

**New England Jesuit  
Oral History Program**



**Rev. Robert D. Farrell, S.J.  
Volume 88**

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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.

## Publications

1. Fr. George W. Nolan
2. Fr. John F. Broderick
3. Fr. Joseph S. Scannell
4. Fr. Joseph G. Fennell
5. Fr. James F. Morgan
6. Fr. John V. Borgo
7. Bro. William J. Spokesfield
8. Fr. Lawrence E. Corcoran
9. Fr. John J. Caskin
10. Fr. William F. Carr
11. Fr. Alwyn C. Harry
12. Fr. John F. Foley
13. Fr. Leo F. Quinlan
14. Fr. Patrick A. Sullivan
15. Fr. John J. McGrath
16. Fr. Victor F. Leeber
17. Fr. Charles G. Crowley
18. Fr. Wilfrid J. Vigeant
19. Fr. James T. Sheehan
20. Fr. Francis X. Sarjeant
21. Bro. Italo A. Parnoff
22. Fr. Dudley R.C. Adams
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24. Fr. Robert E. Lindsay
25. Fr. Ernest F. Passero
26. Fr. Walter M. Abbott
27. Fr. James P. McCaffrey
28. Fr. Aram J. Berard
29. Fr. Joseph F. Brennan
30. Fr. James W. Skehan
31. Fr. Joseph P. O'Neill
32. Bro. Calvin A. Clarke
33. Fr. Edward J. Murawski
34. Fr. Paul T. McCarty
35. Fr. Anthony R. Picariello
36. Fr. Joseph H. Casey
37. Fr. Joseph E. Mullen
38. Fr. Joseph A. Paquet
39. Fr. William G. Devine
40. Fr. Philip K. Harrigan
41. Fr. John J. Mullen
42. Fr. James B. Malley
43. Fr. John F. Devane
44. Bro. H. Francis Cluff
45. Fr. William J. Raftery
46. Fr. John J. Mandile
47. Fr. John W. Keegan
48. Fr. William A. Barry
49. Fr. Robert G. Doherty
50. Bro. Edward L. Niziolek
51. Fr. Albert A. Cardoni
52. Fr. David G. Boulton
53. Fr. Alfred O. Winshman
54. Fr. Paul J. Nelligan
55. Fr. Edward F. Boyle
56. Fr. John F. Mullin
57. Fr. John J. Donohue
58. Fr. Richard W. Rousseau
59. Fr. Francis J. Nicholson
60. Fr. Arthus H. Paré
61. Fr. Richard T. Cleary
62. Fr. Gerard L. McLaughlin
63. Fr. Francis J. O'Neill
64. Fr. Neil P. Decker
65. Fr. Joseph R. Laughlin
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69. Bro. Vincent M. Brennan
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71. Fr. Lawrence J. O'Toole
72. Fr. William J. Cullen
73. Fr. Thomas Vallamattam
74. Fr. Edward J. Hanrahan
75. Fr. Donald L. Larkin
76. Fr. Paul A. Schweitzer
77. Archbp. Lawrence A. Burke
78. Fr. William C. McInnes
79. Fr. Stanley J. Bezuszka
80. Fr. John B. Handrahan
81. Fr. Henry "Harry" J. Cain
82. Fr. William D. Ibach
83. Fr. Herbert J. Cleary
84. Fr. Martin F. McCarthy
85. Fr. Francis A. Sullivan
86. Fr. Robert J. Daly
87. Bro. Cornelius C. Murphy
88. Fr. Robert D. Farrell
89. Fr. James F. Bresnahan
90. Fr. Raymond G. Helmick
91. Fr. William J. Hamilton
92. Fr. John J. Paris
93. Fr. Donald J. Plocke
94. Fr. Joseph F. X. Flanagan
95. Fr. James J. Hosie
96. Fr. Robert R. Dorin
97. Fr. Michael A. Fahey
98. Fr. James W. O'Neil
99. Fr. George A. Gallarelli
100. Fr. Francis R. Allen
101. Fr. Walter R. Pelletier
102. Bro. Paul J. Geysen
103. Fr. Joseph T. Bennett

Interview with Fr. Robert D. Farrell, S.J.  
by Fr. Richard W. Rousseau, S.J.  
December 2, 2008

**SAVED BY A TREE**

**RICHARD ROUSSEAU:** Welcome to our conversation. We will suggest certain things to you and you can follow up as you wish. So let's begin at the very beginning: When were you born and where?

**ROBERT FARRELL:** I was born on March 1, 1930 in Leominster, Massachusetts, at Leominster Hospital.

**RR:** Now tell us something about your father and your mother. Let's begin with your father.

**RF:** Could I go back just a bit in our earlier family history?

**RR:** Sure.

**RF:** I wouldn't be here today if it weren't for a tree in Peshtigo, Wisconsin. On my mother's side, my great-grandmother and my great-grandfather, who were Dennis and Katherine Dacey, came from Ireland and settled in Peshtigo, Wisconsin. Then, on October 8, 1871, there was the Great Peshtigo Fire. It was a terrible forest fire, which destroyed a lot of property and timberland. There were cyclonic winds and 1,200-2,400 people died. It happened on the same day as the Chi-

cago fire, but the Chicago fire got a lot more attention.

My great-grandparents didn't know what to do. They could see the approaching fire and smoke, as well as the many animals rushing through their little farm. There was a tree in their yard that was being pushed back by these powerful winds. Then they noticed water dripping down from its roots. They knew just what to do.

They took their blankets and towels, soaked them in well water, covered themselves with these, and so both they and their children survived, though everything around them was burned. After that, these great-grandparents moved to Leominster, Massachusetts, where my mother was born.

