Welcoming a new president

Rev. Jeffrey P. von Arx, S.J.
July 1, 2004

It’s day one as president of Fairfield University, and Jeffrey von Arx, S.J., barely notices the rat-tat-tat of jackhammers just beneath his window. Camped in temporary quarters on the second floor of Bellarmine Hall, he’s just back from getting his new photo ID card. “The picture’s not as bad as the one I had at Fordham,” he says, reaching into his wallet to produce the evidence.

Outside, construction workers continue to drill intermittently as they demolish the granite steps leading up to Bellarmine Terrace. It’s the last phase of a $2.5 million restoration of the main administrative building, begun last October to prevent further water damage to the 84-year-old structure.

“What noise?” Fr. von Arx says with a smile. “I’m from New York. I don’t even notice it. I feel right at home.”

A typical big brother

Growing up, home for Fr. von Arx was Locust Valley, New York. Born in Pennsylvania, he moved with his family when he was seven to the town in Long Island named, he says, “for the tree, not the bug.”

His father, Eugene, worked as an engineer in the field of inertial navigation. He met his wife, Betty Entwistle, on the job at Pratt & Whitney, a company that makes
commercial and military engines. After they married, she left her position to be a full-time homemaker.

“My mother says Jeff was the perfect baby, no fuss at all,” says his sister, Genie Principe, director of human resources for a large law firm in New York City. “He had memorized his Mother Goose rhymes at an early age and was, in general, a very good little boy. Five years later I came along – with colic – and my parents had an altogether different experience.”

At left, Rev. Jeffrey von Arx makes sure his new Fairfield University ID card has the correct title – University President. Jumping back in time, we see him in black-and-white: 1) as a baby, 2) hanging Christmas stockings with his sister, Genie, and 3) as an 8-year-old playing the trumpet.
“He was the typical big brother, I guess you could say. We were assigned chores every day, things like doing the dishes after supper. When my parents left the room, Jeff would snap the wet dish towel at my feet and command me to dance,” she says. “It got so bad that my father finally had us to do the dishes on alternating nights.”

In high school, the young Jeffrey von Arx taught himself a number of things that had an impact on family life. “He got into gourmet cooking, and often made dinner on the weekends,” says Principe. “He tortured us by listening to Wagner, but that’s when his love for opera developed. He also played the French horn in the high school band.”

At the time, Locust Valley High School included grades 7 to 12. “When I started seventh grade, he was this big-deal senior – editor of the yearbook, a lifeguard at the beach, into theatre, and known by just about everyone. He told me on my first day not to acknowledge him in the hall,” laughs Principe with an affection born of perspective.

His high school friends offer a different view – that of a brilliant young man of unprecedented academic abilities who surprised no one when he earned class valedictorian honors. Ginny (Nielsen) Perrell first met him in third grade. They rode the bus together, and took French and ballroom dancing classes all through school. “Jeff was very, very studious, and very, very smart, and had a great sense of humor,” she says.

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“He was my date for the senior prom, and wore a madras tuxedo jacket, which was very “in” at the time.”

Another high school friend, Jane (Coe) Laino, still remembers the essay he wrote in the class yearbook – especially the ending, she says. In it, he spoke of seeking the “whole story,” the story that lies both within and beyond any given moment in time: “Look quickly, for in a very few days, this class will rise and scatter like seed in a strong wind.”

“[For fun] a bunch of us used to make late-night visits to the Walker Gordon dairy in Plainsboro, N.J., where they milked the cows on a giant merry-go-round called the Rotolactor.” — George O’Brien
And that it did, as life took the high school chums in many different directions. “Jeffrey and I reconnected in 1982 when I saw his picture on the cover of *The New York Times Magazine,*” says Laino, today president of Dlgy 4 Group in New York City. This venture into the limelight took place during his first year of priesthood while he was serving at the Church of St. Francis Xavier, a very diverse parish on West 16th Street.

