

**New England Jesuit
Oral History Program**



**Fr. Charles J. Dunn, S.J.
Volume 109**

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ISBN 1-60067-106-3

June 2010

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AMDG

THE IMPORTANCE OF ORAL HISTORY

Oral histories are the taped recordings of interviews with interesting and often important persons. They are not folklore, gossip, hearsay, or rumor. They are the voice of the person interviewed. These oral records are, in many instances, transcribed into printed documentary form. Though only so much can be done, of course, in an hour or sometimes two, they are an important historical record whose value increases with the inevitable march of time.

For whatever reason, New England Jesuits, among others around the world, have not made any significant number of oral histories of their members. Given the range of their achievements and their impact on the Church and society, this seems to many to be an important opportunity missed. They have all worked as best they could for the greater glory of God. Some have done extraordinary things. Some have done important things. All have made valuable contributions to spirituality, education, art, science, discovery, and many other fields. But living memories quickly fade. Valuable and inspiring stories slip away.

This need not be. Their stories can be retold, their achievements can be remembered, their adventures saved. Their inspiration can provide future generations with attractive models. That is what Jesuit oral history is all about.

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Interview with Fr. Charles J. Dunn, S.J.
by Fr. Richard W. Rousseau, S.J.
March 25, 2009

1923-1942: EARLY YEARS

RICHARD ROUSSEAU: Welcome to our conversation. We're just going to go chronologically through your life. So let's start off at the very beginning: when and where were you born?

CHARLES DUNN: I was delivered into the world by a midwife who lived just a few streets from our home. It was June 25, 1923. I joined my sister, Alice, and my good parents, Helen (Joyce) and Charles K. Dunn.

No man could hope to have a more loving and caring family. My dear sister in later years made me a member of her family and they have surrounded me with love, so that their home has always been "my home away from home." To all I dedicate these memories.

Looking back I can say that growing up in the '20s and '30s was truly a blessing and a joy. Life was built around

the neighborhood, family, public school, and for me, the church. It was a day when each home had many delivery men, whom we knew by name: a mailman, an egg man, a vegetable man, an ice man, a coal man, and a garbage man. (Yes, in Milton there was a pig farm and all garbage was picked up by truck.) These men came at least once a week.

Sports went by the season and the neighborhood kids played them all. Skiing and sledding kept us busy in the winter, along with ping-pong games, boxing, checkers, etc. Games were organized by ourselves and we did our own umpiring. Arguments were settled among us and no adults interfered. Fathers were at work and mothers had too much to do running the home.

Public school was excellent. The pledge of allegiance to the flag and a reading from the Bible were daily duties. Each teacher was called Miss; I do not remember a Mrs. until junior high.

VOCATION

Church was important and Sunday school was a sacred duty, honored by parents, and all lessons were gone over at home. It was somewhere between home and church that I first felt the call to the priesthood.

By the time I went to Milton High I had a good idea that I wanted to be a priest. I shared this with no one. Being an altar boy no doubt helped me to grow in this hidden desire, and, no doubt, brought me to an expressed wish to go to BC High, which I hoped, someday, would lead to BC. This took my parents by surprise, and my father said firmly that I could get a “good

education in Milton if I applied myself.” I knew this but kept asking.

Looking back, I am amazed that I had this goal. Travel would be about an hour: bus, subway, trolley, etc. All my friends were at Milton High. My folks eventually said yes, and early in the evening, in late August, I went to visit Fr. Augustine Keane, Principal, for an interview. He accepted my credits through the ninth grade, but said that I would have to repeat tenth grade, since Greek was required. I asked if I could start over in the ninth, and he thought this might be a good idea. It was, but it took my folks by surprise.

I, too, was in for another surprise. Although I knew that my father was a convert, it was outside BC High at 761 Harrison Avenue that he told me that he had been baptized in the house chapel in 761 Harrison Ave. and that a Jesuit had given him instructions. My mother always claimed, “Your father is a better Catholic than any of us.” And he was. I saw this when, four years later, I announced that I intended to join the Jesuits.