As for my father's side of the family, both his parents came from Drumlion, Ireland. His own father was born in 1860 and baptized there. My father, born in 1902, had a very difficult life. But I always admired him, because I saw him as an extraordinary person. However, his mother went into depression after my father's birth, but in those days they couldn't deal with depression. So she spent her whole life at Grafton State Hospital.

My paternal grandfather died of consumption when my father was twelve. My father's sister died when he was just a little older than that, and then his older brother was gassed in the World War I and died. So my father was raised by his aunt in Leominster. And he had a tough life. He was a very good man, and I often think you can't understand the father and mother unless you know what has preceded them.

A HOME OF DEEP FAITH

RR: Right. What was your parents' faith like?

RF: They were both good parents. My mother was a very lovely lady and had a lot of friends. She and my father were strict, but they were both very loving.

My father worked for C. A. Cross, which was a food distribution company in Fitchburg, Massachusetts. And, from time to time, he would take me with him for the day, if I had a day off or there was a teachers' meeting, which usually took place in October. We'd go and see different stores where he sold the C. A. Cross foodstuffs.

In 1962 my father developed lung cancer and died in August 1963. But he had a wonderful death. He was in Leominster Hospital, and I had been with him the night before he died. He said to me, "Bob, what have I ever done to deserve all the graces God has given me?"

The next morning, after receiving Holy Communion, he went into a coma. In the evening two priests came to visit him on their own initiative. One had visited our friends and was told, "Ted Farrell isn't doing well." The other priest was visiting in the hospital and had also just heard the report about my father. So when my father died, there were two priests there, reading the prayers of the dying. My mother, my younger brother, the doctor, and I were all there as well when he died at 9:15 that night. I thought that now he would see what God had provided for him at the end of his life.

He was a very devout man. He used to stop in church every day during his route and say the rosary. For ten years before he died, he'd go every month from Leominster to the Charlestown Jesuit layman's retreat. He just loved it. Fr. Paul Murphy, as well as the other Murphy brothers, were an important part of his life.

## MOTHER'S LAST WORDS

RR: And how did your mother deal with all this?

RR: Well, after he died in 1963, my mother was a widow for thirty years. She lived by herself in Leominster and died in Quincy Hospital in 1993. When she was dying of pneumonia and old age, I went to anoint her. I took out the pastoral care manual, the Blessed Sacrament, and the oils. And I put them all on a little table by her bed. But she just looked up at me and said, "Forgive me, but forget the book." I just anointed her. I thought afterwards when I was driving back, "You know, it really wasn't necessary for me to be there." It was as though God had already taken care of her. It was amazing.

Both my mother's and father's deaths helped me with my own faith. My mother's last words to me were, "Keep quiet." A few days before she died, I was giving her some sherbet and said, "Oh, you're doing a great job." She was just taking a little bit and finally she said to me, "Keep quiet." I thought to myself, "What nice final words for a mother to her son, "Keep quiet."

## HIS BROTHER AND FAMILY

RR: Tell us something about your brother.

RF: My brother Terence was born in 1940, ten years after I was born. I was pretty much an only child for the first ten years of my life. When I went to college at eighteen, he was pretty much an only child, too. But my brother and I have kept very close.

One of the greatest gifts he has given me is my three wonderful nephews and my two wonderful nieces. My nephew Sean writes plays. He graduated from Loyola Chicago, and is out in Los Angeles. My niece Paige is an assistant manager for a large restaurant conglomerate in Boston. The two other boys,

Terence and John, are at BC High, and Kate is a student in the Hingham public school system. I see them frequently and they're wonderful. They've been a great gift in my life.

RR: Is your brother alive?

RF: My brother is very much alive. He works for the Bank of America in Boston. He handles their real estate. He's ethical, dedicated, and hard-working. He's a Holy Cross graduate. I tried to get into Holy Cross myself in 1948, but I was turned down. That's OK, but when I was accepted three years later at Shadowbrook, I thought, "Well, forget Holy Cross!"

#### HIS EARLY EDUCATION

RR: Tell us a bit about your education.

RF: I grew up in Leominster and went to public schools all the way. I went to George Street School, then to May A. Gallagher Junior High School, and graduated in 1948 from Leominster High School. I had terrific teachers. We had six women teaching in elementary school. They were all unmarried, though two of them got married after I finished school there. However, most of them were Catholic and extremely dedicated people. It was the same in junior and senior high in Leominster. They couldn't have been better role models.

#### THE UNIVERSITY OF VERMONT

RR: Where did you go to college?

RF: I applied to Holy Cross, though I didn't really want to go there, because I would have had to commute from Leominster. I also applied to the University of Vermont and was accepted there. Being away from home that first semester, I really goofed up in class. I was in pre-med and I couldn't balance equations, so I went to see my advisor, Lyman Rowell.

He was a wonderful man, and I told him that I was having a terrible time balancing equations. He said to me, "The wise man Aristotle once said, 'The wise man is the man who knows what he doesn't know.' You don't know mathematics, do you?" And when I said, "No" he said, "Why don't you major in something you like? What do you like?" I said, "I like English." He said, "Well, then, you should major in English." So I did. And I've been happy ever since.

#### THE CALL

RR: A good turning point?

RF: Yes, and because I had disappointed my parents terribly in my first semester at the University of Vermont, I did better the second semester. In any case, I was walking home one day, probably in July after my first year of college, when something happened that I don't want to sound too spiritual. I remember that I was coming from a Wednesday night novena to Our Lady of Perpetual Help. I was walking along the big steel fence by the high school, which is still there, when the thought came to me, just like that: "Become a Jesuit." The strange thing about this, however, was that I had never met a Jesuit.

