

**New England Jesuit
Oral History Program**



**Fr. Clarence J. Burby, S.J.
Volume 118**

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John J. Karwin, S.J.
Joseph A. Paquet, S.J.

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Oral History Program
Campion Center
319 Concord Road
Weston, MA 02493-1398
781-788-6800
info@jesuitoralhistory.org
www.jesuitoralhistory.org

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. Clarence J. Burby, S.J.
by Fr. Richard W. Rousseau, S.J.
July 6, 2009

FAMILY BACKGROUND

RR: Tell us about your family.

CB: I was born in Baghdad, Iraq, in 1935. My father—God rest him—was British of Anglo-Indian descent, born in India. After the death of his father he found it necessary, in order to help his family, to quit his medical studies to join the British army that went to Baghdad. In due course he left the army and began teaching English in the local Latin parish.

RR: How did your parents meet?

CB: After some years, through church activities, he got acquainted with my mother and they got married. My mother—God rest her—was an Iraqi of mixed parentage. Her father was an Armenian from Turkey, and her mother was a Chaldean from the north of Iraq.

RR: What kind of work did your father do?

CB: My dad continued teaching English, both privately and in church schools. In later years he became the subeditor of *The Iraq Times*, the English newspaper in Iraq.

When I reflect on my parentage and on our family life, I really feel very strongly that I am a man of two cultures. At home, my dad made sure that we spoke English. My mom was able to speak English with us, because she was well tutored in English by my dad during their engagement period. For my family, Arabic became a second, complementary language, which we picked up more and more from our schooling and from our surroundings.

RR: Tell us about your brothers and sisters.

CB: I have three brothers and two sisters. My three brothers, like me, went to our Jesuit high school, Baghdad College. The eldest brother became works manager of a British company that ran a printing press and an English newspaper, *The Iraq Times*. In the late '60s, when the company had to close down, he moved on to London with his family. But in England he had to start from zero and struggle for his living as a married man. Finally, the poor man suffered from heart trouble and died, leaving a widow and three children.

RR: How did the others do?

CB: On the other hand, the other two brothers have managed well enough for themselves. They both married Iraqi girls, who graduated from Al Hikma, our Jesuit

university in Baghdad. My two sisters were educated by the Dominican Presentation sisters in Baghdad.

My elder sister married a Greek-Iraqi man and is presently in England. My younger sister married a German, whom she met while continuing studies in England; she lives in Germany. So, as you see, my family opened out to different cultures.

HIGH SCHOOL AND DISCERNING A VOCATION

RR: Tell us about your school years

CB: Just like my three brothers, I studied at our Jesuit high school in Baghdad. In school I was a hard-working student, and, thank God, I did pretty well. Being at Baghdad College, I grew to discover my vocation in the Society.

RR: Tell us how you came to your vocation to the Society.

CB: Just before graduation from Baghdad College, the Jesuits in Baghdad used to invite all the Christian seniors to three days of recollection. This was the appropriate time to reflect prayerfully on what one would like to do after high school. Some time during the three days, one of our senior Jesuits, the late Fr. Joe Merrick, asked what I hoped to do after graduation.

Though deep down in my heart I was then toying with the possibility of becoming a Jesuit priest, I was really hard put to speak out courageously. For his part, the good Fr. Merrick just listened to me and advised me to go and see another Jesuit father. Fr. Merrick also en-

couraged me to return and talk to him, when I felt more sure of what I would like to do in the future. Actually this conversation was just what I needed to get started thinking prayerfully about my vocation. Soon after that, I informed my parents about my experiences and desire to become a Jesuit priest.

RR: How did your parents respond when you told them you wanted to become a Jesuit?

CB: Both were very positive in their reaction. In fact, my dad was very happy, telling me that he always prayed that one of his children would become a priest.

RR: How had your home life influenced your vocation?

CB: Reflecting back on my parents and how they brought us up, I feel very much that my vocation was nurtured through the way they helped us at home to live our Christian life. Usually every day we prayed together before going to bed and then wished each other good night. And every Sunday we usually went together to Mass; we always celebrated the feasts of Christmas and Easter in a big way. All this certainly nourished my faith and gave me a big boost for my vocation.

ENTERING THE SOCIETY OF JESUS

RR: Tell us about your experience as a novice.

CB: After graduation from Baghdad College I joined the Society at Shadowbrook, Lenox, Massachusetts, on August 14, 1954. As for my novitiate, it was really unforgettable. For, on March 10, 1956, well before the

end of my second year as a novice, fire broke out in Shadowbrook, the first place of my novitiate. We had to run for our lives late at night to keep away from the fire spreading throughout the building that housed the novitiate and the juniorate.

