

**New England Jesuit
Oral History Program**



**Fr. Walter M. Abbott, S.J.
Volume 26**

© Society of Jesus of New England
2006 All Rights Reserved

Editor: Richard W. Rousseau, S.J.
Associate Editors: Paul C. Kenney, S.J.
Thomas J. Sheehan, S.J.
Assistant Editors:
William J. Cullen, S.J.
Joseph A. Paquet, S.J.

ISBN 1-60067-023-7

Distribution:

Oral History Program
Campion Center
319 Concord Road
Weston, MA 02493-1398
718-788-6800
ohp@sjnen.org

Interview with Fr. Walter M. Abbott, S.J.
by Fr. Paul C. Kenney, S.J.
February 3, 2006

PAUL KENNEY: Welcome, Walter. I look forward to having a wonderful conversation about your life memories.

WALTER ABBOTT: Thank you.

PK: Where would you like to begin?

WA: Well, I suppose it would be good to begin with the fact that one day when I was five years old, my father took me to meet my grandfather, his father. We arrived at this splendid house. He rang the doorbell. The door never opened. A voice said, "Who is it?" My father said, "It's your son, Walter. I brought my son, Walter, to meet you." Then the voice said, "I have no son named Walter, and I have no grandson named Walter." Silence. We were exiled.

So I looked up at my father with my eyes filled with tears: "He didn't want to meet us." He did not want to talk even with his own son, my father. So we walked back to the street and gradually my father revealed that his grandfather was very angry with him because he had become a Catholic in France during World War

I. He came back from France to his home town, Wakefield, and told his father he had become a Catholic. His father let him stay in the house, because his hope was to bring him back to the family tradition.

PK: What faith was your grandfather?

WA: My grandfather was a Baptist. When I was a little older, my father, when reading the newspaper, discovered that his father had died. He had been a prominent architect. He went to the funeral, and he came back with one of his brothers named Harold. They sat in our living room and argued for quite a while. Harold wanted my father to say to his mother that she should go now to live with one of the others, not with the Catholic family. My father kept saying, "Well, if she wants to come here, she can come here, of course." He stonewalled his brother [laughter], and Harold left the house defeated. My grandmother came to live with us. She was a wonderful lady. She was a member of the Sears family. She was Episcopalian.

I bring these facts out, because years later I realized that God was at work in my life. I was then one of the editors of *America* magazine when Cardinal Bea came to the United States. He had been appointed President of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity by Pope John XXIII. He had come to give a talk at Harvard. He was delayed in New York, so he visited America House. My mother just happened to be visiting New York with my sisters. So the three of us met the Cardinal there at America House. He said to her, "Your son has achieved a lot. Now he's one of the editors of this national Catholic weekly review." My mother agreed. He added something to the effect that I should do great work in the future.

Two or three years later, I was in my room at America House, and the lady at the switchboard phoned me to say that a priest from the Vatican wanted to come up and talk to me. I said, "Send him up," and up came Fr. Tom Stranski, a Paulist father, who was head-of-staff of Cardinal Bea's new secretariat. He said he had come to the United States to take part in a symposium at Notre Dame about Vatican II and Christian unity. He also said, "Cardinal Bea said I should stop and give you this message: he had gotten the Pope's permission to have you come to join his staff in Rome. You need to make preparations to go to Rome. Everything has been arranged."

PK: Do you have any idea why this happened?

WA: I am not sure. The most likely thing may have been that article in *America* that I had written about ecumenism and the Bible.

PK: What did you say there?

WA: I had written about my experience as a priest coming from a family affected by church disunity. My grandfather had been a thirty-second degree Mason and a highly honored architect. But I think it was more likely that it was due to my second article. It was there that I made two points: first, that all Christians had the Bible in common, and, second, that therefore that made the Bible a very important element in the movement for Christian unity. As a matter of fact, within a week after the article came out, I had a telephone call from the World Council of Churches in Geneva and another from the National Council of Churches at the Rockefeller church in Manhattan. They all wanted to know, "Is this a trial balloon being floated by the Vatican?" I said, "As far as I know, the Vatican read about it at the same time you did."

PK: [Laughter]

WA: The Vatican was not consulted in advance. Little did I

know. Cardinal Bea had read that article, and he had put it into the agenda of Vatican II. He had made a summary of the article and inserted it as material for *Dei Verbum*, the document on divine revelation, chapter six. There it is, in chapter six. I was pleasantly surprised to discover it there, to say the least.

PK: So that was why Fr. Stranski came and saw you?

WA: Yes, he had come to tell me that I had been appointed by Cardinal Bea in Rome as a member of his staff to pursue this question of the Bible and Christian unity.

PK: How did you feel about that surprise?

WA: I was astonished, delighted, and very happy!

PK: To backtrack a little bit, what were your feelings between the time that you and your father were refused entrance by your grandfather and when you wrote that article? Did that influence your article on Christian unity and the Bible?

WA: Probably, but I was not so much aware of Christian unity and the Bible when I wrote the first article in *America*. That one was about Freemasons and my grandfather who was a high-ranking Mason.

PK: OK, but what were you thinking about when you wrote the article on the Bible as a bridge between Christian denominations?

WA: If we could truly focus on the Bible as a common heritage, then there would be more hope for Christian unity.

PK: I see.

WA: The next thing that happened, as Stranski told me, was Cardinal Bea had gone to the Pope to ask him if I could be his personal assistant in this matter of the commonality of the Bible leading to Christian unity. So Stranski said to me, "You should phase out your American commitments and plan to be in Rome by the end of the school year." As for timing, I think it was some time in the fall of 1966.

PK: So you closed up your work at *America* magazine?

WA: Yes, and arrived in Rome to stay. Cardinal Bea took me to the Pope. We sat at the Pope's desk together, and talked about this idea of the Bible and Christian unity. I was quite impressed that Bea had shown Pope Paul VI what he had in mind. He told the Pope that he thought that this plan was a good one, and that we should do the best we could to implement it. The Pope agreed, and Cardinal Bea said, "May I have Fr. Abbott to work for me on this?" The Pope said yes. He seemed familiar with my article and was positive about it.

Cardinal Bea said to me, "The first thing you have to do is to send an official letter to all the bishops' conferences, explaining that you're now the personal assistant to Cardinal Bea with an appointment by the Pope. Then you ask them to let you know what they see and hear about the possibilities of this idea of Biblical/ecumenical developments in their region." We had this wonderful conversation. [Laughter]

PK: That is impressive.

WA: I should add here it is very interesting that another cardinal had a lot to do with my development in this area. I was called to Vatican II by one of the four moderators of the Council, Cardinal Suenens, the Archbishop of Malines/Bruxelles in Belgium. So I was at the Council from that point on.

PK: In the light of Vatican II's urging of consultation and collegiality, the Pope was asking you to gather that input from all the bishops?

WA: Yes. That mailing he suggested was very successful. I had learned in New York that if you did a general mailing like that, you were very fortunate if you got a one percent response. I think we got an eighty-five percent response from the bishops' conferences.

PK: Remarkable.