RR: So where did "Jesuit" come from?

RF: God's grace. I thought about it for a few weeks and I said to myself, "I think I'd better talk to my parents about this." So, of course, I did and they said, "Why don't you go down and see Fr. Haddad at St. Leo's Parish. He went to Holy Cross and he might know a Jesuit who could tell you more."

So I did, and he took me over to Holy Cross, where I had a chat with Fr. Luke O'Connor. He was very nice to me and suggested that I enter the Jesuits right away. But I had been thinking about this for only a

couple of weeks. I said, "I'm going back to the University of Vermont." So I went back to my studies at Vermont.

I had done some cross-country running in my first year. In my sophomore year, I was a pledge in the Sigma Nu Fraternity. I was also on a student government committee. Around February of that year, 1950, a retreat director, Fr. Clark, came up from Harvard, where he was studying philosophy, to give a retreat to the University of Vermont Newman Club. He was a New York Province Jesuit. During his retreat, I said to myself, "I think I'll go in and talk to him about my concern." I told him about my experience and what Fr. O'Connor at Holy Cross had said. I asked him, "How can I know if I have a vocation to the Jesuits?" He said, "Well, if you have a vocation to the Jesuits, you'll be looking for more than what college has to offer." I said, "Thank you very much," and I went out and I thought about it.

It was now April and I was going to be initiated into Sigma Nu Fraternity. And I thought to myself, "I've already had two years at the University of Vermont. I enjoyed it very much. They're great people, and the teachers are very nice and supportive. I said to myself, "If I stay here, it will be two more years that my parents will have to pay my tuition." That's when I applied to the Jesuits.

#### ENTERING THE NOVITIATE

RR: But first you went to St. Philip Neri School, right?

RF: Yes, I got in touch with the Jesuits in Boston, and they said, "Go to St. Philip Neri for further training." I went there for a year. It had to do with learning Latin and Greek, neither of which I had really studied; like the others there, I was a beginner. I met some wonder-

ful priests at St. Philip Neri: Fr. John Barry, a great man, and Fr. George Murphy, along with several others.

Then on July 30, 1951, I entered the Jesuits at Shadowbrook. Fr. John Post was master of novices and Fr. Joe Riel was his *socius* [assistant]. I found Shadowbrook to be very interesting, while, at the same time, I found it very difficult.

RR: In what sense?

RF: Well, I had gone to public schools, while a lot of the fellows in my novitiate class had gone to Jesuit schools—Fairfield, BC High, or Cheverus. All of them had a lot of Latin and many of them had also studied Greek. Because of my very little Latin and no Greek, it was a great struggle for me. I wasn't the brightest of people, so I had to work very hard, and it became very discouraging. But God gave me the grace to keep going with these gifted people in the novitiate.

And Fr. John Post was just wonderful to me. Also, T. J. C. Kelley was there at Shadowbrook then. I spent many hours burning his ear. He was also very helpful to many members of my class. There were a lot of very edifying people there.

#### A SERIOUS ACCIDENT

RF: Then shortly after I took my vows on July 31, 1953, I became part of the hayfield crew. We harvested hay in September and we worked on the farmyard, which was down near Hawthorne's house and close by Tanglewood.

One day we were coming out of that field with bales of hay on our truck. I was sitting on the back of the truck and was about ready to put my foot into the chain which was holding the bales below me. But just at that moment, a bale of hay behind me hit a tree

branch, and then hit me and knocked me to the ground. I broke my wrist and cracked my ankle. However, if I had put my foot into that chain, I would have gone head over heels and probably broken my neck and killed myself.

I spent six weeks being carried everywhere by very kind juniors. I couldn't use crutches because of the cast on my wrist and the break in my foot. Though I was completely disheveled at the time, I got through it OK.

#### JUNIORATE AND A RACCOON CAP

RF: Our teachers were Frs. Willy Carroll and Marty Ryan. They were just wonderful people. We juniors had many funny times together. I enjoyed the juniorate very much.

One day a prankster in the dormitory took a raccoon cap and put it under somebody's bed sheet. I won't tell you who the somebody was. Everybody came in the dormitory before this guy came in to go to bed. He got into bed on that cold January night and lowered his feet down the sheet slowly as it warmed up. And at the moment his feet touched the raccoon hat he jumped out of bed. I could follow all this because I was in the bed next to him. And I could hear him breathing heavily and see his chest heaving. That raccoon cap had been secretly borrowed from Larry Burke, later a bishop, but he had nothing to do with it. I won't tell you who did it. It was one of the funniest things that happened during our juniorate.

RR: By this time, I imagine, the classes were easier for you?

RF: It was easier, yes. Pat Sullivan was the dean and he had a wonderful reply. If I gave him a wrong answer, he'd say, "I can see why you would confuse that with this other Greek verb. It was a good mistake." And I

would think, “Isn’t that wonderful?” These “good mistakes” helped me get through Shadowbrook. I found him very consoling.

When I got to Weston, I found it very interesting. I was glad that Latin and Greek were behind me. I should add that, while we were at Weston, we were supposed to talk to each other in Latin. I tried to do that. I figured that I was simply doing God’s will.

#### GREAT BC TEACHERS

RR: How was Weston for you?

RF: Weston was a great experience for me. There were about seven of us studying English, including Bob Daly, Frank Vye, Paul Naumann (NYK). The BC English professors would come out to Weston and give us semester courses in English lit. They were wonderful. And one of the greatest teachers I ever met was Al Duhamel. He taught at BC for many, many years. I remember his course in Shakespeare and, fifty years later, I still use his approach to *Romeo and Juliet* in my own teaching.