My four years at BC High were a gift from God. Good teachers, good role models: men who inspired me to take on a life dedicated to education. For it was there that I realized that I could be a teacher and a priest. This surprised me.

The first Jesuit I knew, Mr. David [Steve] Cummiskey, had us for three classes every day plus home room. One of about twenty scholastics, he made a great impression. The two most influential were Mr. Mal McCloud and Coach Jim Moran. Mal was the best

teacher, and Jim Moran a good advisor, when I was about to delay pursuit of my vocation in senior year to enter a military program. Draft age was twenty-one at that time, but all knew that the service was on the horizon. Coach was clear during a long discussion that God, country, and family were the priorities. This was May 1942.

Mal not only taught Latin, Greek, and religion, but also introduced me to the YMCU on Boylston St., the Oyster Bar, and the love of reading, which my Dad also encouraged by example. Good marks, varsity baseball and football from sophomore year, to election as Senior Class President: they were great years, thanks to Fr. Keane, Fr. Ed Sullivan, and all of the men who taught and encouraged me at BC High.

1942-1946: SHADOWBROOK

We entered knowing we would not return for four years. Twenty-five years later, at a retreat at Cranwell with Fr. Coleran as director, we agreed that we were fortunate to have two master of novices who were sincere men, lovers of the Society of Jesus, and able to inform and inspire: Fr. James Coleran, who led us through the exercises, and Fr. Bill Kelleher, whose common sense and insights kept us on solid ground in an atmosphere that could lead to imbalance and confused souls.

Bonding with men like Dave Carroll, Tom Curran, Bob Drinan, John Driscoll, George Duffy, Joe Fallon, Pete Farrelly, Walt Feeney, Joe McCormick, Leo [Chet] McDonough, Frank Mackin, Ollie Nicholson, Jack Tucker, and many more, made the life livable and pro-

ductive. Much has been written of the “old style training,” and I suggest you read F. X. Shea’s early chapters on the Shadowbrook fire in *The Shadowbrook Fire* for a review of daily life. Those chapters could be a book in itself.

1946-1949: WESTON

We were happy as we journeyed by train to Weston—a welcome change from barracks life to a private room. No sinks, but your own desk, chair, bed, and kneeler. Once again we settled into the academic life. One exceptional teacher stands out in my memory, Fr. Jerry Coleman. Again, the camaraderie gave strength to the daily grind of class. Free time was sufficient and we had some resources to aid in relaxation. All activities were on campus. Sports, walking, and working on the grounds occupied time outside the classroom.

1949-1952: Baghdad

Six men were called in, one by one, and asked if we were willing to go to Baghdad: Francis X. Curran, George Duffy, Charlie Dunn, Walter Feeney, Fred Kelly, and Walter Martin. In late May 1949, Curran, Dunn, and Kelly were selected and informed. In early August we joined Fr. Joe LaBran and sailed from New York. Over twenty-five men came from Fordham and other places to see us off. It was memorable to stand on the fantail of the SS Exochorda and see the Statue of Liberty fade into the dusk. It was my first view, and it would be three years before I would see it again through the morning fog.

About a hundred passengers on this small freighter plowed along for over three weeks, with stops in Marseille, Naples, Alexandria, and finally Beirut, where we were met by Chet McDonough, Mike McCarthy, and others of the Baghdad community. It was a welcome sight. The voyage was one we never forgot—again, a book in itself.

After about twenty-four hours on the Nairn bus to Baghdad—alas, dehydrated and empty of all food—we arrived at Baghdad College, still fasting, as Mass was to be said on our arrival. I was a sorry looking Francis Xavier! The dates and figs relished in the hospitality of the Jesuit house in Damascus did me in.

I recall teaching, prefecting, directing sports, sleeping on the roof; in the winter huddling around a kerosene stove, taking occasional trips to Camp Habbaniyah, a British RAF base, for a picnic; enjoying two wonderful summers in Jerusalem; seeing holy sites; following the Via Dolorosa every Friday; and running for cover the day Abdella was assassinated and staying off the roads. There were Israeli guns at night and snipers during the day, but we were always in our tan habits and felt safe. What made the three years happy and on reflection a wonderful experience? The MEN! The catalog will give that story.