WA: Yes, it was. It really was. They were really interested in this idea. In their responses they told me about reactions and ideas in their regions, if anything. It was clear that there was quite a lot going on. I found out about the United Bible Societies, the American Bible Society, the British, French, German societies or organizations. It was impressive how so many were at work on biblical translating. It was interesting how in so many places Catholics were involved with their efforts. So I knew we had a viable idea here. I was delighted. I felt that God was at work here. I realized that I was able to do this kind of thing. It was all very, very encouraging.

PK: A kind of confirmation?

WA: Yes.

PK: You mentioned the Baptists in passing. Was there some interesting development there in ecumenical relations?

WA: Oh, yes. There is a wonderful American story in that regard. I had been in direct contact with scholars working for the American Bible Society who were already at work on a translation of the Bible into modern language. They were quite open to the possibility of Catholic help, quite open. They had just finished the New Testament, and were trying it out and finding it to be quite successful. It is called: *Good News for Modern Man*.

PK: Oh, yes. I remember that.

WA: They were very happy about its success, as I was when I read it and was able to appreciate what they had done. I felt then that it was important that we should contact them. So I went to Cardinal Cushing and explained this to him. My hope was that he would be willing to examine the book and endorse it, or have his Bible scholars examine it and give it an imprimatur or approval for Catholics. And the Cardinal did

just that. Everything was going so beautifully that I couldn't help but feel that God was working in my life. [Laughter] This was what led to that visit out of the blue by Fr. Stranski with the message from Cardinal Bea about Rome and later the Pope's involvement.

PK: I gather that all that was something of a shock.

WA: It was a big surprise, yes.

PK: Did you mind leaving *America* magazine?

WA: To some extent, because I felt that was good work, too, and I was working at it with vigor. [Laughter]

PK: Well, I know that you had a very strong background in the Classics. You got a B.A. in it here at Weston along with an M.A. Then you went to Oxford during your regency and studied Classics for three years from 1948 to 1951. So you really knew your Greek and Latin?

WA: Yes, it was actually a four-year course. That was a wonderful experience, but it came to an unexpected end. I had been given permission for a course in Greece at the American Academy. While there, I came down with amoebic dysentery, and I was really a wreck! But I told them I was going back to Oxford at the end of the summer. The doctors in Greece said, "Will you stop at Innsbruck?" They had a very good tropical disease clinic there with a worldwide reputation. "You check into that clinic and get their advice and help." So I did, and they got rid of the dysentery. After a month they sent me to the London Hospital for Tropical Diseases. It was said to be the best in the world. They gave me the treatment which finally knocked out the amoeba, and nearly killed me! [Laughter]

PK: Oh.

WA: I was in a coma in a hospital on near Oxford, and when I was well enough they sent me back to Boston for final treatment. It worked out fine; I was cured.

PK: Could you study at all or were those years, '51 to '53,

spent getting your health back?

WA: Yes, getting my health back. I was put to work half-way through that period, teaching at B.C. High. Then a man died at Fairfield and they said they needed someone to take over his home room the second semester, so that is why I went to Fairfield Prep.

PK: How did you like that?

WA: I loved it! I was very happy there. I have had a variety of experiences, including near-death. [Laughter]

PK: Let us return to your early years.

WA: Could I just tell you about a link between the article in *America* and my grandfather?

PK: Yes.

WA: One day I was in my office in the Secretariat for Unity and a French monsignor came in. He was in charge at the moment, because the cardinal-president was away and the bishop-secretary was also away. So this French monsignor was the highest ranking person in the Secretariat, temporarily running it. He came to me with a telegram from the immediate past president of the Southern Baptist Convention, W. A. Criswell. Dr. Criswell had said in the telegram, "With four hundred Southern Baptists in two chartered planes, I am going to the Holy Land on pilgrimage. We ask for your permission to stop in Rome and visit Pope Paul VI. We arrive tomorrow morning."

PK: [Laughter]

WA: So the monsignor said to me in Italian, "*Caro Padre*, dear father, at our level we have to schedule at least a week ahead for audiences with the Pope. Now, they want to talk with the Pope tomorrow morning." I said, "Yes, but it's a very unusual situation. I know a little bit about Criswell. I think from what I've heard that he's a typical, nineteenth century, anti-Catholic bigot." That was what I had been told. "And now he wants an audience with the Pope with four hundred

Southern Baptists!" I said, "This is extraordinary."

PK: Unbelievable!

WA: So I said, "I'm sure if Cardinal Bea or Bishop Willebrands were here, they would agree that we would do everything possible to arrange their visit and set up a little audience with the Pope." He agreed, so I said, "You should get on the phone to Archbishop Benelli [the Pope's personal Chief of Staff and General Secretary for International Affairs]. Since he knew Archbishop Benelli, he got him on the phone while I was right there and told him what was happening. Benelli said, "Tell Fr. Abbott to be up here this afternoon with a draft of a little speech the Pope could give on the occasion." Then he added, "I'll arrange this. I'll go to the Pope right now. I'm sure he'll say yes. Stand by and I'll get right back to you."

So he did; he went to the Pope and had a brief conversation. He then got back to us and said, "Yes, the Pope said tell Fr. Abbott to meet them at the bronze door [adjoining St. Peter's] and bring them up to the Pope's library." This was his private office. So we did it. We arranged the meeting with the Pope by Criswell, the head of the Southern Baptists U.S.A. and, at the time, the most esteemed Baptist preacher in the United States. I believe he is still living and preaching at ninety-two.

PK: Wow.

WA: He was the immediate past President of the Southern Baptist Convention. But he still had a lot of clout. So I explained to the monsignor who he was, and why it was so important that he should be allowed to speak to the Pope with his group. Then I got on the phone to Archbishop Benelli and filled him in on the details. He was, of course, a very intelligent person and he knew instantly how important this was. He said to

me, “Yes, the Pope will receive them at eleven o’clock tomorrow morning. Come up here this afternoon with a draft of the Pope’s greeting.”

PK: And you did that?

WA: Yes. The next day I met Criswell at the bronze door along with his whole party of four hundred people. We went up the great staircase to the Pope’s library. They had a remarkable audience.

PK: What did Dr. Criswell say after it was over?

WA: I found his reaction to be really spectacular! At the end of the audience, the Pope signaled me to take them back down the staircase to the great bronze door right by where the colonnade meets St. Peter’s Basilica. So I did. The Swiss Guards opened the door. I had not tipped off anybody, but somehow the word got out to the press. The first one in line was from the *New York Times*, whom I knew. He said to Criswell, “You’ve just spent some time talking with the Pope. What do you think of the Pope?” And Dr. Criswell, a Texan, said—I will never forget his reply—“I’ve just spent five minutes talking with the Pope, eyeball to eyeball. I can tell you he’s a saint! I know a saint when I see one and he’s a saint!” He stood there beside the steps of St. Peter’s Basilica and “canonized” Pope Paul VI for the world!

PK: Wow! What a story!

WA: The reporters were writing all this down and the papers ran the story the next day all over the world.

PK: How did you feel about this, given the fact that your own grandfather, a Baptist, had rejected your father and you from his family because your father became your Catholic?

WA: I was quite pleased, of course, that the head of my grandfather’s church had asked for an audience with the Pope. That alone was enough for me. No matter how you look at it, it was an extraordinary event.

PK: Also for the churches themselves?