For me personally this fire was providential, helping me to adjust myself better to my new life in the States and to refocus my Jesuit vocation. After Shadowbrook was totally destroyed by fire, I concluded my novitiate and did my juniorate at St. Andrew-on-Hudson, the New York Province's novitiate and juniorate in Poughkeepsie, New York. It was really a change for the better, as it helped me to open up to the New York Jesuits.

PHILOSOPHY YEARS

RR: Tell us about your years studying philosophy.

CB: After finishing my two years of juniorate studies in Poughkeepsie, I and my New England companions went to Weston College in 1958 to begin our philosophy studies. I very much loved my philosophy years. They helped me become much more reflective about my life and its focus on God.

One professor, the late Fr. Gus Devenny, stands out especially. He had been a fine missionary in Baghdad. His missionary spirit encouraged me to prepare myself for my own future work in Baghdad. He also directed the work of my master's thesis in philosophy. Besides these, he guided me to read and analyze Arabic literature. All that helped me to brush up on my Arabic and to develop it a great deal.

REGENCY YEARS

RR: Where did you go for your regency?

CB: My regency years were, of course, at Baghdad College, my high school alma mater. Those years were very interesting, opening me out to my future work in the Near East. My Arabic background helped me to feel at home with my students and to open up to their world. During the three years at Baghdad College, I taught math and religion in freshman year. On the side I helped Fr. Jim Morgan in his Eucharistic Society and Fr. Paul Nash in his work with the year book, *Al Iraqi*.

THEOLOGY YEARS

RR: Tell us about your years studying theology.

CB: When it came to begin my years of theology, I was looking forward to doing my theology in Beirut, where the Near East Province ran a diocesan seminary. That way I would be very much in touch with our Arab world, and I would be doing my studies both in Arabic and French, and not just in English, as it would be if I were to go back to the United States.

But my superiors preferred to send me to India, where I would be close enough to the Near East world. As I reflect back on all that, I thank God that I did my theology in India. Firstly, I was privileged to have Fr. Joseph Neuner as the dean of the theology studies at De Nobili College in Poona, India. Fr. Neuner was the *peritus* [expert] who accompanied Indian bishops to Vatican II, and he was the theologian who helped in putting out the two documents. (1) “The Church in

the Modern World,” and (2) “The Mission Activity of the Church.” Secondly—and this was a very personal point—doing theology in India brought me in contact with the Anglo-Indian relatives from my father’s side. As the saying goes, “Man proposes, but God disposes.”

So with all those benefits, that I cannot thank the good Lord enough for the way everything developed. I really benefitted a lot from doing theology under the supervision of Fr. Neuner, at a time when the Catholic Church began to pass through a period of transition and clashes between the older traditions and the new ways of thinking. And, of course, the experience of meeting face-to-face with close relatives, who before that had been so far from Iraq, opened me to another world and expanded my cultural and religious background.

TERTIANSHIP

RR: Where did you go for tertianship?

CB: As the time for tertianship approached, I asked my superiors if I could do it in a French-speaking place. What I had in mind was the possibility of being in contact with the French language, which in turn would help me to communicate with our Jesuits in the Near East Province, whose cultural language was French. This time the superiors accepted my request and sent me to Belgium, where my theoretical knowledge of French developed into an ability to speak it and to make more use of it in the future.

A TURNING POINT

RR: Were there any major changes for you during tertianship?

CB: Tertianship in Belgium brought me to an important turning point in my future orientation. While I was reaching the last week or so of my long retreat, I got a letter from my superior in Iraq, Fr. Jack Donohue, informing me that I must finish up as soon as possible in Belgium and get back to Baghdad. He was afraid that our high school, Baghdad College, would be taken over by the Iraqi government and that our American Jesuits might have to leave Iraq. In fact the year before, in 1968, the government had taken over our Al Hikma university, and all the Jesuits in the university had to leave the country. And so I was told that I and another Iraqi Jesuit, Yusuf Seferta, might have to run Baghdad College if our American Jesuits were forced to leave.

Well, that was quite shocking for me, to say the least. Suddenly everything came to a head after my years of formation and in a very unexpected way. For me it was a big challenge to move into the unknown. Anyway, I gathered up my courage, putting my trust in the Lord who called me, and I got back to Baghdad.

