office.’ He was very cordial and offered to help in whatever would be necessary.”<sup>73</sup>

---

72. Porras to Muzquiz, January 9, 1957, series M.1.1. 1157-A12, AGP.

73. Memorandum (1957), 4.

Father Porras placed himself in a position to build bridges between Archbishop Cushing and President Pusey. Both attended in May 1956 the first ever senior reception, a celebration of the members of that year's senior class who were active in the Harvard Catholic Club. According to Porras, about 300 attended, including many professors. Porras recorded the reaction of Cushing: "[T]his was wonderful. I think it's good to know these people and we ought to do this every year."<sup>74</sup> *The Crimson* noted that Cushing and Pusey "meeting for the first time, were the guests of honor" and the reception "marked the first time also, that either the President or the prelate had appeared before the College religious group."<sup>75</sup> The reception was held in successive years and Cushing remained in contact with Pusey and at his death was considered a personal friend of the Harvard president.<sup>76</sup>

## Conclusion

The chaplaincy of Father William Porras (1954–1960) was significant for the Catholics at Harvard.<sup>77</sup> After the crisis of the St. Benedict Center and the excommunication of Father Feeney in 1953, it was necessary to reestablish a presence within the Harvard community. In 1954, Archbishop Cushing found in Porras a loyal and effective collaborator. Throughout the six years of his chaplaincy, Father Porras fostered an active and integrating presence of Catholics at Harvard and combated Catholicism's perceived insularity. As Catholic chaplain, Father Porras presented himself as a true member of the university community, among students, professors, and administrators of all faiths.

His initiatives were instrumental in bringing about the regular celebration of Mass on campus and the inauguration of the Charles Chauncey Stillman Chair of Catholic Studies, the birth of the magazine *Current*, and the beginnings of more cordial relations between Harvard and the Boston Archdiocese. At the same time, Father Porras understood that his role as priest was neither to become the representative of Catholics at Harvard nor to be the main force in the work of the Harvard Catholic Club. He understood

---

74. Notes of Porras, May 1, 1956, series E.4.2. 91-1, AGP.

75. *The Crimson*, May 1, 1956.

76. *The Crimson*, November 3, 1970.

77. Porras left the chaplaincy of Harvard in June 1960. In September 1962, he moved to Pamplona, Spain where he worked to obtain his doctorate in canon law from the University of Navarre. In April 1964 he returned to the United States and settled in New York. At the end of 1965 he moved to Mexico where he carried out both his priestly and academic work. See Alfonso Martínez Rosales, "Don Guillermo Porras Muñoz, 1917–1988," *Historia Mexicana* 38 (1988): 171–172. He became a member of the Academia Nacional de Historia y Geografía in 1975. In 1987 he received the "Tomás Valles" prize. The Academia Mexicana de la Historia received him as a member on October 21, 1986. He died in México City, June 28, 1988. See <http://www.acadmexhistoria.org.mx>.

that his mission was to promote the spiritual and intellectual growth of the laity and to this effect he helped initiate the club's spiritual and cultural programs. Father Porras did not hesitate to propose to the students at Harvard the quest for sanctity and apostolic efforts. His was not only a cultural project, but a spiritual and pastoral one.

We have framed this study as one shedding light on the conflict between two opposing currents characterizing American Catholicism before Vatican II: the desire to construct a "distinctive Catholic culture" on one hand, and on the other, "assimilative tendencies" that considered the process of secularization as inevitable and largely positive. In keeping with the spirit and praxis of *Opus Dei*, Father Porras felt that sanctity and apostolic action should be sought above all through work, professional relationships, and in friendship, all values that belong to university life. Hence, with this vision, Father Porras offered a positive and constructive response to the process of secularization that many Catholics were aware of and which, on occasion, had led some to isolate themselves. His position was diametrically opposed to Father Feeney's insular approach. He urged Catholics not to isolate themselves from an adverse environment but to exert a positive influence on that environment.

Yet Father Porras did not accept uncritically a secularized culture and way of life. He did not underestimate the challenges that a secularized culture—in the widely accepted negative meaning of this term, implying the loss of religious values—represented for young Catholics at Harvard. His response was to encourage lay Catholics to be present in all technical, scientific and humanistic sectors as true members of the Harvard community, bringing into these human endeavors the enriching contribution of their Catholicism.