WA: Yes, it was really an astonishing development all around, especially his calling the Pope a saint and adding that he was especially glad to have been able to talk with him.

PK: It is interesting that he used the Catholic term, saint, rather than a Baptist one to describe the Pope. Do you think he was trying to build a bridge?

WA: That he was willing to stop in Rome and visit the Pope with four hundred leaders in his own church was significant. But then the fact that he called him a saint was astonishing! It was on the front page of papers around the world the next day.

PK: How did that affect the climate for ecumenical initiatives that you were involved with?

WA: It inspired me to stay right with this work and to give it as much as I could.

PK: A kind of confirmation of God's will for you at that time?

WA: I felt God was at work there for sure.

PK: That it was good for you to be doing that work?

WA: Yes, and then I quickly found out from two Baptist biblical scholars that Criswell had approved their New Testament translation. He was already using it in his Dallas, Texas church.

PK: An ecumenical translation that included Catholics?

WA: Not the New Testament part of it. But when they decided to do the Old Testament as well, they brought in Catholic scholars on a cooperative basis.

PK: What was your actual work?

WA: It turned out to be to travel all over the world to explain what was happening to Catholic and Protestant biblical people and church leaders in seeing their commonality in the Bible.

PK: You were creating a more open climate.

WA: Yes, so I traveled everywhere, even to Australia and

Papua New Guinea. [Laughter]

PK: How was your health after being sick in Greece?

WA: Fortunately, it was quite good. I was full of energy.

PK: As we talk about your health, I remember you told me how your eye was healed through Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha.

WA: Yes, I got back enough vision that I could function as well as ever.

PK: Did that healing relate to the cause of Kateri?

WA: Yes. Both postulators for the cause of Kateri in the United States and Canada petitioned the Holy See to consider my healing as the final miracle needed for her canonization. She had already been beatified by Pope John Paul II in 1980. But more was needed for canonization. So I feel that my healing contributed some small part to the process of canonization, which is still going on.

PK: Yes.

WA: Very frankly, I am ambivalent about all this. I said to myself, "Good heavens! If I become part of the process of canonization, I'll really be embarrassed!" I felt there would be too much publicity and I would find it to be too much. That is why I had mixed feelings. I also felt it was something that had to be done. I was advised by the vice-postulator to go personally to the cardinal in charge of canonizations and give my testimony in Rome. So I did speak to that cardinal and testified.

PK: Let us talk now a bit about your family. I understand you are from Somerville.

WA: I was born in the Somerville General Hospital. My parents were living in Somerville. Then we moved to Roxbury, because my father became the manager of a Cloverdale grocery store.

PK: Were you the only child?

WA: No. I was the oldest of five.

PK: How many are still alive?

WA: My brother was the next oldest, but he is dead now. Next my sister, Dorothy, died. But both my sisters, Phyllis and Betty, are very much alive.

PK: How about nephews and nieces?

WA: I have fourteen nieces and nephews and thirty-four grandnieces and grandnephews.

PK: Quite a family. Now, tell me a little bit about your local parish. Were you an altar boy?

WA: The pastor there insisted that I go to Boston College High School so I could get a good Catholic education. He backed that up by giving me some financial support.

PK: Generous.

WA: I did well when I was there.

PK: You had shown promise?

WA: Yes. At first I was in a parochial grammar school at Blessed Sacrament Church in Jamaica Plain. I also went to the public school up to then, because it was near our house and behind my father's store. When I was in junior high school, I was the valedictorian.

PK: Does any experience at B.C. High stand out?

WA: It was a very good experience. I was in dramatics and debating. I became co-editor of the *Botolphian*, the school magazine, with another boy who was as interested as I was in writing. So I had a good experience and did well in my classes.

PK: Do you remember being in any plays?

WA: Indeed. When B.C. High celebrated the four hundredth anniversary of the founding of the Society of Jesus in 1540, I played the part of St. Ignatius. [Laughter] It was written by Fr. Murphy of B.C. High.

PK: Prophetic.

WA: That is true. I did become a Jesuit.

PK: What attracted you to the Society?

WA: I admired my teachers and wanted to be just like them.

PK: You then went to Shadowbrook. Does anything stand out?

WA: Well, I did have an *actus* when in the juniorate.

PK: What did you do in the *actus*?

WA: It was a public examination and presentation before all the juniors and some local professors on the works of Cicero's rhetoric. It was quite an event!

PK: Then right to philosophy here at Weston College?

WA: Yes, in 1945.

PK: Your knowledge and love of Latin helped you a lot in your studies?

WA: Yes. I was fluent in Latin. It was a big help. [Laughter]

PK: You spent regency at Oxford?

WA: Yes, along with Bob Healy. That was because I had such a good command of Latin and Greek, for which I had B.C. High to thank.

PK: I visited Oxford myself. It is very beautiful.

WA: It is a beautiful place. And it is a great school, too.

PK: Then on a summer research trip to Greece both you and Bob got quite sick?

WA: Yes. Bob and I went to Greece as part of our training. The idea was to see some of the actual places that we were spending so much time studying at Oxford. But I picked up amoebic dysentery, which nearly killed me. But, fortunately, it did not. [Laughter] And poor Bob! He contracted some kind of liver disease which bothered him all his life until he died years later while teaching at Holy Cross.

PK: I am sorry to hear that.

WA: I believe that it was providential that I was sent to special studies at Oxford. At the same time, it was nearly my death warrant! [Laughter]

PK: Did you meet your former teachers and the students, say at the Vatican?

WA: No, but I did see them here and there. For example,

when one of my fellow scholastics came to New York, he stayed with us at America House. Interestingly he was a friend of Harold Macmillan, former British prime minister.

PK: Any others?

WA: My closest link at Oxford and later became a key member of the House of Lords. He was a friend of the rector-master of Campion Hall, the Jesuit residence at Oxford. It was called a college but in reality, we just lived there. Our tutors were in the other colleges. This fellow was a great friend of the rector's and came to dinner at our community several times, which is where I got to know him. He was then the Minister of Civil Aviation, though he was one of the lords who were members of the Macmillan's cabinet. So we became friendly and would have dinner with him every so often. He and his wife were prolific authors, specialists in historical biographies. Each wrote a half-dozen books. They were famous in England for their kind of histories.

PK: So one effect of this experience at Oxford was that it prepared you for dealing with people in places of importance and helped you to develop social ease?

WA: Although I did not realize it at the time, it was doing that, yes! [Laughter]

PK: So, later on, you were at ease with Cardinal Bea?

WA: Yes. But Cardinal Bea was approaching ninety years old and quite a frail, bent-over man. He could walk around, but it was clear that he had a hunched back and downcast eyes. Despite all this he was a powerhouse politician. But that word may not be quite accurate. At the Council and at the Vatican, he was an important figure because he was a brilliant man who spoke his mind very clearly. [Laughter] But he spoke very diplomatically and kindly. At the same time he was very good at pulling the ground out from under

somebody when there was a disagreement. [Laughter] All in all, Cardinal Bea was a holy and impressive man.

PK: How was your relationship with him?

WA: It was excellent.

PK: How did you grow as a person through your work under Cardinal Bea?

