

**New England Jesuit
Oral History Program**



**Rev. Michael A. Fahey, S.J.
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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 some times 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

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Rev. Michael A. Fahey, S.J.
December 1, 2008

Since I served as an editor for many years, I chose to assist the editorial staff of this series by writing out my questions and answers. So, although this is not an “oral” interview but written remarks, the voice behind the words is mine. [Although the questions are Rev. Fahey’s, for consistency RR: stands for the usual interviewer, Rev. Richard Rousseau. Ed.]

PARENTS

RR: Tell me about your mother and father.

MF: My mother was a British citizen born in India, where her father served as an officer in the Royal Irish Regiment. She and her sisters were educated at a boarding school in England run by the Anglo-Belgian sisters of Saint André.

My father was a Cleveland native. After high school he moved to Boston to work for the Gillette Safety Razor Company, where his uncle Frank was vice-president. In 1920 he was asked to oversee the opening of a Gillette factory in London, where he lived for some ten years, during which time he married. After the Depression my father relocated with the family back

to the States. I was born in Ohio.

RR: How was it that you ended up in Connecticut?

MF: My father's work brought us to Norwalk, Connecticut. I arrived there when I was only one year old.

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

RR: Did you attend a Catholic elementary school in Norwalk?

MF: I had the good fortune of attending St. Mary's Elementary School in Norwalk, conducted by the Sisters of Mercy. It was a first-rate school, and the sisters were fine teachers. They taught me the basics of good writing, for which I am grateful to this day. My favorite subjects were reading, spelling, and geography.

I learned enough Latin to become an altar boy, and to sing Gregorian chant. One day, in the fifth grade, a visiting Holy Ghost (Spiritans) missionary working in Tanganyika showed us slides of his mission station. I decided there and then to become a Holy Ghost missionary in Africa, until my Dad told me to wait until I graduated from high school.

FAIRFIELD PREP

RR: When did you begin high school with the Jesuits at Fairfield?

MF: The Jesuits had just recently opened a prep school in nearby Fairfield. I passed the entrance exam and began there in 1947. The curriculum was heavily weighted toward classical and modern languages.

As teachers I had a series of Jesuit scholastics, including Oliver Nickerson, Miles Fay, Frank Devine, etc. I was impressed with how they could combine priestly ministry with teaching. By senior year I was determined to apply to the Jesuits.

HIGH SCHOOL HIGHLIGHTS

RR: Any highlights during your four years as a student at Fairfield Prep?

MF: In junior year we were introduced to Homeric Greek through an experimental program that had us translating books of the Odyssey after several months. Our teacher, Miles Fay, organized a public *actus* [presentation] on the epic in which several of us (including future two Jesuit novices, Jim Linehan and Tom Mathews) displayed our skills in translating, in discussing mythology, and presenting the history of ancient Greece before some professors of classics from Yale and Columbia.

Another high point during my time at the Prep was a three-month's summer visit to England in 1949 to visit my grandmother and other relatives. England was still recovering from the considerable destruction by bombings in World War II. Food and gasoline rationing was still in effect. The visit opened my eyes to the dreadful impact of the war in which three of my own siblings served in the armed forces.

VOCATION

RR: When did you decide to enter the Jesuits?

MF: By the end of senior year in 1951 six of us out of twenty-five in home room 4-A had applied to the Jesuits. The Sodality, school retreats, and the example of the Jesuit teachers were contributing factors. I was not drawn to the diocesan clergy, because I considered rectory life (often under a strict pastor) to be uninviting, and I wanted to teach.

NOVITIATE AND JUNIORATE

RR: What was life like in the novitiate and juniorate at Shadowbrook?

MF: Novitiate life in those pre-Vatican II days was strict

and ruled by formation principles that few would support today. We led a highly protected and regimented life, but few of us dreamed of questioning the way it was. I missed my home life (especially as we had visiting days only twice a year). I found a lot of the novitiate customs puzzling. But there was a sense of camaraderie that sustained us.

Life in the juniorate was far more agreeable with its greater flexibility and more time to study and read. We had several memorable teachers, such as Willy Carroll and Marty Ryan, who awakened us not only to literature, music, the fine arts, but also to the diversity of Jesuit life.

STUDYING PHILOSOPHY IN BELGIUM

RR: Where were you sent to do philosophy studies?