1952-1956: BACK TO WESTON

Finally we were on the last part of the journey to priesthood, which had kept me on the road, and still does. At last it was in sight, and I rejoiced. Weston was easy for Fred Kelly and me; green grass, milk, a chance to see family and friends. Others found it difficult to re-

turn after a regency stateside, but it was a step up for us.

June 17, 1955: ORDINATION

Cardinal Cushing ordained us. To my surprise I felt no special emotion, just peace, but no soaring spiritual feeling or elation. My good mother, father, and sister were in the front pews, and I was surrounded by classmates, hearing beautiful music. A thirteen-year journey had finally come to an end, and where was that bounding joy of the new bridegroom? Only on that day a deep consolation that I had been called, had answered, and now shared the Last Supper with Jesus. "Do this in memory of me...this is....." The next day when I said those words, I thanked God again for the call.

1956-1957: TERTIANSHIP AT POMFRET

I did tertianship at St. Robert Hall in Pomfret, Connecticut. Superiors knew it was time to change the format of tertianship, but, alas, they waited too long. We got through it, because good men suffered together.

1957-1960: PORTLAND, MAINE: CHEVERUS

They were three wonderful years with great young lads at the school at Ocean Avenue. There were good men to share the two three-deckers on Danforth Street. We were living beside the blue-collar people of Portland. There we flourished individually and as a community.

I was assistant principal; Tom Grace, principal; John Foley, rector; Ed Crowley, minister. We had an en-

thusiastic faculty. We were a happy and successful group.

1960-1967: HOLY CROSS

I awoke on July 31, 1960 to learn that the status said I was to go to Holy Cross. No asking, no rumors—total surprise. How did it happen? Ray Swords had gone in as the new president at Holy Cross, and asked that I be assigned there as Assistant Dean of Men. The provincial had agreed.

When I reported, it was the second time I had been on the campus. My first time was to hear senior oral exams in philosophy. The custom was to send newly minted MA philosophy grads from Weston to BC and Holy Cross to hear the exams of frightened college students.

Before the summer ended, Ray informed me that I was to be the Dean of Men. It was to be a “learning on the job” experience. And it was. What saved me was a lot of luck, common sense, putting myself in their shoes, and remembering my carefree days at Milton High. Realizing that they were always ahead of me, I was not there to “win” and not to take it too personally.

They were wonderful young men, and their parents sacrificed much to send them to Holy Cross and backed the Jesuits in their efforts to be, as was the policy of the times, “in loco parentis.” They were great years, and I am still friends with many of the grads. God was good to me and it was a blessing to have had the opportunity to grow with them.

1967-1973: BISHOP CONNOLLY HIGH SCHOOL

In April 1967, J. V. O'Connor, then the provincial, spoke to me about the possibility of my going to the newly opened Bishop Connolly High in Fall River as rector. It was confidential, and even Ray Swords did not know. Connolly High School came late on the scene once the high school plans for Springfield, Mass., were abandoned.

We had about 1,000 men in the Province and hopes were high. But then started an interesting era, because, although the numbers were up, the provincial and others realized that there were a lot of problems, and there was much "green water coming over the bow." The colleges, I believe, from my own experience, did not realize this, but those in charge of secondary schools and formation knew something was wrong.

After I had been read in as rector and was starting the move into the new building at Bishop Connolly High, J.V. suddenly asked me, "How can we get out of it?" Someday these events will be written up.

He, F. X. Miller (Province Treasurer), Bishop Connolly, his chancellor, and I met many times. The Bishop was very understanding. He settled it all when he asked the Society to stay on as long as possible, and to give him three years notice (as he, too, would give us) if we had to back out.