WA: I admired his great wisdom and knowledge. He was a great man and a saint. In some ways I became more like him. I learned more in my travels around the world as his personal assistant on the mission given directly to us by the Pope. For example, in Australia, the Cardinal sent his secretary to pick me at the airport in his own limousine. He had a big Rolls Royce limousine, given to him, the secretary told me, by the biggest beer maker in Australia! [Laughter] The Cardinal accepted it, since it was given to him as the head of the Church in that country.

PK: I see. So this made you realize the social and religious importance of the mission that the Cardinal and the Pope had given you?

WA: It also led me to try to remain as humble as I could. I was coming as an emissary from Rome. I was working directly for the Pope and Cardinal Bea, and I could have played that to a fare-thee-well. But I realized I was just that, an emissary and Jesuit priest. I was not a bishop.

PK: So you had to work at combining knowledge, wisdom, and humility?

WA: Yes, and continually remind myself of my status as an emissary.

PK: Were you successful?

WA: Well, I think I succeeded well enough in the job I was given to do. In any case, the judgment of my performance was not mine to make.

PK: How did the various countries receive you?

- WA: It was quite an experience for me to travel the world as an emissary of the Pope and Cardinal Bea on that particular project about the Bible and Christian unity. Everywhere I went, I was warmly welcomed and given the red carpet treatment as if I were some bishop or apostolic delegate. But I was not wearing purple.
- PK: So your contact with Cardinal Bea was a blessing?
- WA: Definitely!
- PK: Could one say that, in some way, you were a blessing for Cardinal Bea by pursuing this work?
- WA: It is true that I was the one who could travel in so many places travel without difficulty. It would have been difficult, even painful for the poor man. He did some travel but I did the bulk of it. So my contribution was to relieve him of the need to travel with all its difficulties. I was, in a sense, his feet.
- PK: Of course, all this was before e-mails, and long distance phone calls would not really have been adequate for the situation. When you returned from each of these trips, would you have important debriefing meetings with Cardinal Bea?
- WA: Yes.
- PK: I imagine those memories are quite vivid and dear to you.
- WA: Some are very vivid. For example, what happened in the Holy Year of 1975. I could have access to the Pope whenever I needed to. He had said to me, "You can come to me anytime; no problem. Just phone my secretary, tell him that you want to talk with me. He'll set it up." So on this occasion, I told him about the message I had gotten from the Italian layman Protestant in charge of the Bible Society of Italy for the United Bible Society. He had said to me, "Could we team up during the Holy Year and distribute to the pilgrims a portion of scripture as part of the Holy Year experience? It would be wonderful if we could do it

in the porch of St. Peter's Basilica and in the four big basilicas in Rome." When I passed this message on to the Pope, he was receptive. He said to me, "That's a good idea. You may do that. In order to do, I want you to go and visit the cardinal in charge of the Holy Year events and tell him that you have my permission to have that kind of event take place. It can be done on the front porch of the Basilica of St. Peter." So I did. That meeting with the Pope and its follow-up with the cardinal in charge of the Holy Year were an interesting experience, I'll tell you that!

PK: What happened?

WA: The cardinal lived in the Holy Office building. He was also a Belgian prince in his own right. I phoned him and said, "I have just been with the Pope, and he wants me to talk to you about something." He said, "Come right over." I said, "Where are you?" He said, "I'm in my apartment here on the other side of St. Peter's Square." So I said, "I'll be right over." When I got there, he took me down to the ground floor courtyard and said, "We'll go in my car right now. You've told me enough. We'll go right to my office to tell the bishop in charge what needs to be done." So he drove me through St. Peter's Square out to the Tiber River and then along the road that goes along the river into Trastevere, which is a lovely, fascinating old area of the city of Rome. It has a pentagon building of the Holy See.

PK: Like an office building?

WA: With a lot of offices in it. And the top floor is a residence for a half dozen cardinals who live on the top floor, each with his own apartment. So we drove over to his building and went into his office. He said to the bishop's secretary, "Fr. Abbott has just been told by the Pope that this is all right to do, so we're going to do it!" [Laughter] So he asked what this was about.

So we told him and he said, "What? Did you say that out on the porch of St. Peter's some Italian Protestants along with Fr. Abbott are going to give out a scriptural pamphlet as part of the Holy Year celebration?" The cardinal said, "Yes, Excellency, that's what the Pope said." So he said, "All right." [Laughter] He was not very happy about all this! So, we did it!

PK: This was a pamphlet of about a hundred pages?

WA: Yes, a pamphlet with less than a hundred pages. It contained the letter of St. James from the new translation made with Catholic support and help.

PK: So it was possible to get it in English, Italian, French, German, etc.?

WA: Yes, it was in five languages.

PK: How many copies were given out?

WA: Thousands, hundreds of thousands.

PK: What a great idea!

WA: It was wonderful! The person who suggested this, myself, and his staff, were often out on the porch of St. Peter's to help distribute these pamphlets. More help was given by the Swiss Guards and some monsignors of the Holy Year staff. Many people were fascinated to see the people from the Bible Society of Italy on the porch of St. Peter's giving out giving out this pamphlet. [Laughter] It was a stunning event! But, blessed as it was by the Pope, it was carried out very well.

PK: Your work was with the Word of God and with the Vatican documents. I know you edited the first English translation of the documents of Vatican II.

WA: Yes, but that was out and published before I started in this work. The document was done earlier during the Council.

PK: How did that come about? How were you chosen for this?

WA: I am very pleased that you would ask that question.

PK: Were you at *America* magazine then?

WA: Yes. I was one of the editors of *America*. One day the phone rang and a voice said, "This is Cardinal Suenens. I'm calling from Brussels. A friend of yours is sitting at my desk telling me that I should talk to you about something." Cardinal Suenens was one of the four moderators of Vatican II, speaker of the house, so I was awed when he continued, "Your friend tells me that you're the one that can help me better than anybody else in the United States." So I said, "How can I do that?" "Well," he said, "I have accepted invitations to talk to key faculty at important American universities about the Council and cooperation with Catholics in general. I need an American priest always at my side to steer me in the right direction to the right people and say the right things. I need to be helped to avoid saying the wrong things or going to the wrong places." He said simply, "I need your help. I speak English, but sometimes I may be misreading my audience and you'll get me back on the track." Whew! It meant traveling with him for a solid week. So I said, "Oh, I think this is a wonderful idea, but I have to get permission from my editor-in-chief."

At that moment Thurston Davis walked into my office. I said to the cardinal, "Just a minute; he's just come into my office." I said to Thurston, "This is one of the four moderators of Vatican II, the Primate of Belgium, Cardinal Suenens. He wants me to help him for a week on a trip through the theological faculties of the United States." Thurston Davis says, "That's pretty important. All right. Go ahead and do it." I told Cardinal Suenens, "Yes, he said I may do that. I'll go with you on this trip." He said, "Thank you very much, Father. I'm looking forward to it." I said, "I am too." Whew!