Less than three months after that, what we had feared, happened. Our high school was taken over and our American fathers had to leave without delay, except for the rector, Fr. Jack Carty, and the school principal, Fr. Ray Powers. The new administration in the school allowed me and Yusuf Seferta to teach religion. Not too long later, Frs. Carty and Powers also left.

And so, there we were, Yusuf Seferta and I, the only Jesuits left.

We somehow managed to carry on with our teaching duties. But, before the end of the school year, due to harassments by some of our domestic workers, we finally decided, with the permission of our superiors, to leave for Beirut. And that, sad to say, brought to an end our educational mission work in Iraq that had begun in the early 1930s. And imagine: The work came to an end just when I was ready after my formation to get back to my home country and to join in the apostolate that had nourished my Jesuit vocation!

WORK IN THE NEAR EAST PROVINCE

RR: What a blow! Tell us about your activities after you had to leave your work in Iraq so abruptly.

CB: As it had happened to me before, I was putting my trust in the Lord who had called me to serve Him in and through the Society of Jesus. So, my going to Lebanon, though it was moving into the unknown future, was really a grace in disguise. Strange to say, it slowly opened me out to my future pastoral possibilities.

After being forced to leave our work in Iraq, my first thought was to continue my theological studies in Europe, but my superiors advised me not to rush into further studies. Accordingly, while looking forward to possibilities for my future ministry, I began delving into pastoral work with different groups in Lebanon. In between, I went to neighboring Syria, where I got acquainted with the work of our Jesuits there. Some

months after that, I was invited by our Jesuits in Damascus to join them in their pastoral work. From then on, with the permission of my New England provincial and while remaining a member of my own province, I cooperated on the pastoral work of the Near East Province. I began to work for the Syrian region of that province.

RR: How did that work out?

CB: From there onwards, through the grace of God I found myself very much at home with various fields of pastoral work in the Arabic language. This work began in Damascus, moved on to other cities in Syria, and extended for twenty-three years. In fact, for me those years in Syria were the beginning and the basis for all my subsequent priestly activities.

I was quite busy during those years. I joined a Syrian diocesan priest as chaplain for Christian university students. I taught Latin for eleven years in the English Department of Damascus University. In addition to these duties, I was also chaplain for various groups: the Christian Life Community, the Teams of Our Lady, the Missionary Sisters of Charity, and the Faith and Light Movement. Meanwhile, I worked very much in the Spiritual Exercises, together with a team of our Jesuits in Syria. All in all these were very unforgettable and fruitful years.

CONCERN FOR PEACE

RR: Yes, you were very active.

CB: But before moving on to speak about my work outside of Syria, I wish to pinpoint something that means a lot to me as a Jesuit, based on my long experience of twenty-three years in the Near East Province. This is in connection with the ongoing, sad conflict between the Palestinians and Israel, that very much influences our peoples in the Near East, and especially our Christians there. I hope that the Jesuits of the New England Province, many of whom have had close and enriching contact with the peoples of the Near East, will make their voices heard for greater justice in that region. For I deeply feel that we need to keep working earnestly and praying constantly to God that something can be done to promote a true peace based on real justice, leading to a change of outlook and action, in order to create a stable region.

RR: Yes, work and prayer are essential.

WORK IN JORDAN

RR: Tell us of your activities after working in Syria.

CB: In summer 1993, after all those years away from my own province, my New England provincial wanted me to join our New England Jesuits in Amman, Jordan. They had started the Jesuit Center in Amman in the mid-'80s and they needed an Arabic-speaking Jesuit. On the other hand, after my many years of service with his Jesuits in Syria, the provincial of the Near East Province tried hard to hold on to me. In fact, when my case reached Fr. General in Rome, who was then Fr. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach [and the former Near East Province provincial], he resolved the issue with

the Near East provincial by checking with him if I had anything against joining our fathers in Amman. So, since I personally had nothing against my going to work in Amman, I finally found myself back with our New England Jesuits. Thus I started my new line of apostolate in Jordan, that has continued since summer 1993 till today.

RR: How did you find your new work?

CB: For me, working in Amman was a whole new ball game. On the one hand, my work has been very much based at our Jesuit Center. Its work depends on three Jordanian lay people, two of whom went for master's degrees at the Institute of Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry at Boston College, where I have also studied. When I first arrived at our Jesuit Center, we started a two-year program of religious education for religion teachers in the local church schools. In this work as well we depended on some local priests, sisters, and lay people. In time, our religious programs at the Center increased and opened out to the different church groups in Amman.