MF: At the end of the juniorate in 1955, four of us sailed on the S. S. America to Europe for philosophy studies. I was assigned to the French-speaking philosophate in Louvain, Belgium. The large community there also included a diverse international theologate, where the journal, *Nouvelle revue théologique*, was published. Two other New Englanders were there: Gerry Kirk and Ed O'Flaherty.

The place had a vibrant tradition of philosophy in the transcendental Thomism of Joseph Maréchal. I found the courses very interesting and challenging. We studied Teilhard de Chardin, Maurice Blondel, Gabriel Marcel, and Paul Ricoeur. I had anticipated that Jesuit life in Europe would be much stricter than in America. Actually, it reflected a notably freer atmosphere with stress on personal responsibility and initiative.

On Sundays in Louvain we used to visit the nearby Benedictine monastery of Mont César, where already some of the future liturgical reforms of Vatican II were taking shape. In the summers I traveled a lot. One

summer I improved my French at the philosophate at Vals, and the next summer I took courses in German at the University of Vienna. To prepare for my *de universa* exam in philosophy I spent several months at the old Heythrop College, Chipping Norton, Oxford.

REGENCY AT FAIRFIELD PREP

RR: Where did you spend your regency when you returned to the USA?

MF: I was assigned to Fairfield Prep for the first two years. In fact I was the first Prep graduate to return to teach there as a scholastic. I was fortunate both years having the “brain class,” some twenty-five bright students. I was their home room teacher, and taught them Latin, Greek, French, and English. I also ran the school’s literary magazine and the yearbook. The faculty included ten scholastics and a large Jesuit presence. The Prep School and the University shared the same campus and residences. I enjoyed the teaching a lot.

STUDY AT FORDHAM

RR: What about your third year of regency?

MF: I moved to Fordham University, where I completed a master’s degree in French literature in one year. Since I was already familiar with French, the program was not difficult. I read a wide cross section of authors from the medieval to the modern period. I was particularly interested in some of the religious writers, such as Bossuet, Fénelon, Richard Simon, etc. This was the beginning of my concentration on theology.

NEW TESTAMENT ABSTRACTS

RR: From Fordham where did you go for the pre-ordination course in theology?

MF: I headed for Weston College in its original location in the town of the same name for the traditional four-

year program. The years overlapped with the opening of the Second Vatican Council. It was a time of transition and change, but most of the professors (with the exception of Ed Kilmartin) were traditional in their course content and pedagogy.

What saved me during those years was my work with [Fr.] Jakie Collins as managing editor of *New Testament Abstracts*. A sign of the loosening up of the regime at Weston, I was permitted to study Scripture at Union Theological Seminary in New York City during two summers. According to prescriptions of canon law at the time, I needed permission to read biblical journals published by non-Catholics. The provincial (Jimmy Coleran) gave me permission to do so with the proviso that “I remain in close contact with my spiritual director.” I began to hope for doctoral studies in Europe, and perhaps even at one of the German universities that were impacting the ongoing council.

TERTIANSHIP IN AUSTRIA

RR: After four years at Weston where did you head for tertianship?

MF: I left for Austria to complete the nine-month tertianship in the tiny village of Sankt Andrä im Lavanttal near the border with Slovenia. I hoped to practice my German during those months, but most of the tertians were non-native speakers. The eighty-year-old tertian instructor was terrified by his charges (especially those from the Netherlands, the USA, or Latin America). After one week of the preached month-long Spiritual Exercises he gave up and said he couldn’t deal with us and our newfangled historical-critical approach to Scripture, and he told us “to make our own retreat.”

I spent as much time as I could outside the tertian house on a variety of ministries, such as hospital chaplaincy at Berchtesgarden, retreats to American soldiers,

etc. During that time I also contacted various German universities where I might study theology.

DOCTORAL STUDY

RR: What university did you finally chose?

MF: I chose the University of Tübingen, because I was interested in patristic exegesis, that is, how certain early Fathers of the Church made use of the Bible for teaching and preaching. Prof. Karl Hermann Schelkle, a leading scholar in that field at Tübingen, agreed to direct my research on St. Cyprian of Carthage. There were two departments of theology at the university, one Catholic (with Joseph Ratzinger, Hans Küng, etc.) and one Lutheran (with Jürgen Moltmann, Gerhard Ebeling, Ernst Käsemann, etc.).