So later, halfway through the trip, I said to Cardinal Suenens, "You don't need me. You're doing perfectly well by yourself. You speak English beautifully. And you're doing just what you should be doing. You really don't need me at all." So Suenens said, "Don't leave me. At any moment, it could break down and that wouldn't be so good. You've got to stay with me through to the end." I said, "All right." And I did; I stayed with him until the end, when I said to him, "You really didn't need me." He said, "I think I did." But then he added, "Now I'll give you your reward. I'm calling you to Vatican II. You will be on my staff. You'll be able to observe everything that's happening. You'll be in on everything. I think you'll find it a good experience for yourself as well as the editors of *America*." So I said, "That's terrific. I'd like to do that, but I have to get permission." [Laughter]

PK: [Laughter]

WA: He said, "Don't worry. You will get permission." I explained it all to Thurston Davis, and he said, "That's terrific! Go with him." So I did. A well-known American woman, who had recommended me to him in the first place, also came with us. She was someone that he had known for some time as a friend of himself and his group in Belgium. She was Margie Grace, the wife of J. Peter Grace, who was a real power in the American Catholic church. We had become friends, and I was a guest at their home for dinner with the family. She had said to the Cardinal, "He's a friend of mine. He'll do. Phone him, and he'll be the best person you can get to go on this trip with you." So that is how it all happened. And at the end of the trip Cardinal Suenens called me to Vatican II. So she was the one who got me into Vatican II.

PK: [Laughter]

WA: It was fabulous!

PK: So you packed up your toothbrush and went to Vatican II?

WA: Yes. I got there in the very middle of the Council. The members of the Council were, at that time, right in the middle of the Feeney case. Being a Bostonian, I was familiar with the case.

PK: He was a New England Jesuit, the Catholic chaplain at Harvard who was speaking out so loudly about “No salvation outside the Church.”

WA: Exactly. “No salvation outside the Church.” I had actually met him some time before. He had come to Shadowbrook when I was either a junior or a novice. He gave a talk to the community at that time. So that background was a great help to me, though I never did have to reveal at the Council that I knew Feeney. [Laughter]

PK: What happened at the Council?

WA: On one occasion, I did intervene in the Council, however. An amazing thing happened one day: I stopped the Council dead in its tracks! I have not gotten over it yet! It was unbelievable! Imagine! I’m sitting there watching the whole hierarchy of the Catholic Church, some four thousand bishops and cardinals are all at work stretching all the way down to the doors of St. Peter’s on both sides of the main aisle. Whew! That’s when I stopped it dead. I was sitting next to Fr. John Courtney Murray in the tribune. These were seats that started up underneath one of the four statues at the four corners at the base of St. Peter’s dome. These statues are about fifty feet high and extend down almost to the altar. The official observers were in special balconies between the bishops and us. Fr. Murray and I were sitting in these empty balconies in this empty set of bleachers with no else near us. [Laughter] I had my feet on the bench in front of me and I was rocking the bench a little bit. But actually I was

rocking it fairly strongly. Suddenly the bench fell forward and hit the floor many feet down like a cannon shot! It echoed through the whole length of St. Peter's Basilica! Everything stopped dead! All the cardinals and bishops began looking around to see if anyone had been shot! They could not see anyone on the floor. So they were baffled.

PK: Did you 'fess up?

WA: Courtney Murray and I both sat like statues. Nothing was happening here, just us chickens.

PK: [Laughter]

WA: At the end of the morning's session, he and I went out the same back door we used to come in. One of the cardinals, who had been a student with me at Oxford years before, came over to me and said, "Walter, Walter! What did you do to make that sound like a cannon shot rumbling through the middle of the morning session?" I said, "What makes you think I was the cause of that?"

PK: [Laughter]

WA: He said, "Because I could see you from where I was sitting. The sound came apparently from near the altar. You got red to the roots of your hair." So I told him what had happened: how my feet were rocking the bench too strongly until without realizing it had gotten away from me and hit the plywood floor. Ironically, the big point that the Spanish cardinal was making was a refutation of my companion, Fr. Courtney Murray's draft of the Document on Religious Freedom. The cannon shot forced him to stop and his mouth dropped open. [Laughter] That was an unforgettable moment. [But the Document on Religious Freedom passed later.]

PK: Going back a few years, let me ask you a little bit more about the time after Oxford, when you came back to theology at Weston. Do you have some particular

memories of those years that set you on the road that you later followed into scholarship and writing? Or let me put it another way: How did you get to go to *America* magazine?

WA: I found out after I got there that Thurston Davis, the Editor-in-Chief, had been looking for somebody for some time with my qualifications. In his travels around the country other Jesuits told him that he should approach me about that *America* job.

PK: What were your qualifications?

WA: That I was a careful editor. I could proofread. I was intelligent and I was a good learner.

PK: Right. What opportunity did you have to demonstrate these skills? I know you had been the editor of the *Botolphian* at Boston College High School. Had you done some editing connected with your studies?

WA: Yes. While at theology at Weston I was the editor of *New Testament Abstracts*. I was a scholastic whose job was to go out and sign up people there to do the work. We got Fr. Collins, the New Testament professor, to be the editor, and we were working together to get *New Testament Abstracts* started.

PK: So you were one of its founders?

WA: Yes, I was the original recruiter.

PK: You saw the need for this? I knew nothing about that and there is nothing about that in your bio. I would be very happy if you would give a little background on the beginning of *New Testament Abstracts*.

WA: The fact is that two other Jesuits had the idea, but they could not make it work, so they asked me if I would take it over, given my experience.

PK: Who were these two?

WA: Bob Coté from the New England Province and a big hefty fellow from the Maryland Province.

PK: So you did the practical work on getting it going?

WA: Yes.

- PK: Was the idea to bring together various important articles on New Testament topics?
- WA: Yes.
- PK: You relied on Fr. Collins a lot?
- WA: Fr. Collins was very important as the faculty editor of the publication itself. I was what we called the managing editor.
- PK: The managing editor. So you showed those skills there? Where did you acquire them? When did the first issue appear and where were you in the course at Weston at the time?
- WA: I think it began during my second year of theology.
- PK: You went to theology in 1953 so about '54, '55?
- WA: '55.
- PK: I know the *NTA* then turned out to be an important innovation and made a major contribution.
- WA: Yes. Several years later, some other biblical group started a sister publication called *Old Testament Abstracts*.
- PK: So two things were involved: first, you provided the editorial knowledge to make it work in practice and, second, all this made you very much aware of the ongoing important developments in New Testament studies?
- WA: Yes.
- PK: Would you say that this gave you a foundation for your editorial work at *America*?
- WA: I found out Thurston Davis had been looking for somebody to replace one of the staff who was called back to his province. He was looking for someone who could take charge of editing, proofread the galleys, and occasionally come up with a good idea about an editorial.
- PK: Did your work on *New Testament Abstracts* for two to three years at Weston lead you to this appointment at *America* upon your ordination?

WA: First I did my tertianship year.

PK: And this of course, broke what you were doing with the *Abstracts*?

WA: Yes.

PK: Did you feel at the time that this was the end of your *NTA* work?

WA: I do not remember how I felt. But as I look back at it I did not know what my future was going to be. Some of my contemporaries were hearing about their appointments and I finally got word.

PK: That showed considerable detachment on your part to leave what you had helped start?

WA: I guess you could say that.

PK: So Thurston Davis gave you the appointment to *America*. Before we come to that, was there anything in your tertianship experience as a priest that stands out in your mind? Did you have ample opportunity then for pastoral ministries.?