#### REGENCY IN BAGHDAD

RF: It was a very interesting time at Weston. I think I spent more time playing paddleball than I did studying. It seemed OK at the time. While at Weston for philosophy, I volunteered to go to Baghdad and I was accepted. And I went there and found it to be a very, very interesting place. I was there three years. It was like being on a movie set. For the first two years, I was in the boarding house with Muslim and Christian kids. Bob Taft was my superior there during my first year. I had a meeting with him about the boarding house my first night in Baghdad. He said to me, “Bob, there are two ways of doing things in the boarding house: my

way and the wrong way.” That started my very humorous relationship with Bob Taft, which turned out to be very important, because Baghdad was a stressful place.

RR: Could you explain that a bit more?

RF: Well, for one, we had gotten there right after soldiers in the Iraqi army had wiped out the entire royal family. It was a stressful environment. Nevertheless, I found it to be a wonderful place.

During my first month there, I remember sitting out in the garden one night speaking with a Muslim kid from down in the south. We were just making conversation and I said to him, “Do you come from a large family?” He said, “Yes, my father has four wives and I have twenty-eight brothers.” That was my first initiation to the Muslim world.

A few months later, one of the Muslim kids, son of a sheikh, had gone home for the weekend and had been driven back. I just happened to be standing outside the gate of the boarding house when his limousine pulled up. As he got out, I said hello, and added that he had a beautiful car. He said, “Father, that car is yours.” All I could say was “What? I can’t have a car like that.” But he was very insistent, “Father, it is yours.” And when I insisted that I couldn’t take it, he was quite disappointed.

The next day I said to Fr. Sid MacNeil, “Sid, last night, I was offered a limousine by one of these boys.” He said, “Anytime you praise something in Iraq, their custom is to give it to you.” I was very careful about what I praised from then on.

#### MURDERED STUDENT

RR: Do you recall any other particular events?

RF: We had a wonderful Jesuit leader in Baghdad College.

Fr. Bob Sullivan was an extraordinary man. His school ran like a clock. Yet, at the same time, he was very creative and supportive, especially of us scholastics.

The priests there had adapted themselves beautifully to Iraq and the school. They were much loved by the people. For me, it was a wonderful experience to live in a country like that. However, a couple of shocking things happened. One of them concerned an Armenian student.

He was a senior. But some of the town kids in Baghdad thought that he was a Communist, though he was nothing of the kind. So one night, when he was watching a basketball game, he was told, "You have a phone call." When he went to the telephone, he was stabbed to death.

Everybody in the school was heartbroken, so we had a funeral in the college chapel. We put a big table from our recreation room in the chapel and covered it with a sheet for the ceremony. Some of his classmates carried the coffin in and put it down on the table. We then had a ceremony that went for about twenty minutes. I don't believe there was a Mass.

When the boys lifted the coffin from the table, the cloth on the table went up with it. It hung there for a second and then dropped back onto the table. We could see it was soaked in blood. He had been stabbed in the back, and they don't embalm people in Baghdad. They simply put you in the coffin. It was all so shocking. I can still remember going into the chapel after we had come back from the cemetery and seeing a drop of blood on the chapel's marble floor. I'll never forget that little inch of blood.

RR: I assume that he was killed by people from off campus?

RF: Yes, it was done by people in the city who were in-

volved in politics. During my third year there, however, things generally went along well for the seniors. Yet there was another political incident. Some Baghdad College boys seemed to be interested in just keeping Iraq for the Iraqis. But others wanted to join up with Jamal Abdul Nasser in the United Arab Republic.

One of them was a senior, Basim Al-Umar, the president of the senior class and one of the greatest Muslim kids you could imagine. The students had to wear a shirt and tie. When he was beaten up by off-campus political thugs, I can remember seeing Basim's shirt all covered with blood. It was distressing, because at Baghdad College the Muslims, Christians, and a few Jewish students all lived together, played together, and had sports teams together. They never had any problems. As I said, the trouble came from off campus.

The next day, I was talking to a Muslim junior and said, "Isn't it too bad that we can't have peace at least on the campus of Baghdad College?" And he said, "Father, we will never have peace. It has been this way from the beginning." And that was very accurate. The Iraqis were certainly able to put up with all sorts of difficulties, problems, pains, and distress. But yet they could still manage to go on with their lives.

#### AN EDIFYING COLLEAGUE

RR: In general, how would you evaluate your three years in Baghdad?

RF: I found Baghdad to be a very great experience. It was one of God's great blessings to me. One of the nice things was living with a fellow scholastic, Tom Manning. At the end of my first year, around June 11, Tom contracted hepatitis. He went into the hospital and died there on the Feast of St. Aloysius, June 21. I was there with Charlie Healey when Tom died.

Tom was one of the most edifying guys I ever lived with. He would make a fifteen-minute visit to the Blessed Sacrament every single night. I saw him do that when I was a junior, again during philosophy, and again in Baghdad. And I never once heard Tom say anything negative about anyone. He was a real saint.

#### A BREAK IN LEBANON

RR: What did you do for a break?

RF: We had a place in Lebanon that we would go to in the summer. It wasn't much, just an old Jesuit school. There were no screens on the windows. But it was up in a cool area overlooking the Mediterranean.

I said to Tom in the middle of his first year, "Listen, let's play a joke on Charlie. I'm going to tell you I can't wait to get to Lebanon and spend time up in that 'lovely spot.'" And Tom was to say in the presence of Charlie Healey, "Boy, Bob, you make it sound so good, I can't wait to get there myself." So Tom and I laughed and laughed. Charlie knew nothing about this trick. But after Tom died, I told Charlie about our plot to get him excited about that dump in Lebanon. In Baghdad we had to make our own fun. We managed to have what I would call a nice life with simple things to entertain us.