We also organized days of recollection and retreats for different youth groups. Some of these days of recollection were conducted in our Center, and some at other locations. I also personally started individual and group spiritual direction. In due course, I worked out a program based on the 19th Annotation of the Spiritual Exercises, which included both Jordanians and Iraqis. This work encouraged me very much to open up to spiritual direction for sisters and priests in my pastoral work.

Finally, during my years in Jordan I stayed in contact with my home country, Iraq, through pastoral work and retreats. In 2000 I spent four months of my sabbatical year there in Iraq, teaching in the Chaldean seminary in Baghdad and conducting retreats for lay people and religious.

A NEAR ESCAPE

RR: That was a dangerous and lawless time, wasn't it?

CB: Yes, indeed. I had an unforgettable experience when I was on my way from Amman to Baghdad. The political situation in Iraq was getting dangerous during those final years of the Saddam regime. Fr. Al Hicks and I were on a bus entering Baghdad after passing uneventfully through the border with Jordan. Suddenly our bus was attacked by bandits, who got us out of the bus and stole the money in our pockets. Fortunately I had hid most of my money with the driver, who had warned us about the danger of meeting bandits on the way. So, thank God, we were able to have enough funds to manage during our visit to Baghdad!

WORK WITH IRAQI REFUGEES

RR: How did your work go with the Iraqi refugees in Jordan?

CB: As time moved on, my work grew to include helping Iraqi refugees, who were seeking to emigrate to other countries. Their situation became more and more desperate. Many of them had to leave Iraq because of threats to their lives, kidnaping, bomb blasts, and

deaths in the family. Without a residency permit, most of them couldn't find employment in Jordan.

Accordingly, I started to do more and more pastoral work with Iraqi refugees. In the poor sections of Amman, I started to visit some of the poor refugees. In due course I began to have weekly Masses for them, to do spiritual sessions with grown-ups in their homes, and to organize English language courses for grown-ups in a classroom of a neighboring school.

RR: You began to focus more of your attention on helping to meet the immigrants' needs.

CB: Yes. In time, some of our Baghdadi alumni, who are living in the United States, put us in contact with the Chaldean-American Foundation for financial aid to Iraqi refugees. And so, slowly but surely, I got very much involved in this work. This meant meeting with Iraqi refugees who are especially in need, filling out and e-mailing forms, receiving financial aid from the foundation in Detroit, and giving out the aid every month at our Center.

I was helped in this work by an Iraqi, who both aided my contacts with the Iraqi refugees and did the technical work of e-mailing the Foundation. As this work with our Iraqi refugees moved on, the International Jesuit Refugee Service began to see possibilities for helping us to go further in helping Iraqi refugees. Accordingly, after initial contacts with us, JRS started a branch in Jordan to help us develop our work with Iraqi refugees.

At an early stage, Fr. Steve Bonian was appointed director of this work, but health problems forced him to let go of the work. Eventually, the administration moved on to a core group, which included some young Iraqis and some local religious sisters.

For my part, I help out as adviser and contact person. Eventually, Maroun Nejim, a former Jesuit scholastic of the Near East Province, was officially appointed to direct the JRS branch in Amman. Thus, the work developed in two poor sections of Amman. The JRS program included teaching English at different levels, training in the use of the computer, inviting grown-ups to our lectures and activities at our Jesuit Center, visiting the poorer people in their homes, assisting those who need special medical help, etc. As this work develops, I discern that the Lord is calling me more and more to feel deeply the needs of our poor Iraqis and to help them as far as possible.

FUTURE WORK IN IRAQ

RR: What are the possibilities of future work in Iraq?

CB: Where all the work with our Iraqi refugees will lead me, I leave in the hands of our loving Lord. On the other hand, I am still very much interested in going back one day to Iraq. Already since the '90s I used to go there—mostly during summer time—to do various pastoral work in Baghdad. As I mentioned, in 2000 I did part of my sabbatical year in Baghdad, helping in the Chaldean seminary, teaching some courses, and conducting retreats. Also, in the last few years two of our Jesuits in Amman, Fr. Al Hicks (our superior in

Amman) and Fr. Denis Como, who were both formerly stationed in the Baghdad mission, have also been very interested in doing some pastoral work in Baghdad. In fact, Fr. Denis recently finished two and half years at the Chaldean seminary in Erbil, in the north of Iraq. We pray to God and we hope against hope that, in spite of the continuing unstable state of affairs in Iraq after the 2003 invasion, we can succeed, one way or other, to help the church in Iraq and the poor people there.