WA: Yes, I clearly remember taking these weekend pastoral assignments. I felt that the purpose of the tertianship was important. It gave us a year of ascetical theology and study including key elements of Constitutions of our Society of Jesus. I appreciated all that very much.

PK: And then the invitation to *America* came from Thurston Davis?

WA: Yes.

PK: So this was a transition for you from the rural groves of Pomfret, Connecticut, to the busy streets of New York?

WA: I found out that he was looking for me while I was still in tertianship. I felt pretty good about that. I felt I could do that. I felt confident.

PK: Did you still have any concerns about your health?

WA: No, I felt that was behind me.

TOM SHEEHAN: Speaking of health, Walter, it might be good to tell us something about your eye.

WA: Yes, I had damaged my left eye. So here in Boston, it was examined carefully. Then I was sent to New York for another opinion, and back to Boston for a third opinion. It was decided that eye had been damaged by the fall that I had taken in Rome.

PK: I did not know you had fallen. Tell us about that.

WA: During that last year in Rome, I was diagnosed as having some internal trouble in my eye. The doctors there were troubled as to what it was. One evening I was having a great deal of pain and I got out of my bed in the house that I lived in called Villa Marta. I went up the stairs to get help from two good friends who lived above me. As I made the right turn from the staircase onto their corridor, I went over the balcony railing down the stairwell two, maybe three floors and landed hard onto the marble floor face down. When I came to, I was sore from a three-point landing: head, chest and knee. I also realized that I could not see out of my left eye. They took me to the Rome hospital immediately in an ambulance. I was studied from head to foot. One of the things they told me was that I had some trouble with my left eye.

PK: Could you see through it at all?

WA: No. The doctors decided that my optic nerve was dead. They said that was why I was having the trouble, so little could be done about that. But at least I was not in pain with it, so I could carry on my work in that condition.

PK: You had taken a fall, and lost all vision in your left eye?

WA: Yes.

PK: You still had one good eye?

WA: Yes.

PK: What happened next?

WA: The doctors also could not figure out why I was having trouble in other parts of my body. I had some

paralysis in my torso and generally did not feel well. It was strange and I had trouble describing it. The doctors were really puzzled. They could not figure it out. That is why I was sent back to Boston to see if they could figure out what was wrong with me, internally. [Sigh] I was sent to a doctor at New England Deaconess Hospital who was a world expert in internal illnesses with some confidence he would know what it was. It turned out to be what he called a celiac disease. He said, "It's not an allergy, but when gluten gets into your system, it's a poison."

PK: Gluten, as in wheat bread?

WA: I knew that it was something like that because it was as if I had been bitten by a cobra. I was just paralyzed. I would sit there and would not be able to function. I was just, [sighs] paralyzed. So after some tests, he also said to me, "Yes, you have celiac disease. It is hereditary and incurable."

PK: So with this celiac disease, you just avoid gluten in all forms?

WA: Yes. If I did that, I was fine.

PK: What happened to your eye?

WA: It had no connection with the eye.

PK: Right. But what happened with the eye?

WA: I went forward with that damaged vision in the left eye for some time.

PK: Yes, but did you have some kind of healing?

WA: Yes, and that is the rest of the story. One day, Fr. Weiser, who lived at Campion while I was here in the infirmary, said, "We must pray to Kateri Tekakwitha, because she had trouble with her eye."

PK: Yes, from smallpox, I believe.

WA: So he asked, "Will you come with me to visit Kateri's tomb and pray for a miracle?" So, trusting him, I agreed, and he drove me to the tomb.

PK: Wonderful!

WA: And we prayed. It was a marvelous experience! I will never forget it. It was a nice church on the Mohawk Indian reservation. It happened that there was a group of pilgrims there and the vice postulator for her canonization cause was there as principal celebrant of the Mass. The superior of the mission was there as well. A very good Indian choir was singing. It sounded like a wonderful Italian operatic choir. They sang softly as we went to the tomb, to the left of the altar toward the door of the church. The vice postulator said that he wanted each one of us to pray, which we did. He said, "You must promise me that you will say an Our Father, Hail Mary, and Glory be for the intercession of Kateri Tekakwitha for a cure of Fr Abbott's eye."

Some weeks later I was back in Rome. One morning, I got up from the bed and, as the sleep dropped away, I realized that I could see the whole lower half of the room, my bookcases, and so on. As you can imagine, it was a quite surprise, that I had at least fifty percent of my vision back, though I could not see the upper half of the room or the ceiling. To me, it was a miracle!

PK: Did you keep this restoration?

WA: I told the doctors about it. They were puzzled and said, "The optic nerve is dead, and yet you're seeing fifty percent, as you describe it." They had no medical explanation.

PK: Did you tell Fr. Weiser when you saw him later in Weston?

WA: Yes, of course. He said, "When you go back to Rome go to the postulator of the cause." One of the reasons he said this was that, in the meanwhile, I had recovered much more vision in my left eye with, according to the doctors in Rome and New York, no optic nerve in that left eye.

PK: Even more than half?

WA: More than fifty percent. So he said, "You must go back to the Vatican and tell the cardinal in charge of that department what has happened to you." When I got back to Rome, I went to see that cardinal.

PK: Then what happened?

WA: His staff studied what happened to me. It is a well-known medical fact that the optic nerve, once gone, never returns. But I had at least fifty percent of it back. They were genuinely puzzled and were thinking that maybe it was a miracle.

PK: Was that used in the cause of Kateri Tekakwitha?

WA: In a certain way, yes, though not in the expected way. It was not considered as a miracle by the congregation. But when I got back here to Boston for some medical treatment, I was advised to have that eye examined by three American experts and bring their opinions back to the Vatican when I returned. It seemed that it was already intended I should return to my work in Rome. [Laughter] A battered ship, going back to its base.

PK: What did you do in Rome?

WA: Back in Rome, I typed it all up and handed it to those interested. I was advised to return to Boston to pursue my medical problems there rather than in Rome, which I did, especially for the operations. So I came back. As far as the eye was concerned, they decided not to touch it. [Sigh]

PK: What happened with the gluten?

WA: Let me tell you a bit more about the doctor and the paralysis/gluten problem. The doctor at New England Deaconess said, "I suspect you have something that I know a little bit about." A little bit. He was a world expert in the subject. He said, "Let me give you a certain test." He had me swallow a capsule about the size of a fingernail on a ring finger. It was attached to a wire encased in rubber that went to his computer.

He said, “Now, I send it down through your intestinal track. I tell it what to do.” Pointing at the computer, he said, “Now, keep your eyes on this TV screen here.” There was the capsule down in the duodenum. He said, “Now, see that wall of the duodenum? I’ll phone you at noon time and tell you what to do.” He said, “Now we retrieve the capsule.” [Zooming sound] It came out and back to him. He said, “Now we send this to the lab, and tomorrow morning I will phone you; I will tell you what the lab says.” That was when he told me about the gluten and how I had to avoid it because it affected my system. I am still doing that today. [Laughter]

PK: Finding the Lord in illness and in poor health has been a challenge for you?

WA: Oh, yes. Which I accepted, because what else could I do? I mean, it had happened. I had to just pray, pray, pray, that it would be taken away. But I still have it.