He just happened to be around and available when photographers from the *Times* came to shoot the cover photo for an article about the Jesuits’ then very-troubled relationship with the Vatican. “I remember that it was my day off, that the pastor ‘volunteered’ me, and that it took three hours to take the pictures. The photographer kept telling us not to smile,” says Fr. von Arx. The very day after the article appeared (Feb. 14, 1982), he interviewed at Georgetown for a position in the History Department. “Fr. Tim Healy, who was then president, made some rather colorful comments about the advance press I had ‘arranged,’” he recalls. “But I got the job.”

**The Rotolactor years**

Like that seed in a strong wind, the journey from his student days at Locust Valley High to his faculty position at Georgetown included the laying down of roots and the bearing of new fruit in unexpected places.

In choosing a college, Fr. von Arx’s interest in public service led him to Princeton University and its renowned Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs. By sophomore year, he found himself increasingly interested in the study of history, and changed focus. With that came a growing notion that college teaching might be his true desire. Another vocational path was also taking shape within him, one that, through even deeper listening, would ultimately lead him to the Society of Jesus.

“I met Jeff at the Aquinas Institute, a big house off campus that contained the Catholic chapel, meeting rooms, and the chaplain’s residence,” says Princeton classmate George O’Brien, who also remembers a certain student retreat that involved large pots of chili, cases of beer, and very insightful questions by his friend, Jeff. “We got to know each other gradually and spent a lot of time together during our junior and senior years. I went to basketball games, drank beer, and bemoaned the fact that Princeton wasn’t coeducational. Jeff read Aristotle.”

Don’t get the impression, however, that all Jeff von Arx did was study. He played the French horn in Princeton’s marching band, sporting a trademark straw boater and an orange-and-black plaid jacket while performing in zany half-
time shows. He also did local sightseeing. “A bunch of us used to make late-night visits to the Walker Gordon dairy in Plainsboro, N.J., where they milked the cows on a giant merry-go-round called the Rotolactor,” says O’Brien, an attorney who chairs the labor and employment practice at Tyler Cooper & Alcorn in New Haven, Conn. “They milked the cows twice a day [morning and night], from 9 to 3. You could watch from an observation platform that featured a mural showing cows throughout history. They also had a grave marker for the original Elsie the Cow.”

Were these trips to the now-defunct Rotolactor rooted in Fr. von Arx’s love of things historical? “No,” laughs Fairfield’s new president. “You have to remember, my class [1969] was the last class at Princeton when it was all male. There was one movie theater in town and we weren’t allowed to have cars on campus.”

With means of distraction at a minimum, the intellectual life so integral to who Jeff von Arx is flourished in the Ivy League environment. A careful and thorough scholar, he tackled his senior independent research project with zeal, producing a 121-page thesis titled “Thomas Carlyle and the Failure of Radical Conservatism.”

“Everyone else we knew who finished a thesis let out a whoop and immediately went out to celebrate,” says O’Brien. “Jeff finished his and said, ‘Well, I’m glad that’s done’ … and took down his Aristotle book to study for a philosophy course.”

Such nonchalance convinced two of his library neighbors that he needed a different kind of lesson. “A few days later, right before the library closed, they jammed the sliding door to Jeff’s carrel with a 2x4 cut to just the right length,” recalls O’Brien. “Jeff had to pound on the door and holler for more than an hour until a watchman finally heard him.”

Weeks later, one of the very friends who had locked him in the carrel had still not finished his own history thesis, by now overdue. “I got a call in the middle of the night asking me to come right away and bring my typewriter,” says O’Brien. “Jeff and several others received similar calls, and we proceeded as a
“Jeff has a capacity for not putting people in corners even when he has strong opinions about something. He also has a wonderful capacity for looking to people’s better angels. What a gift.” —  

**Dr. George Turner**

Left: Fr. von Arx’s nephew, Christopher Principe, has followed his uncle’s footsteps to Princeton, where he is entering his junior year. Middle: Betty von Arx shares in the joy of her son’s graduation from Yale University, where he earned an M.A. and Ph.D. in history. Right: After that Yale graduation, siblings Jeff and Genie gave in to a moment of mock collapse.

The summer before graduation, Fr. von Arx decided to apply to the Society of Jesus – a real surprise to his parents and friends. Having been educated solely in public schools, he had no ties to any particular religious order. In responding to his sense of call, he went through what he describes as a logical process of elimination.