Another New England Jesuit, Harold Bumpus, had begun his studies there one year earlier. These were exciting years in the late 1960s, a time of student strikes and political upheavals. I learned a lot in an ecumenical context from the professors and visiting lecturers. In the wake of Vatican II, most of us thought that full Church unity with the Orthodox, Anglicans, and Protestants was just around the corner. On weekends I helped out at a large American military base in nearby Stuttgart. There I discovered how untypical New England was within the broader American complex.

TEACHING AT WESTON

RR: What was your first assignment after doctoral studies?

MF: After a summer of ministry in Jamaica, I was assigned in 1970 to the New England theologate located then in Cambridge, Massachusetts, on property rented from the Episcopal Divinity School, part of the ecumenical consortium, the Boston Theological Institute. I taught ecclesiology and early church history. It was a time of unrest and upheaval for many, as the Jesuits adjusted

to the new setting.

Shortly thereafter I was invited by Bishop Bernard Flanagan of Worcester to join the national Orthodox/Roman Catholic Consultation. Although I knew little about Eastern Orthodoxy, I studied their theology and remained on the dialogue team for some twenty-five years. There I met and collaborated for many years with Flanagan's successor, Archbishop Rembert Weakland, O.S.B., who had a profound influence on my commitment to the Church and religious life. One year in Cambridge, Bernard Lonergan lived in our small community, while he was Stillman Lecturer at Harvard. Eventually, the Weston faculty judged "that I would be happier in a university setting" so I looked elsewhere for a teaching position.

TEACHING IN MONTREAL

RR: Is that how you moved to Montreal to begin a long stay in Canada?

MF: Yes, within several weeks I was invited by the Department of Theology at Concordia University, Montreal, to teach ecclesiology and to direct its theology graduate program. Concordia was a recent merger of the Jesuit-founded Loyola College and the YWCA affiliated Sir George Williams University. By then there was only a small Jesuit presence at the university and the adjacent Loyola High School. Although the city was predominantly French-speaking, there were pockets of English institutions including McGill University. In Montreal I was an associate of the Canadian Centre of Ecumenism, which had been founded by the Jesuit, Fr. Irénée Beaubien, after the Council. I also worked for the Canadian hierarchy on church unity issues.

RR: How long did you live in Montreal?

MF: About ten years. It was a lively place with an exciting

postmodern Catholic church life. Besides my teaching at the university, and occasional talks to the clergy, I helped establish a diaconate program for English-speaking candidates and their wives. In the summer, over six years, I taught religious education at the Edmundite college of St. Michael's in Burlington (Winooski), Vermont.

I also spent several months each summer in Paris as coordinator of an international group of university student tour guides for the Cathedral of Notre Dame. Organized by the Archbishop of Paris, the group gave free tours to tourists in a variety of languages in order to explain the religious, artistic, and historical significance of the cathedral.

MOVE TO TORONTO

RR: How did you come to move eventually to Toronto?

MF: In the spring of 1985, while I was visiting professor at Rome's Oriental Institute (where Fr. Bob Taft has taught for decades), I received an invitation to apply for the position as dean at one of the Catholic colleges (St. Michael's) in the University of Toronto. I was fifty-two at the time and hadn't considered going into administration. But, given the reputation of the college, the fact I knew personally many of its faculty members, and that I could still continue to do some teaching, I applied for the position and was chosen. I held the position for ten years. St. Michael's was an important Catholic constituent in the consortium Toronto School of Theology, and our ecumenical involvement continued.

In that position I served also in the USA and Canada as a accreditation consultant for the Association of Theological Schools. I headed up a number of teams to a variety of seminaries and divinity schools to determine if they were meeting the association's degree stan-

dards. I learned much about programs to prepare women and men for ministry in the Church.

THEOLOGICAL STUDIES

MF: Toward the end of my stay there I was asked by the Jesuit board of the journal *Theological Studies* to serve as editor-in-chief, a job I held for ten years. This afforded a valuable opportunity to promote solid theological research. Eventually, as I approached sixty-five, the mandatory age for retirement in the civil province of Ontario, I accepted an invitation to hold an endowed chair of theology at Marquette University in Milwaukee.

MARQUETTE UNIVERSITY

RR: How was your transition back to the USA and to Marquette in particular?