PK: So in addition to wisdom and understanding that you found in Cardinal Bea, and in trying to increase in knowledge and humility, now you have to develop your patience and acceptance?

WA: Yes.

PK: Let’s go back to your time at *America*. I understood you to say that you were the editor of the English translations of the Vatican II documents?

WA: Yes, that was the idea of Thurston Davis, the editor-in-chief of *America*. He asked me because of my background and my studies. And I was a good proofreader. He said, “You should write an article for *America* about the common Bible.”

PK: As I remember, you did that.

WA: Yes, that’s what he asked me to do first of all. I had explained that to him earlier.

PK: It was very much your own idea?

WA: Yes, it was. And when I wrote it, he put it as the only

thing on the cover. It was an illustration of a hand opening the Bible with the common Bible idea underneath. As I mentioned earlier, a day or two later I had a phone call from the World Council of Churches in Switzerland. They wanted to know if this was a trial balloon floated by the Vatican. [Laughter] So I said, "I don't think so. I think the Vatican was looking at it just about the same time you did." I not heard anything like that. Then I had a phone call from the National Council of Churches. They said the same thing. "We're reading this article and we're wondering: Is this a trial balloon floated by the Catholic Church, namely by the Vatican?" I said, "I don't know. I don't think so. The Vatican saw the article the same time you did. That's all I know."

PK: Could we return to the editing of the documents? Thurston Davis commissioned this and you followed through as an editor?

WA: I had to sign up the people to do the work.

PK: How did you find them?

WA: I remember going down on the train to Baltimore in order to go out to Woodstock to talk to Fr. Avery Dulles. He came out to meet me at the train. He had said to me on the phone, "Can you come down here?" Because of his teaching responsibilities he could not get to New York just then. So we met and went to dinner to talk. I signed him up to do the commentary on the big document on the Church.

PK: So you got a person to do the commentaries? Then you did the translations of all the documents?

WA: No, no. I had a team of translators. I asked a priest who had volunteered to help me if he could help me by putting together a small team of translators. His name was Monsignor Gallagher from Baltimore. Then Cardinal Suenens in Belgium called me to Vatican II and, of course, I went.

PK: What happened there?

WA: A cardinal at the Council, Cardinal Shehan, Archbishop of Baltimore, was connected to the translation project. It happened that one day at the Council, I was watching from up in the balcony when a man nearby in the Protestant observers group struck up a conversation with me about the English translation project. He apparently knew that I was in charge of it, and said to me, "What about getting some input from us observers?" So I said, "I hadn't thought of that, but it's a good idea. To do that, however, I would have to get it by one person and he happens to be right over there talking to another bishop." At that point I went over near him where he could catch that I wanted to talk to him. He called me over. This cardinal, who had a reputation of being very conservative, said to me. "It's all right with me. You take care of that yourself as the editor of the project. They don't have to put their materials through me." The reason behind this was that he had already agreed to give the translation his imprimatur.

PK: What a vote of confidence in your opinion, in your judgment.

WA: Yes, but I should add that he already had his own censors of the translation in place in Baltimore. He surprised me by saying, "You don't have to run them by me." [Laughter]

PK: I see.

WA: Baltimore was also involved in another way. One day we were visited at *America* by someone who was a friend of Thurston Davis and of mine. Our translation project came up for discussion. In the course of it he said he was very much interested in it himself and volunteered to form a group of translators himself.

PK: What was his name?

WA: Monsignor Gallagher, and there is quite a story connected with this.

PK: What happened?

WA: I agreed that his offer was providential and that I knew that he would do a good job. And he did! He quickly set up a team of translators who were there at the Council. He even did some of the translating himself.

PK: Was there any opposition to this translation?

WA: We met no trouble at all. I was there in the Council with Cardinal Suenens, one of the four moderators of the Council. So I had great freedom with regard to such projects at the Council. I got to know a great deal about the inside workings of the Council, privy to this and that. I had been given all the document materials that were proposed for discussion.

As a matter of fact, Article Six, as discussed and passed by the bishops, was totally based on my original *America* article. I asked myself, "How did my article get in there?" I later found out that it was sponsored by both Cardinal Bea and Bishop Willebrands, the President and Secretary for Unity. They are the ones who digested it and put it into the Conciliar Documents #6. They thought it was a good idea, so they adopted it and they pushed it. I was saying to myself, "Boy, this is turning out to be pretty good. I think I'll stay right here at this Council so I can see what happens." [Laughter]

PK: What happened then?

WA: Then, one morning at the Council, I was standing near the altar of St. Peter's at the front of the basilica, when a very distinguished gentleman approached me and told me that he was the publisher of Herder and Herder books, a German firm. He heard about our book of translations of documents on the Council. So

he asked whom he should talk to about making a deal with in regard to publishing a major series. I said, "We're just producing a timely paperback." So he said, "A Council needs to have a big edition for the bishops and the libraries around the world." So he said, "Who should I talk with for that purpose?" I said, "Well, I can handle that," because Thurston Davis had given me the whole project. He said, "You handle this whole project."

So I said, "I just have to get the approval of that cardinal right over there, because I've signed him up to give the imprimatur to our book." So he said, "All right, I'll wait here." So I went over and brought this to Cardinal Shehan's attention. I said, "Over there is the publisher of Herder and Herder publications. He wants to know if he can be the publisher of a major edition of the conciliar documents and commentaries of various kinds for the bishops, libraries and the larger public. I just want to make sure that it's all right with you." He said, "I want you to take care of all that totally by yourself. What you do is alright with me." I said, "Thank you." And that was that." [Laughter]

So I went back to director of Herder and Herder publishers, and told him, "It's on. We can do it." And that is why we have also those five big volumes bound with the same silver covers that you see over there on that shelf, the big Herder and Herder edition of the Council documents, including German commentaries translated into English. It is interesting for me to realize that it was all worked out with Mr. Herder that day. [Laughter]

PK: That is quite an story. So you did the overall editing of the translations and of the commentaries on all the documents of Vatican II?

WA: The English ones, yes.

PK: And these were published in a very timely way?

WA: Yes, within one month after the end of the Council the book was distributed and sold.

PK: Wouldn't you call that a publishing coup?

WA: It was a publishing coup, yes. I never worked so hard in my life as I did making sure that everything was translated and ready to go. One of the things I had to make sure was that the book would have Cardinal Shehan's "*imprimi potest*," that it can be published, and he gave it as he had promised.

PK: Were there any issues of concern?

WA: No, we had no troubles with that.

PK: Sailed right through?

WA: Sailed right through.

PK: Your book never had another edition, has it?

WA: The larger works have had other editions. But our original paperback edition has had dozens of printings around the world. At its high point, there were three million paperback copies sold as well as half a million of the big Herder edition.

PK: Did America Press realize some profits from all this?

WA: Yes. But, as I am sure you know, all my royalties went directly to the New England Jesuit Province.

PK: So you actually got nothing out of this but the honor of serving the Church and the Society?

WA: Actually, the Province made quite a lot of money out of it, at least of a quarter of a million! [Laughter]

PK: You said you worked very hard at this. Did you find it difficult?

WA: Quite the opposite. I thought it was a good, great, and wonderful thing to do. I was pleased.

PK: In terms of important events in your life, does this rival your work with the Secretariat, and the promotion of a common Bible?