Stan Gerry had a record player and he'd play records at night while we sat under the palm trees. We would have dinner together under the stars. It was wonderful.

#### THEOLOGY AND PASTORAL EXPERIENCE

RR: You left Baghdad before the school was closed?

RF: Yes, I left there in June 1961 and had nothing to do with the real closing in 1968.

RR: That was a great experience for you.

RF: It was a wonderful experience. They were all edifying Jesuits.

RR: So then you went back?

RF: I went back to theology at Weston College, and I also found that to be very wonderful. I used to go to the Lyman School in Westborough on Sunday mornings to teach catechism. I also played paddleball a lot. I took John Lynch's canon law and moral theology courses. And after I left Weston, I found these courses to be very valuable.

RR: How about Mo [Maurice] Walsh's canon law courses?

RF: Yes, Mo Walsh was great as well. These were very wonderful, substantial courses. And the other teacher I really admired was Fr. Bill Reed. I enjoyed theology very much. After I was ordained, I went down to help out at St. Ignatius Church for a month. Fr. Tom Hurlihey had been the pastor there for years and years. And once, when I was there, a guy came to his rectory asking for money, which he said he needed to go some place. So I gave him five dollars. When I told Tom about this the next morning, he said, "Oh, Bob, giving someone five dollars will bring every beggar in Boston up here to St. Ignatius." He was a great guy and I learned a lot pastorally from him. And from there, I went to Auriesville, New York, for my tertianship.

#### TERTIANSHIP AT AURIESEVILLE

RR: How did your tertianship go?

RF: I loved it. Fr. John McMann was the tertian master. And he told us right at the beginning of tertianship, "When I was provincial in New York, I had a hard time getting men to give retreats, so I'm going to send you out to give retreats." I went out to give retreats thirteen times during my tertianship. It would be ei-

ther a weekend retreat for students at Manhasset in Long Island or a day of recollection in one of the small towns in upper New York.

Under John McMann's supervision, tertianship was a wonderful experience. I can remember the first night of the long retreat. When he came in, I said to myself, "How am I ever going to get through thirty days of silence!" However, at the end of the long retreat, I can still remember saying also to myself, "If I had just four more days, I might be able to understand what I really want to find out." He was a great man.

#### TEACHING ENGLISH

RR: Where did you have your first assignment?

RF: I went to Shadowbrook to teach English. It turned out to be very interesting. I taught the ordinary English courses in the juniorate, and I also taught a course in advanced placement English at Cranwell, which was just across the way. Teaching young Jesuits was a great experience. It turned out that I was there only two years, because they moved the scholastics' program down to Boston College.

My second year there, I was made dean. And one day I got a phone call from Vinnie Lapomarda, who was at Holy Cross at the time. He said, "They put you at the top of the heap, even though you can't even conjugate the Greek verbs." It was funny, and I often find a great deal of humor in both my assignments and in the Society. I found it great to be teaching at Shadowbrook.

When Jimmy Benson was made headmaster at Cranwell, the provincial, Fr. John V. O'Connor, asked me if I would go and teach English there, since the juniorate at Shadowbrook had closed down. Actually, it was the last place I wanted to go to teach, but I grew

to love Cranwell.

I was also in charge of a dormitory of eighty boys, some sophomores and some juniors. My rector there, Fr. Frank Mackin, was one of the best rectors I ever had. I'll never forget getting a letter from him about a week after I was assigned to Cranwell by the provincial. He wrote, "Welcome aboard." I said to myself, "What a wonderful way to welcome a person to a new house!" I've learned so much from the Jesuits who were ahead of me.

Frank Mackin was a wonderful rector. We'd have dinner together, while all the students were in the dining room. We'd then go to our recreation room for about a half hour before going back to the dorms around 7:30 PM. Frank would always be the center of attention and was always quite funny.

RR: He'd always have all kinds of stories to tell.

RR: That's right. I remember one night he brought in his notebooks of his time at BC and his meetings with the Kennedys. Those two hours were some of the happiest of my life, as we laughed at his wonderful stories.

He was also very kind to me. We had a guest section in the St. Joseph's building. I asked him one summer, "Could I have my mother come up here for a weekend and go over to Tanglewood?" And he said, "Bob, you can have your mother come up anytime you want. You will never find another person in your life who is as interested in you as your mother is." That was Frank's wisdom. He was just wonderful.

#### GROUNDHOG IN BED

RR: How did you find the boys?

RF: Cranwell was a wonderful place, and I found the boys very respectful in general. I do recall that, one morning one of the boys came into class and said, "Father,

we have a surprise for you.” And sure enough, that night I found a dead groundhog in my bed. I had been asked to go down and open a boy’s door as a trick to get me out of my room. When I came back, I found what looked like a small pillow under the covers of my bed. I pulled back the spread and there was the dead groundhog lying on a school newspaper. I said to myself, “Oh boy, this is something.”

In class the next day, even though the two boys who I knew had done it were there, I said nothing. We just went on with class. The next day the perpetrators set up Tom Hubert to question me in class. He asked, “Father, did you find a dead groundhog in your bed the other night?” I said, “Yes, I did.” “Well, Father,” he added, “what did you think about finding a dead groundhog in your bed?” I said, “Well, Tom, nobody likes to find a dead groundhog in his bed, but as a matter of fact, one of the boys Scotch-taped the poem ‘The Groundhog’ by Richard Eberhart to my suite door.” We had dealt with that poem in February and it was now April. I continued, “I thought it was wonderful that the boy remembered that poem.” Then I just went right back to where we were in our book.