He would own it, and, as decided earlier at J.V.'s insistence, the name would be Bishop Connolly High, not Xavier High, as announced earlier. The original agreement was for the Society to give the diocese \$500,000 and take over ownership in 1973. The plant was built

with \$3,000,000 raised by the priests and people of Fall River. The Province stayed for twenty-five years

Those were the days that we lived through province congresses and adopted such ideas as the Principle of Attraction and Choice of Ministries. Fr. Bill Guindon and I were deans together and finally vice presidents at Holy Cross. We knew each other well, but on most things, when he became provincial, we were on opposite sides. I argued against the new principles and some of our democratic procedures. I guess “our way of proceeding” can be worked out in many ways.

“The green water over the bow” was really rocking the ship during these years, the late ‘60s and ‘70s. Enough has been written of the cultural changes in the “world” and someday, I hope an historical account will be written of the New England Province during the same storms.

Some men, good men, felt that secondary schools should not be our apostolate. Though they were in that work, they found it lacking. Their cry was: work in the world; live and work with the poor; give retreats and spiritual direction. The new Principles adopted at Our Lady of Round Hills Retreat House backed up this platform.

For me it came to a head at a province meeting at Shadowbook when a delegation from Xavier High School, Concord, led by John Vigneau, put a petition under the door of Bill Guindon, the provincial, proposing that we close Xavier. Only those two men knew this, but Bill put it on the floor for discussion as a priority of major importance, and, therefore, it was first on the agenda.

I opposed this from the first moment and argued that we knew nothing a priori about this. I said that we are not a democratic body that should vote to close one of our institutions. It was not pleasant. A few hours later word reached the Jesuits at Xavier, who did not know of this and were not present with those who were pushing it. Even the rector at Xavier did not know. Alas the ship had taken on some really heavy seas and something was going to sink.

Bishop Connolly High School, the most recently opened, perhaps should have been the first to go, but it was Cranwell and Xavier that disappeared.

They were difficult times. Our structure, to me, became more complicated and fragmented. Vice provincials appeared on the scene and the provincial became more wrapped up in planning. Vatican II arrived and many of us were caught up in the confusion of freedom vs. Catholic teaching.

They were heady times and more “green water” came over the bow. Good priest friends left the Society and the priesthood, some to get married, others to take a job in the marketplace. Many of the movers in the Province, who had advocated for radical change, left, while those who remained wondered, as Bill O’Halloran often said: “Chas, what happened to the halcyon days?”

For all that, I have happy memories of Connolly High and Fall River. We were dealing with students, many of whom were first-generation college-bound sons of middle-class families. Some were sons of immigrants. It was a wonderful apostolate, and as rector of a small community, I was also able to be a full-time teacher of math. My term as rector finished in 1973.

1973-1978: FORDHAM UNIVERSITY

The Principle of Attraction and Choice of Ministries was now in full gear. It seemed to be a matter of: “Look for a job”—perhaps that is too blunt or perhaps that is the “real world” that so many felt we should be engaged in. I had some calls from our apostolates and outside the Province. Fordham was looking for an associate dean of students, and after some prayer and discussion, I headed for the Bronx. It was a good fit.

I had a chance to make new friends and enjoy the hospitality of a very good community. I was the only Jesuit in the department and that was one of the reasons the Vice President, Bill Crowley, invited me to join him.

In the new spirit of the times, I sported a shirt and necktie. In retrospect, for me, that was a big mistake. I was just another person, lost in the mix, and yet the reason for me to be there was to enhance Jesuit presence. Yes, the collar would have been not only proper, but also beneficial to the apostolate. Isn't it basically an external sign, the uniform of the priesthood?

1978-1981: SOUTH CAROLINA

Then I was on the move again. Bill Crowley resigned as Vice President at Fordham University, and at the same time there came a notice from Bishop Unterkeffler of South Carolina seeking a priest to teach religion and be a counselor at Cardinal Newman High School in Columbia, South Carolina. Ah, this new Principle that I opposed—and still do—was adding to my life experience.

But they were three wonderful years. The student of the South was respectful and reasonably studious. I had only the responsibility of the classroom and chaplain's duties. Twenty-five hours a week of teaching and daily Mass kept me busy. There was no A/C, and I could feel my age when I compared this to Baghdad and found this more tiring. But it was a joy to be in a classroom once again.