MF: At first it was somewhat strange leaving Canada after over twenty years, and moving to a part of the States, namely Wisconsin, that I did not know. I moved into one of the Jesuit satellite communities at Marquette. I found the working conditions at the university excellent, and the department was welcoming. I concentrated especially on lecturing in the doctoral program, directing dissertations, coaching students to write for publication, and, of course, preparing four issues a year of the journal *Theological Studies*. I was the first holder of the Emmett Doerr Chair of Catholic Theology. I was able to continue my collaboration with Archbishop Weakland, who was completing his term in Milwaukee. When David Schultenover succeeded me as editor of the journal, I decided it was time to return to my home province after an absence of thirty years.

BOSTON COLLEGE

RR: What are your responsibilities nowadays at Boston College?

MF: I serve as adjunct research professor of theology, a part-time involvement, mostly with graduate students. I also have a number of writing projects that keep me busy. I continue my activities with the Catholic Theological Society of America (CTSA) and the American Theological Society. I served as president of both societies. I also co-sponsor an international project on "Ecclesiological Investigations" for the American Academy of Religion. I was honored to receive the CTSA's John Courtney Murray Award for achievement in theology in 2003. Also a group of my longtime colleagues published a Festschrift for me entitled *In God's Hands: Essays on the Church and Ecumenism* (Louvain: Peeters, 2006).

LOOKING AHEAD

RR: Are you optimistic about the future of the Society of Jesus?

MF: Since I entered the Society in 1951, I have lived for lengthy periods of time in nine different Jesuit provinces. There is considerable vitality and diversity in our apostolates and ministries. However, I think that our Jesuit numbers will continue to decrease dramatically. We will see a handing on of our Ignatian values and priorities to our lay Catholic and ecumenical colleagues. This I see not as defeat but as success in empowering the faithful and lessening clericalism and triumphalism. I agree with those who see our decreasing and the laity's increasing as a positive sign of *aggiornamento*.

From Vatican II's Decree on
Ecumenism (*Unitatis redintegratio*):

“Christ summons the church, as she goes her pilgrim way, to that continual reformation of which she always has need, insofar as she is a human institution here on earth. Consequently, if, in various times and circumstances, there have been deficiencies in moral conduct or in church discipline, or even in the way that church teaching has been formulated --- to be carefully distinguished from the deposit of faith itself --- these should be set right at the opportune moment and in the proper way.”

(No. 6).

Rev. Michael A. Fahey, S.J.

- Born:** September 27, 1933, Fremont, Ohio
- Entered:** August 14, 1951, Lenox, Massachusetts, St. Stanislaus Novitiate/Shadowbrook
- Ordained:** June 13, 1964, Weston, Massachusetts, Weston College of the Holy Spirit
- Final vows:** April 22, 1973, Cambridge, Massachusetts
- 1939 Norwalk, Connecticut: St. Mary's Elementary School - Student (Sisters of Mercy)
- 1947 Fairfield, Connecticut: Fairfield College Preparatory School - Student
- 1951 Lenox, Massachusetts: St. Stanislaus Novitiate & Juniorate/Shadowbrook - Novice, junior
- 1955 Eegenhoven-Louvain, Belgium: Facultés St. Albert, - Studied philosophy
- 1958 Fairfield, Connecticut: Fairfield Preparatory School - Taught Latin, Greek, French, English
- 1960 Bronx, New York: Fordham University - Studied for M.A. in Romance Languages and Literature
- 1961 Weston, Massachusetts: Weston College - Studied theology; managing editor, *New Testament Abstracts*
- 1965 Carinthia, Austria: Sankt Andrä im Lavanttal - Tertian
- 1966 Tübingen, Germany: University of Tübingen - Doctoral studies in theology with Joseph Ratzinger and Hans Küng

- 1970 Cambridge, Massachusetts: Weston School of Theology - Taught systematic theology
- 1976 Montreal, Canada: Concordia University - Professor of theology
- 1986 Toronto, Canada: St. Michael's College, University of Toronto - Dean and professor of theology
- 1997 Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Marquette University, Emmett Doerr Professor of Theology; Editor-in-Chief, *Theological Studies* (to 2007)
- 2006 Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts: Boston College - Adjunct Research Professor of Theology

Degrees

- 1956 Bachelor of Arts, Classics, Boston College
- 1959 Licentiate in Philosophy, St. Albert, University of Louvain, Belgium
- 1961 Master of Arts, Fordham University, Romance Languages and Literature
- 1965 Licentiate in Theology, Weston College
- 1970 Doctor of Theology (Dr. theol.), University of Tübingen, Germany
- 2005 Doctor of Divinity (honoris causa), University of Toronto, Canada

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