Then two years ago at BC I had one of the twin sons of the Cranwell student who put the groundhog in my bed. One day I invited his wife and the two boys to lunch at St Mary’s Hall. I said to her, “You have two wonderful gentlemen there.” She said, “Well, their father has been very strict with them.” I thought to myself, “Here’s a guy who put a dead groundhog in my bed who has raised these wonderful sons!” I saw it as a tribute to the Cranwell education.

#### SHOOTING MOVIES AT CRANWELL

RR: It sounds like you had a lot going on there then.

RF: Yes, life at Cranwell was very interesting. I had gotten to know William Gibson, the playwright, who just died last week. And also Arthur Penn, who participated in the play-writing group that used to meet over in Stockbridge. Arthur was filming the movie, "Alice's Restaurant," which was based on some guys dumping rubbish in the woods in Stockbridge. The theme song by Arlo Guthrie, "Alice's Restaurant," went on for seventeen minutes.

Since Arthur was filming on a nearby location, I asked Frank Mackin about letting Arthur use Cranwell for some shots. He said, "Oh, fine. No problem at all." Arthur was thrilled to use the big Cranwell Hall as the University of Arizona where Arlo Guthrie had gone to school, and Frank Mackin's office as the dean's office at the University of Arizona. The Berkshires were a good place for photography, because there were so many interesting people there who enjoyed serving as extras.

#### GESTAPO BOB

RR: How did you like living in the dorms?

RF: Being in a Cranwell School dormitory of eighty boys was a lot of fun. From time to time, I used to set my alarm for three o'clock Sunday morning. And I'd go outside and into the dorm to see if any lights were on in any rooms. I'd walk down the corridor to see if there was any funny stuff going on. So they gave me the nickname, "Gestapo Bob."

One boy, who later went to Columbia and medical school, put a Swastika in acrylic paint on my door on graduation day. And if you ever go back to what was Founders Hall at Cranwell, you would see a little bit of black that's still there to this day.

## CRANWELL IS CLOSED

RR: How long were you at Cranwell?

RF: Six years, and then I learned Cranwell was closing down the next year. Then I saw a notice in the province news that they wanted an English teacher for a year to fill in for a Jesuit at St. Paul's College at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg, Canada.

Al Reddy had put the notice in. I knew Al, because I had gone to Breadloaf School of English at Middlebury College with him five summers. I said to Al, "I don't have a doctorate, but do you think that they'd be interested?" He checked it out and said, "I don't think the guy you'd be replacing has one either.

So I spent that year in Manitoba. I was there during one of the worst blizzards they ever had. It was so bad that for the first time ever, Hudson Bay Company was closed.

I was with five or six Jesuits who had been at St. Paul's College for many years. They worked very hard and did a lot of apostolic work in the town. I remember going often to a convent to say Mass. One February morning, I was going out to the car when it was twenty-seven degrees below zero. When I started the car, the tires would go ka-boomp, ka-boomp, ka-boomp, because they were frozen stiff. They then gradually softened up. When you'd come to an intersection with a stoplight, the cars in front of you would be belching thick exhaust. You had to be very careful. So it was an interesting year.

I've often thought to myself about how I debated about leaving or staying at Cranwell one more year until it closed. Then I thought to myself, "Going now will be a good experience for me." And I can remember standing on the street waiting for a bus to go back to St. Paul's after going to a Royal Winnipeg Ballet

program and saying to myself, “Boy, if I hadn’t taken this, I would never have known how stupid I was to not take it.” It was a wonderful experience up there.

#### CHEVERUS: A GREAT CHOICE

RF: At the end of that year, I got a letter from Jimmy Burke, then in charge of teaching assignments. He asked me if I would like to go to BC High or to Cheverus in Portland? I decided to go to Cheverus, and it turned out to be a great choice. I was there from 1975 to 1990.

There were 400 boys in the school, so you got to know everybody. Parents loved the school and it was just a beautiful, beautiful place to be. We were near Old Orchard Beach, which was a great place to drive to on a Sunday afternoon and walk on the beach.

#### THE DEATH OF RAY SWORDS

RF: One of the experiences at Cheverus that I will never forget was the death of Ray Swords. We were sitting around having drinks and Ray had a Manhattan on his knee when, all of a sudden, he just went, “Aghhh.” So Neil Decker stood up and took the Manhattan from Ray’s knee and put it on a little table at his side. And Ray was gone just like that.

I couldn’t help thinking, “What a wonderful way to go in the midst of your brothers.” Ray went right to heaven, there’s no doubt about that. Afterwards, the rector, Don Keegan, spread some of Ray’s clothes out on a couple of beds. I got one of Ray’s black suit coats. Then when I reached in the right-hand pocket, I found aspirin tablets, an indication of the pain he suffered in his later years, including his work at Mass General Hospital. His other pocket was full of Sacred Heart badges. I thought that it was great to have these

things. I said to myself, “Isn’t this wonderful to see how these two things symbolized Ray.”

RR: As I understand it, some people felt that because of his health, he should not have been given that last job as president of Cheverus. And they were right. It turned out to be too much for him.

RF: Yes, it was probably too much for him. But Ray was a saintly guy, and he would take whatever the provincial wanted him to do. He saw that as God’s will. There was no question about that.

#### WONDERFUL YEARS AT CHEVERUS

RR: In general, how did you find those years there?