“I knew I wanted to join a religious community and become a priest,” he says. “I thought my talents and abilities were in the area of college teaching. So my sense was that the Jesuits were the place to go.”

That summer, he wrote a letter to the New York province – once, twice, and yet again. He got no answer. “My assumption was that the Jesuits were so selective that you really had to persist before they would acknowledge any letter from you or any kind of an application,” he says. “It just turned out that they were between vocation directors that summer and somehow the mail was falling through the cracks.”

He entered the Society after graduation. “The year I joined was a period of great transition in the Church and in the Society of Jesus,” he says, noting some of the corollary changes that took place in Jesuit formation (among them, no more rules about wearing cassocks). St. Andrew-on-Hudson, the province’s monastery-like novitiate, had just closed, so his two years as a novice were spent at a small novitiate on the campus of LeMoyne College in Syracuse. He then did a year of studies in philosophy at Fordham University.

“The times being what they were in the Society of Jesus, I was offered a number of choices after that,” he says. “I remember the formation director coming to me and saying, ‘Would you like to go to Theology? Would you like to go to graduate school? Or would you like to go to regency (to teach high school, typically for a couple of years)?’ And I said, ‘Well, I think I’d like to go to graduate school.’ That was certainly not typical of things in the Society of Jesus before then, nor is it now.” At that point, he went to Yale University and spent five years there working on his Ph.D. in history.

**Looking to better angels**

“What I enjoyed about having Jeff von Arx as a student,” says Dr. Frank Turner, John Hay Whitney Professor of History at Yale, “was that he had a very interesting way of thinking about things historical. He consistently came at a topic from the side, not head-on. By that I mean he was superb at bringing together ideas that most people tried to keep separate, and refused to let established categories determine his thinking.”

By way of example, his doctoral dissertation, *Progress and Pessimism: Religion, Politics, and History in Late Nineteenth Century Britain*, challenged the notion that the Victorian era’s characteristic faith in progress was rooted in optimism. Not so,
claimed the then 33-year-old scholar whose dissertation director was one of the grand old men of Yale’s History Department, Dr. Franklin M. Baumer.

“Jeff focused on the tension in the minds of a number of Victorian English thinkers and historians between a commitment to progress,” says Dr. Turner, “and a deep pessimism about the human condition in general, and contemporary political life in particular.” Subsequently published by Harvard University Press, the book asserted that it was pessimism that motivated the Victorian intellectual aristocracy. Concerned about the effects of the Franchise Reform Act of 1867 that brought the masses into the political process, the intellectuals Fr. von Arx studied championed the notion of progress as a way to “explain away and reverse, if possible,” any trend that would bring religion into the arena of public debate.

“Throughout his scholarly and teaching life, Jeff has always looked to the big questions,” says Dr. Turner, who is also director of Yale’s Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. “Scholars who do religious history, Christian history, tend to be narrowly and denominationally focused. Jeff has risen above that. He’s a solid professional historian and has an enormous ethical commitment. In my opinion, he’s more broadly read than most historians.”

Fr. von Arx considers Dr. Turner a co-mentor. “From him I learned not to be afraid to think outside of received interpretations … to read as much as evidence as you can because it will bring you closer to the truth … and to take religion seriously as a category of human self-understanding, because most of the people you’ll be writing about did!”

“Ignatius would be so proud of Jeff. Wherever he’s worked, he has balanced his roles as a serious scholar, a pastoral presence, and a caring and effective administrator.”

— Thomas Benz, S.J.
This ability to reserve judgment reveals itself in interpersonal ways as well, a habit of mind and heart very in tune with St. Ignatius of Loyola’s practice of presuming the good intentions of others until they prove otherwise. “Jeff has a capacity for not putting people in corners even when he has strong opinions about something,” says Dr. Turner. “He also has a wonderful capacity for looking to people’s better angels. What a gift.”

A pastoral presence

So, it turns out, is his gift for teaching, according to 1987 Georgetown alumnus, Tom Benz, S.J., who took two of Fr. von Arx’s upper-level classes and credits his own vocation to the priesthood with his gentle interest of his mentor. What he refers to as a life-changing conversation took place when he went to Fr. von Arx during office hours to discuss a history project. Midway through the conversation, a question came out-of-the-blue.

