



Father T. Lawrason Riggs '10

Fr. Riggs was born in New London, CT in 1888. A member of the Riggs banking family of Washington, D.C., Fr. Riggs graduated from Yale in 1910. He had majored in Romantic languages and literature and was an accomplished poet who wrote his class's Ivy Ode. Prior to the first World War, he tried his hand at graduate work at Harvard University as well as book writing for Broadway musicals with Cole Porter—both endeavors were failures. “See America First,” the musical they wrote together, failed to win the admiration of Broadway audiences. Though, Porter used “I’ve a Shooting Box in Scotland,” a song the two penned together, for subsequent productions.

Like many young men who joined the fight of the first world war, it affected the young Riggs profoundly. A translator for Yale's Mobile Hospital Unit, Riggs experienced the great war at the front line, an experience whose dirt and gore shocked him. Because of his language skills, he was eventually transferred to intelligence work in Paris, where he spent the remainder of the war. But the one thing that seemed to remain with him in both the trenches and in Paris was how he—and his fellow soldiers—all found themselves relying on God. This horrible experience of war drew him closer to God. After the war, he began to pursue a calling to the priesthood. He was ordained Fr. Riggs the summer after his “historic interview” with Yale University President Angell on May 31, 1922, and began his chaplaincy work at Yale in October of 1922.

During his time at Yale, Fr. Riggs was a well-respected intellectual and religious figure on campus. He specialized in the life of Joan of Arc and wrote a book on her life, *Saving Angel: The Truth About Joan of Arc and the Church* (Milwaukee, WI: Bruce Publishing, 1944). He was also unafraid to defend Catholicism on Yale's campus—writing into the *Yale Daily News* when it seemed appropriate to do so. The most noteworthy instance of Fr. Riggs's apologetics occurred in 1930 between him and Professor Erwin R. Goodenough. Professor Goodenough's, a member of Yale's History Department, wrote a book, *The Rise of the Christian Church*, which argued that Christianity was a form of paganism. Fr. Riggs did not agree with this position and wrote a pamphlet refuting it. The incident between Fr. Riggs and Professor Goodenough even made it into the *New York Times* on Monday, October 6, 1930. Though a staunch defender of Catholicism, Fr. Riggs was also an active participant in Yale's campus life—often seen at the Elizabethan Club and Scroll & Key, where he was a member since his undergraduate days. He also enjoyed attending plays put on by the Yale Dramat and was a pioneer in Yale's Inter-Faith movement.

Fr. Riggs died unexpectedly of a heart attack on April 26, 1943. He was 55. He had served STM for twenty-one years as Catholic Chaplain. In his will, he left a great deal of his books and religious objects to STM. He is buried at STM in the Riggs Garden underneath two weeping cherry trees.

Links:

“I've a Shooting Box in Scotland” <https://youtu.be/ZrhJUxXk--c>

“A Tale of Two Archives” <https://campuspress.yale.edu/mssa/a-tale-of-two-archives-tracing-the-life-of-thomas-lawrason-riggs-10/>