DIVINE PROVIDENCE

RR: We're nearing the end, so I would like to ask you one general question. As you look back over your life and what's happened to you, do you feel that there's been a providential direction in your life? Do you feel that, in things that have happened to you and around you, God's providence has been at work, helping you as you go along?

CB: Indeed, very, very much, and right through my life, from the beginning of my interest in the Society to today. Yes, I am sure of it. Even though the future is very much unknown, I still maintain my hope and trust in God. One could tend to be very pessimistic on a certain level, but on our deeper level of faith I feel very optimistic.

RR: Well, thank you.

CB: You're welcome.

Suscipe

Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty,
my memory, my understanding,
and my entire will.

All I have and call my own

You have given to me.

To you, Lord, I return it.

Everything is yours; do with it what you will.

Give me only your love and your grace.

That is enough for me.

Amen.

Fr. Clarence J. Burby, S.J.

Born: April 15, 1935, Baghdad, Iraq
Entered: August 14, 1954, Lenox, Massachusetts, St. Stanislaus Novitiate / Shadowbrook
Ordained: April 7, 1967, Baghdad, Iraq, Baghdad College
Final Vows: December 10, 1972, Damascus, Syria, Jesuit Residence

1949 Baghdad, Iraq: Baghdad College - Student
1954 Lenox, Massachusetts: St. Stanislaus Novitiate / Shadowbrook - Novitiate
1956 Poughkeepsie, New York: St. Andrew-on-Hudson - Novitiate, juniorate
1958 Weston, Massachusetts: Weston College - Studied philosophy
1961 Baghdad, Iraq: Baghdad College - Taught religion, math
1964 Poona, India: De Nobili College - Studied theology
1968 Drongen, Belgium: Oude Abdij - Tertianship
1969 Baghdad, Iraq: Bagdad College - Taught religion, student counselor
1970 Beirut, Lebanon: St Joseph University - Catechetical and social work
1971 Damascus, Syria: Maison St. Paul -
1971-1977 Catechetical and social work
1977-1983 University chaplain; taught English, Latin; worked in Center for Religious Education Development
1983-1988 Director of library, subminister, assistant treasurer
1988 Aleppo, Syria: Jesuit Residence -
1988-1990 Chaplain of "Equipes Notre Dame," librarian, CLC chaplain

1990-1993 Prefect of church, chaplain Groupe St. Ignace, local apostolate
1993-Amman, Jordan: Jesuit Center - Director of Religious Education, Assistant Director of the Center, pastoral ministry (aid to Iraqi refugees)

Degrees

1960 Bachelor of Arts, Philosophy, Boston College
1961 Master of Arts, Philosophy, Weston College / Boston College
1964 Licentiate in Sacred Theology, De Nobili College
1982 Master of Arts, Religious Education, Boston College - Institute of Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry

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On the occasion of his Golden Jubilee in the Society of Jesus, August 14, 1954 to August 14, 2004. Fr. Burby wrote in reply to the Anniversary Letter from Fr. General Peter-Hans Kolvenbach. Superior General of the Society of Jesus

Jesuit Center
Amman, Jordan
August 16, 2004

Dear Reverend Father:

It is a source of great joy for me to receive your very thoughtful letter on the occasion of my golden jubilee in the Society. Your gracious letter is very uplifting, especially because I was very fortunate to know you personally during my many years in the Near East Province. For my part, I cannot thank our good Lord enough

for His graces to me over the past fifty years. Besides, I thank you heartily, Reverend Father, for affirming me in my Jesuit vocation. I pray that your offering to me of fifty Masses on behalf of the Society of Jesus will be a source of graces, both for me and for our future work in Jordan and Iraq.

Ever united prayerfully in the Lord,

Fr. Clarence J. Burby, S.J.

Publications

Arabic pamphlets published by the Near East Province of the Society of Jesus

Clarence J. Burby, S.J. *St. Ephrem the Syrian*. Jesuit Center, Beirut, Lebanon. 1990. 44 pages.

Clarence J. Burby, S.J. *Love, Sex, and God*. Jesuit Center, Beirut, Lebanon. 1991. 36 pages.

Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out*. Translated into Arabic by Clarence J. Burby, S.J. Jesuit Center, Beirut, Lebanon. 1995. 166 pages.

Michael Harter, S.J., editor. *Hearts on Fire: Praying with Jesuits*. 1993. Translated into Arabic by George A. Musli, with Clarence Burby, S.J., and Emile J. Al Deek. Jesuit Center: Amman, Jordan. 2005. 204 pages.