JVA: “Have you ever given any thought to becoming a Jesuit?”
TB: “Can I close the door?”
JVA: “Of course.”
TB: (tentatively) “Why do you ask the question?”
JVA: “I’ve noticed that you come to the 10 o’clock Mass a lot.”

That’s because Fr. von Arx often celebrated the quiet, late-night Mass himself. Two years later, Tom Benz joined the Society, and says he’s not the only young Jesuit whose vocation to the priesthood has been encouraged and nurtured by Fr. von Arx. “At Georgetown, Jeff was always involved in student and alumni retreats,” says Fr. Benz, who today chairs the Religious Studies Department at Fordham Prep and serves as a campus minister.

“Ignatius would be so proud of Jeff,” says Fr. Benz. “Wherever he’s worked, he has balanced his roles as a serious scholar, a pastoral presence, and a caring and effective administrator.”

Ready for the next step

Rev. Joseph O’Hare, S.J., former president of Fordham University, agrees. “I didn’t know Jeff well until he became a candidate for Dean of our Rose Hill campus. His academic background, his years on the Georgetown faculty (many of those as chair), the second book he wrote there, and his founding of its Center for Australian and New Zealand Studies sent a clear signal that he was ready to make the next step.

“He had instant credibility with the faculty,” continues Fr. O’Hare. “As a scholar, he understood their aspirations. He believed in being consultative with them – in many cases, quite candidly, more than I would have been. As a president, I believe Jeff will excel at translating and representing, to each, the concerns of the trustees and the aspirations of the faculty. He has a good sense of management and governance issues, and knows which aspects are
open to the corporate model and which are not.”

Another strength, and an indication of the breadth he brings to Fairfield, is the personal and pastoral interest he shows to students, among whom he lived throughout his Georgetown and Fordham days. According to Fr. O’Hare, when a new student residence building came on line at Fordham in 2000, Fr. von Arx volunteered to be house-master. “Jeff and a fellow Jesuit established a very fine presence in the house, and created a number of new traditions,” says Fr. O’Hare. “He also arranged to have a small room adjacent to the Great Hall converted to a chapel, and secured the funding for it. Jeff was the most successful of our deans in attracting funds to support his school. Through the Board of Visitors he established, he engaged alumni more directly and effectively in the College.

“Jeff is an articulate speaker who writes well and who conducts his business in a quiet style that is never loud or flashy,” says Fr. O’Hare. “In him, Fairfield University has one of the most outstanding Jesuits in the country.”

Top to bottom: Note the festive apron being worn by the von Arx family gourmet cook as he prepares Christmas dinner. He and his grandmother, Frances von Arx, are all smiles after the delicious meal. Fr. von Arx has a great reason to go to Florida every year – his parents, Eugene (left photo) and Betty (right photo) retired there. Having now had practice as captain of a vessel (below), he’s eager to put those skills, and his inner compass, to work as he charts Fairfield University’s course into the future.
Rev. Jeffrey P. von Arx, S.J.

**Born:**
May 12, 1947

**Education:**
A.B. Princeton University, 1969 (history)
M.A. Yale University, 1973 (history)
M. Phil. Yale University, 1974 (history)
Ph.D. Yale University, 1980 (history)
M. Div. Weston School of Theology, 1981

**Entered Jesuits:**
August 14, 1969

**Ordained:**
June 13, 1981

**Family:**
Eugene and Betty von Arx (parents)
Genie Principe (sister)
Brian Principe (brother-in-law)
Christopher Principe (nephew)

**Experience:**
Dean of Fordham College at Rose Hill, 1998-2004
Georgetown University, History Department, 1982-1998
Department Chair, 1991-1997
Director, Georgetown Center for Australian and New Zealand Studies

**Publications:**
*Progress and Pessimism: Religion, Politics, and History in Late Nineteenth Century Britain* (Harvard University Press, 1985)
*Varieties of Ultramontanism* (Catholic University of America Press, 1998)

**Relaxation:**
Reading, opera, gourmet cooking