RF: I had fifteen wonderful years at Cheverus. For ten years, I had the opportunity to give a conference every month, from September to June, to the Sisters of the Precious Blood, contemplative nuns. All this added up to a hundred conferences over ten years! Though my spiritual ideas had run out after the first two years, they were always delighted by my coming. They liked the fact that after my twenty-minute presentation, we had an informal conversation for another twenty minutes. I realized then that so much in religious life depends on appreciating God’s gifts. I thought to myself, “After I went there for ten years, saying the same thing over and over again, they just accepted it beautifully.” It was a wonderful experience.

One of the people I lived with and whom I really admired, was John Clancy. He was an old man by that time and he used to go to two nursing homes almost every day. And they loved him at the nursing homes. He had arthritis, and it would take him five minutes of struggle to get out of a car. Yet he’d go to those nursing homes every day because the people loved him so much. He was a very edifying guy.

## FROM CHEVERUS TO BC

RR: How did you come to move to BC?

RF: In 1990 I came down to BC. I used to give retreats in the summers; the summer of 1984 I didn't have any. When Don Plocke came up to Portland for a trustee meeting at St. Joseph's College, he told me that Jim Woods was expanding the BC summer school.

I got in touch with Jim, who said, "Sure, come on down and we'll have you teach writing." I taught writing at BC during the summers of 1984 to 1990. In 1987, Dan Lewis gave me a sabbatical from Cheverus. I spent one semester at BC, teaching a course in poetry, and the second semester, I was free. I talked with Jim and with the provincial then, Bob Manning, about moving to BC. I had been at Cheverus for fifteen years and Jim didn't have any Jesuit teaching in the evening college. Bob Manning was very kind and he said, "You've been teaching in high schools for thirty-years; you deserve a change." So that's when I went to BC in 1990.

RR: That was very thoughtful of him.

RF: Yes, it was wonderful. I started teaching in the BC English Department during the day and teaching a course each semester for Jim. I also did two summer school courses there. Then, in 1993, Bob Barth, asked me if I would work as his Assistant Dean of Arts and Sciences to deal mainly with freshmen students. I did that for six years until Bob retired.

When that happened, I decided to go back to just teach. Then I was asked by Dr. Wolff, head of the pre-medical program, to be a pre-medical advisor. And I did that for five years. Each of the twelve teachers would be a advisor to about ten juniors. We would gather all their materials and write their letter of recommendation. We'd then send them to Dr. Wolff for their applications to medical schools. I met some bril-

liant, brilliant young men and women. I thought to myself, “Boy, these people going into health care are really terrific.”

#### KAIROS STUDENT RETREAT

RR: Did you have any pastoral opportunities at BC?

RF: When I was sixty-eight, which was ten years ago, I was in the office when a student came in and said, “Father, seven of us are going to run a Kairos retreat like those we had in our high schools. We were given your name. So would you like to come?” So I said, “Sure.” You can’t say no to a retreat. I went to their Kairos retreat in Charlton, Massachusetts. The seven kids gave the talks themselves.

RR: I see. So they weren’t asking you to give the retreat?

RF: That’s right. I was just there to say Mass. I was overwhelmed by this student retreat experience. I was sixty-eight years old and thought I had my fill of spiritual experience until these kids came in all dressed up and gave their spiritual talks. They were also listened to by thirty-five transfixed kids. I said to myself, “This is just wonderful.” Going on that Kairos retreat was one of the great joys of my life. I have now been on ten of these retreats at BC. And I have always found them to be enriching experiences.

I also say Mass for the freshmen every third week over at the Newton Campus and hear confessions every Friday. We have confessions every weekday here at BC, and I love to hear them.

#### CHALLENGING COURSES

RR: Would you say a bit about your courses?

RF: Each semester I teach three courses.

RR: That keeps you busy.

RF: It keeps me busy, and I love its great variety. I have

generally thirty-six freshmen in a literary themes course. The major themes are: "Paying a Price for Love," "Grappling With Mortality," and "Seeking the Divine."

RR: Do they respond positively to these themes?

RF: They respond wonderfully. I give a quiz every day, and this particular semester I again have thirty-six freshmen in the class, along with a few sophomores and juniors. I would say, based on these quizzes, that these young people are very gifted. It is such a joy to be in their presence. Really. They're wonderful. They write well and have their hands up all the time. They're tremendous.

RR: Do they volunteer for the course?

RF: Oh yes. They sign up for the course on their own. Each semester I teach a course for seniors in the Capstone program. We use literature to talk about work, spirituality, relationships, and civic duty. One such course is called "Passages," which is based on St. Teresa of Avila's "All Things Pass, God Alone Remains."

The other Capstone course is called "Five Heroic Americans." This includes Thoreau, Emerson, Emily Dickinson, Robert Frost, and Mary Rowlandson. And every semester I have a course in the evening college, which I like very much. At present, I have I have fifteen students, ranging in age from nineteen to fifty-five in the Woods College course, "Survivals."

#### AN INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

RR: You might be interested to know that I once met Robert Frost on the BC campus.

RF: Did you really? Good for you. Wonderful. I have been very blessed to be at St. Mary's Hall. It's a wonderful international community. This morning I had break-

fast with a Jesuit from China. I think he's the first one from mainland China to become a Jesuit. He was ordained in San Francisco in the spring.

Then there is a fellow from Indonesia, who is finishing up his degree in educational administration. Also, there's a Jesuit from Slovenia, who is getting his degree in philosophy. It's a great blessing to live at St. Mary's and to have these wonderful conversations with Jesuit graduate students from all over the world.

#### SOCIETY'S FUTURE

RR: What do you think lies in the future for the Society and for the Church? Where are we going? Do you have any thoughts on that?

