

CONNECTING THE DOTS

The Intersection of Piety and Politics

BY BARBARA R. BODENGRAVEN

Like many students at Weston Jesuit, Paul Christopher Manuel, MTS'03, enrolled at the school with several advanced degrees already in hand. He had recently completed his doctorate in political science from Georgetown University, where he studied the influence of religion on a country's culture and politics, especially as it pertained to the two Iberian nation states of Portugal and Spain. While working on his doctoral dissertation, Manuel said he had become increasingly dissatisfied with the way many social scientists treated religion, especially the way Roman Catholicism was treated in Iberia.

PHOTO: SERGIO PEREZ/REUTERS



The virgin of Our Lady of Fatima is paraded in front of hundreds of thousands of worshippers at the start of the beatification ceremony of Portuguese shepherd children Francisco and Jacinta Marto at the holy shrine of Fatima, Portugal, in 2000. The Fatima Marian sightings 90 years ago resulted in important political developments within Portugal, says Manuel.

“Religion in general was viewed as a mostly unimportant variable in analyzing the region's social and political changes,” said Manuel. “I came to Weston Jesuit in search of a more nuanced understanding of the influence theological issues have on cultural changes and political developments.”

Manuel found what he was looking for in a class called “Popular Religion in Europe,” taught by Adjunct Assistant Professor of Church History Janice Farnham, R.J.M.


“Suddenly, I could connect the dots between my graduate training in political science and theology,” said Manuel. “That class was my inspiration.”

It was while writing his MTS

thesis on the Marian sightings in Fatima, Portugal, that Manuel finally articulated what he had suspected all along—that popular devotions dramatically affect the political culture and life of a country.

According to Manuel, the Marian apparitions that occurred over a six-month period in the spring and summer of 1917 seized the religious imaginations of the largely poor, Catholic and unsophisticated people of the countryside, while powerful players in Lisbon used the event to discredit the anticlerical government in power at the time. All of this set the stage for the emergence of the 40-year, authoritarian Catholic and repressive Salazar dictatorship in Portugal.

According to Manuel, some political scientists and historians have treated popular devotional events such as the Fatima Marian sightings only as cases of popular reaction against modernity, with no enduring consequences. But Manuel takes issue with this point of view, insisting that devotional events of this kind are not to be isolated “only as a theological reality, but as a political one as well.”

“It's my belief that all cases of popular devotion offer a revealing window into the political culture and life of a country,” said Manuel. “It may behoove us to take these events more seriously, and carefully consider their consequences.” 

Paul Christopher Manuel, MTS'03, is professor of politics and chair of the politics department at Saint Anselm College, Manchester, N.H. Following his graduation from Weston Jesuit School of Theology, Manuel organized a symposium on church-state relations at The New Hampshire Institute of Politics at Saint Anselm College, bringing together social scientists and theologians to discuss how

the Vatican and local national churches try to influence politics and public policy around the globe. Manuel is co-editor of a book composed of papers from the symposium, *The Catholic Church and the Nation-State: Comparative Perspectives* (Georgetown University Press).



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