WA: Yes. I would say that my experience at the Council

was probably the greatest experience of my life.

PK: In what way?

WA: In every way. Just being there in the first place, being on the inside of everything important going on, hearing so many cardinals and bishops present their particular ideas on so many issues. It was such a great experience!

PK: How has that experience continued in your relationship with the Lord? For example, your present assignment is to pray for the Church and the Society. I would imagine that your sense of the Church is much broader and deeper than it might be otherwise?

WA: Yes, it's very big! [Laughter] I pray for everything: for the bishops, Father General, the whole Society as well as for myself. I also pray for good health so I may get back to doing something constructive. It has been good for my spiritual life.

PK: With regard to that, have the documents of Vatican II continued as a source of spiritual renewal?

WA: To the extent that they would apply to a Jesuit priest, of course.

PK: Another aspect of your life was your intimate knowledge of Scriptures, since you can read them in the original Greek. In addition, for a while, you taught a scripture seminar at Bld. John XXIII National Seminary?

WA: Yes. During my medical recuperation in Boston, I was asked if I felt well enough to be a New Testament professor at Pope John Seminary. I thought I could, and it turned out to be to a wonderful experience.

PK: In what way?

WA: Wonderful with regard to the kind and diversity of men I was teaching. In my classes I had quite a range: older, white-haired men in their sixties and seventies; middle-aged men as well as young men in their upper thirties or early forties. I thought it was a wonderful thing for the Church to have such experienced people

going for the priesthood. I was happy to do that.

PK: You were able to present them with a sense of the Church as well as the importance of the Scriptures in the life of the Church?

WA: Yes.

PK: What about the question of the proper relationship with other churches?

WA: I was able to do all kinds of good things in the classroom as a teacher.

PK: Did you have the pleasure of recommending your book of translations of the Council documents for classroom work as well as providing information on your biblical work?

WA: [Laughter] I suppose I have to say yes to that. These two very important areas are understood as mutually interconnected.

PK: Could you tell us more about that?

WA: I felt from the beginning of the Council that God was at work in my life. As time went on in the Council, I became all the more sure that God was at work here. It is a powerful feeling!

PK: Kind of a benchmark experience of God's action in your life?

WA: Yes.

PK: Just a quick look at two other interests of yours. First, your time at the Vatican Radio. Tell us something about that.

WA: For a year or so in the mid-sixties, I was at the Vatican Radio station in Rome as the Director of the North American Section. I had a number of interesting interviews broadcast.

PK: Then second, what about your interest in the Shroud of Turin?

WA: I was always interested in the Shroud of Turin and, being in Italy so many years, I had a number of opportunities to visit it. Later on, I studied it more,

bought some excellent slides, and was able to give a number of lectures on the Shroud when I was back in the States, which seemed well received.

PK: Now, as we conclude our conversation, are there other elements in your life that you would like to mention? Or would you like to make a summary statement?

WA: Well, I think that this interview has been a very worthwhile effort to look into this line of events. Here is an additional thing I could mention. When I was first at *America* we were looking for a new office for the press and a residence for the Jesuit community. One day I was up in my room, over the office area, when I got a call from the real estate expert who was looking for a suitable place, telling me that he had found what he thought was an ideal place on West 56th St. I had been in charge of the search for a new building somewhere nearby in Manhattan and he was filling me in on what he found. I phoned Thurston from inside that building and said, "Thurston, come down and take a look. I think I've found exactly what you want for *America*: forty-five thousand square feet with both work and residence space. Come on down and take a look." He was delighted when he saw it. He said, "This is it. Get it. We'll buy it!"

PK: It is a great location.

WA: One day, I went to work a little bit early to our old place at 108th Street. We had not yet moved into the new one. We were still up near Columbia University. I was in my second floor office near a bay window. I got a phone call from Belgium from Cardinal Suenens when he called between Council sessions. He wanted to ask me for help in his forthcoming American lecture tour.

PK: Yes. You had mentioned that already. A very interesting story, a wonderful thing. It sounds as if this was very gratifying to you, that he would rely on you,

and welcome your companionship?

WA: We became good friends, yes.

PK: As we conclude, do you have any final statement?

WA: It was certainly a great and rewarding opportunity to be the Pope's envoy on those worldwide trips about the common Bible idea. I was, of course, neither an ambassador or an apostolic delegate. When I arrived in countries like Australia, for example, where I was picked up by this great limousine, I said, "Well, I'll use it. It's here; God is at work." [Laughter] It was a big, beautiful limousine given to the Cardinal Archbishop of Sydney by the leading beer manufacturer of Australia! Yes, it was so big it reminded me of a hearse. [Laughter] It was wonderful work.

PK: You found it wonderful work...

WA: Yes, I felt that God was at work using me for his own purposes. I had a keen feeling that God was at work in all these wonderful experiences. His grace sustained me along the route, especially when my legs were wobbly. [Laughter]

PK: Thank you.

WA: Thank you.

Fr. Walter M. Abbott, S.J.

- Born:** December 2, 1923, Somerville,
Massachusetts
- Entered:** June 30, 1941, Lenox, Massachusetts,
Shadowbrook
- Ordained:** June 16, 1956, Weston, Massachusetts,
Weston College
- Final Vows:** August 15, 1959, Weston, Massachusetts,
Weston College
-
- 1937 Boston, Massachusetts: Boston College High
School - Student
- 1941 Lenox, Massachusetts: Shadowbrook - Novitiate,
juniorate
- 1945 Weston, Massachusetts: Weston College - Studied
philosophy; assistant prefect of the library (1945-
46)
- 1948 Oxford, England: Oxford University - Studied
Classics
- 1951 Weston, Massachusetts: Weston College - Health
care, private study; B.C. High - Taught
homeroom; Fairfield Preparatory School - Taught
homeroom (Spring 1953)
- 1953 Weston, Massachusetts: Weston College - Studied
theology; assistant prefect of library (1953-54)
- 1957 Pomfret, Connecticut: St. Robert Hall - Tertian-
ship
- 1958 New York City, New York: America House -
Writer for *America*; Associate Editor (1959-1966)
- 1966 Vatican City, Vatican: Vatican Radio - Director of
North American Section
- 1967 Vatican City, Vatican: Secretariat for Christian
Unity - Assistant to Cardinal Bea (1967-69); Mod-
erator of Christian Bible Section (1969-78)

- 1978 Cambridge, Massachusetts: LaFarge House -
Sabbatical
- 1979 Weston, Massachusetts: Campion Center - Assis-
tant Province Archivist (1979-1987); taught Sacred
Scripture at Pope John XXIII Seminary (1979-90);
local apostolate
- 1990 Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts: Arrupe House -
Minister (1990-93); taught Sacred Scripture (1990-
99); pastoral ministry; writer
- 1999 Weston, Massachusetts: Campion Center - Pasto-
ral ministry; writer
- 2005 Weston, Massachusetts: Campion Health Center -
Praying for the Church and the Society

Degrees

- 1947 Bachelor of Arts, Classics, Weston College-Boston
College. Licentiate in Philosophy, Weston College
- 1948 Master of Arts, Philosophy, Weston College-
Boston College
- 1957 Licentiate in Sacred Theology, Weston College-
Boston College