RF: I don't. No, I really don't. I haven't the slightest idea. I would like to see more vocations to the Society. One of the great things at BC is Fr. Paul McNellis's group called "The Sons of St. Patrick." Three years ago, a couple of boys had said, "Could we get together and chat about spiritual things?" So Paul said, "Sure."

And one night he asked me to go to their meeting because he was hearing confessions. So I went to the conference room and sat down at six o'clock. There were about ten boys there. Then they said, "We're going into the chapel to pray. Would you like to come?" I said, "No, I'll stay here."

When the boys came back after about ten minutes with about a dozen others, one of them gave a twenty-minute talk on the pope's encyclical on charity. Then the others discussed it for about a half hour, and that was it. From this year's group alone, there are four vocations.

RR: It's encouraging to hear that.

RF: Yes. One of them, a brilliant kid and the captain of the BC lacrosse team, joined a community of very poor

Franciscans. Another joined the Jesuits in the California Province, and a third entered the Oregon Jesuit Province. And I'm not sure where the fourth one went; I think it was to a diocesan seminary.

And this "Sons of St. Patrick's" group continues. They just love Fr. Paul McNellis and he dedicates himself to these contacts. If you want to see *cura personalis* at work, just look at Fr. Paul McNellis. He gives these kids all sorts of time. So I would say that the more Jesuits get involved with students in that way, the more hopeful our future will be.

#### GOD' PROVIDENCE

RR: In conclusion, I like to ask a general question. As you look back over your life, did you feel God's providence influencing your life?

RF: I would say that my whole life has been touched by God's providence. I will always remember walking home one Wednesday night in Leominster, Massachusetts. I suddenly heard a voice in my mind saying to me, "Become a Jesuit." For me, it was a clear indication of God's grace at work.

I also can never forget how, at the time my father died, some priests who had not even been called, came into his room. And I was reminded of my father's great devotion to Our Lord and the Blessed Mother. And that memory has been a wonderful support to this day for my own faith.

As I look back, I see how my life has received blessing after blessing. I could never begin to thank God for the gifts he has given me, especially God's calling me to the Society of Jesus.

I can still remember how I was at St. Philip Neri and went to a St. Francis Xavier Novena given by Fr. Paul Barry, who was in the mission band. I remember

especially what he said at the end of his novena, “Please pray for me, lest, preaching to others, I become a cast-away.” I thought to myself, “Isn’t that wonderful.”

As a matter of fact, I was living on the fourth floor of Weston College in theology when he died in his room down at the end of my corridor. I thought to myself, “God bless him. He died in the Society. He’s gone to where he wanted to go.” That’s the kind of grace I’d like to have myself.

RR: Thank you for telling us about God’s graces in your life. We have had an edifying conversation. God bless you.

RF: God bless you, too.

## A Gaelic Prayer

Be Thou my Vision,  
O Lord of my heart!  
Naught is all else to me,  
Save what Thou art.  
Thou, my great Father,  
I, Thy dear son:  
Thou in me dwelling,  
I, with Thee one.  
Be Thou my Battle Shield,  
Sword for the fight;  
Be Thou my dignity,  
Thou my Delight.  
Thou my soul's Shelter,  
Thou my high Tower;  
Raise Thou me heavenward,  
Power of my Power.  
Thou, and Thou only,  
First in my heart:  
High King in heaven,  
My Treasure Thou art.  
Heart of my own heart,  
Whatever befall,  
Still be my Vision,  
O Ruler of All!

VII Century

**Fr. Robert D. Farrell, S.J.**

**Born:** March 1, 1930, Leominster, Massachusetts  
**Entered:** July 30, 1951, Lenox, Massachusetts, St.  
Stanislaus Novitiate / Shadowbrook  
**Ordained:** June 13, 1964, Weston, Massachusetts,  
Weston College  
**Last Vows:** April 27, 1987, Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts,  
St. Mary Chapel, Boston College

1945 Leominster, Massachusetts: Leominster High School  
- Student  
1948 Burlington, Vermont: University of Vermont  
Burlington - Student  
1950 Boston, Massachusetts: St. Philip Neri School -  
Student  
1951 Lenox, Massachusetts: St. Stanislaus Novitiate /  
Shadowbrook - Novitiate, juniorate  
1955 Weston, Massachusetts: Weston College - Studied  
philosophy  
1958 Baghdad, Iraq: Baghdad College - Taught English  
1961 Weston, Massachusetts: Weston College - Studied  
theology  
1965 Auriesville, New York: Our Lady of Martyrs -  
Tertianship  
1966 Lenox, Massachusetts: St. Stanislaus Novitiate /  
Shadowbrook - Taught English  
1968 Lenox, Massachusetts: Cranwell School - Taught  
English, Chair of English Department  
1974 Winnipeg, Canada: St. Paul's College at the  
University of Manitoba - Taught English  
1975 Portland, Maine: Cheverus High School - Taught  
English, Chair of English Department  
1986 Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts: Boston College -  
Sabbatical. Fall - Taught English

1987 Portland, Maine: Cheverus High School - Taught English, Director of Community Service Program  
1990 Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts: Boston College -  
1990-1993 Taught English  
1993-1999 Assistant Dean of College of Arts and Sciences, Mentor of AHANA Students, taught English  
1999-2004 Taught English, pre-med student advisor  
2004- Teaching English in English Department, and in Woods College of Advancing Studies

### Degrees

1957 Bachelor of Arts, English, Boston College  
1958 Master of Arts, Philosophy, Weston College-Boston College  
1965 Bachelor of Sacred Theology, Weston College  
1966 Master of Arts, English, Middlebury College

### Honors

2003 The Robert D. Farrell, S.J., Scholarship Fund was established in the Woods College of Advancing Studies. Fund assets stand at about two million dollars.