1981-PRESENT

Frank Miller called me and said John Brooks and he were looking for someone to work in the Development Office at Holy Cross. A Jesuit would be an asset, particularly one who had some knowledge of alumni, etc. At the same time, Fr. Provincial had indicated during 1980-81 that he wanted men to return to the Province, since laborers were scarce in the local vineyard.

On June 27, 1981, I packed a U-Haul and headed North. Subsequently, under Frank Miller's direction, I attended some intense courses in planned giving and then took over the office.

For me, it was a coming home. Many Jesuits from my days in the 1960s were still at Holy Cross, and it was an easy transition. I learned the basics, corralled some good alumni to assist me "pro bono," and did my best to promote the College and raise monies for the apostolate. This is not a work I would choose, but it is one that I did accept as a Jesuit, because I realize the importance of Jesuit education to our Church. Hopefully, our men of talent will teach the message of Christ through classroom, conversation, and chapel.

In 1998 I retired, and now, as Vice President Emeritus and Assistant to the Director of Gift Planning, I visit alumni in nursing homes, attend wakes and funerals, and, when possible, practice my putting.

Thanks to the grace of God, the love of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, the help of the Holy Spirit, and the love and support of family and friends, it has been a great run.

GOD'S PROVIDENCE

RR: Let me just ask you a final question, one we ask all the time. As you look back over all of this, with all these ups and downs, and things that have happened in your life, do you feel that God's providence was at work in your life, leading you from one thing to another in a way that was positive and helpful to the Church, to you, and to other people?

CD: That's easy for me at this point in my life to answer, probably easier now than it was then. "The years teach you much that the days never know." My father used to say that a lot. So, yes, I see divine providence at work in my life. I wouldn't be here without it, because every man hits some forks in the road—which road do you choose? You make conscious decisions every day of your life, so, yes, I see divine providence.

My thanks to you, Richard and Paul, for your kindness and patience.

Fr. Charles J. Dunn, S.J.

- Born:** June 25, 1923, East Milton, Massachusetts
- Entered:** June 29, 1942, Lenox, Massachusetts, St. Stanislaus Novitiate/ Shadowbrook
- Ordained:** June 19, 1955, Weston, Massachusetts, Weston College
- Final Vows:** August 15, 1958, Portland, Maine, Cheverus High School
- 1938 Boston, Massachusetts:** Boston College High School Student
- 1941 Lenox, Massachusetts:** St. Stanislaus Novitiate / Shadowbrook - Novitiate, juniorate
- 1946 Weston, Massachusetts:** Weston College - Studied philosophy
- 1949 Baghdad, Iraq:** Baghdad College - Taught religion, English, and math
- 1952 Weston, Massachusetts:** Weston, Massachusetts: Weston College - Studied theology
- 1956 Pomfret, Connecticut:** St. Robert Hall - Tertianship
- 1957 Portland, Maine:** Cheverus High School - Associate Principal, Prefect of Discipline

- 1960 Worcester, Massachusetts: College of the Holy Cross - Dean of Men
- 1965 Vice President, Dean of Students
- 1967 Fall River, Massachusetts: Bishop Connolly High School - Rector, taught math
- 1968 Worcester, Massachusetts: College of the Holy Cross - Taught math
- 1970 Taught religion
- 1973 New York, New York City: Fordham University - Assistant Dean of Students
- 1978 Columbia, South Carolina: Cardinal Newman High School - Chaplain
- 1981 Worcester, Massachusetts: College of the Holy Cross
Director of Estate Planning
- 1995-1996 Assistant Director of Planned Giving
- 1996-2009 Associate Director of Planned Giving
- 2009- Vice President Emeritus, Assistant to the Director of Gift Planning

Degrees

1948 Bachelor of Arts, Philosophy, Weston College-
Boston College

1949 Master and Licentiate in Philosophy,
Weston College-Boston College

1956 Licentiate in Theology, Weston College