

**New England Jesuit  
Oral History Program**



**Fr. Aram J. Berard, S.J.  
Volume 28**

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## 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 oral history is all about.

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September 2007

Interview with Fr. Aram J. Berard, S.J.  
by Fr. Paul C. Kenney, S.J.  
February 17, 22, 24, 27, 2006

**PREFACE: MEMORIES OF THREE FRIENDS**

**PAUL KENNEY:** Good morning, everyone. I'm pleased to welcome three friends of yours, Aram: Mr. Arthur St. Laurent, who has known you since grammar school; Mr. Eugene Peloquin, who knew you in high school; and Fr. George Allard, who was with you in the minor seminary.

**ARAM BERARD:** Hello.

**ALL:** Hello, Aram.

**PK:** Let's start with grammar school years. Arthur, where did you first meet Aram?

**ASL:** OK. Aram has been for years now a very close friend of mine. I hesitate to say what I'm going to say, because maybe he shouldn't be listening to this. But this is something that's never forgotten. When we were in grade school, myself and a friend of mine considered Aram a bully. We used to run past the street where he used to walk home to make sure that Aram [chuckles] would not do anything to us. And it's strange how things turn out, that he ends up one of my best friends.

PK: Yes. How about you, Eugene?

EP: I met Fr. Aram in grade ten at Mount St. Charles Academy in Woonsocket, Rhode Island. He was in many of the same classes—French, religion, English. But then I took Latin and Greek, and I think you were in the business course.

AB: Business courses.

EP: Business courses. But a miracle happened, because by the time he left grade school as a bully, when I knew him at Mount St. Charles, he was a very charitable, kind person to all his classmates, including some who really needed help, a little mentoring, a guiding hand. A fine student and not lazy at all, because, unlike me, he worked during high school at Peter Pan Ice Cream every day. Was it four or five hours?

AB: About that.

EP: It was quite a bit. And yet, he managed to keep up with his classes. But luckily, he had a friend who would let him copy his homework. But he turned out very well. He was kind, a hard worker, and a straight shooter. So those are my recollections.

PK: Thank you. How about you, George?

GA: I got to know Aram in the minor seminary, which was first and second year college. We even traveled back and forth. We used to go home on Thursdays, and then we had summers off. He had a wonderful mother. I guess he always had things to do. She could never get enough of Aram. When he had decided to become a Jesuit, it was a big thing for her, because she had her heart set for him to be a priest in the Diocese of Providence. She was kind of disappointed, because she wouldn't see Aram for a while. That was difficult for her, because she really was a good mother, very nice lady. I have met a lot of people that I liked, but she was really great. She had a great love for you, Aram.

Anyway, as we traveled back and forth we got to know one another. I remember him as a low-key type of guy on the dreamer side—he’s always dreaming of something new, always looking ahead. And he worked hard in school. He really put his mind to his studies. I remember that.

He was also talented in music. Aram, you were what Fr. Lebeuf was, who took care of music at the minor seminary. What was your position in the choir?

AB: The choir director.

GA: Yes. And he’s low key. He never bragged about anything. He’d just do what he had to do and did it well. Also, Aram was adventurous, because I remember when Aram bought a Harley Davidson 125 in first year college. I kind of liked the idea. But at first my parents weren’t too keen on my getting one. I said, “Oh, listen. I’m doing my best. I’m not asking for much, but I want to get a motorcycle.” So I got a motorcycle that matched yours. I was kind of lucky: you were a classmate of mine from grammar school who had the same type of motorcycle. So we both enjoyed that.

And a big surprise to me, to show you Aram is very self-contained in many ways—because I thought I knew him quite well—and yet, I never had any inclination that you were going to join the Jesuits. Never seemed to talk about it, and then, was it in your first year that you decided to join the Jesuits?

AB: First year of theology.

GA: I went to St. Paul Seminary in Ottawa. When I found out Aram was joining the Jesuits, I was so surprised. It was very sporadic, as far as seeing one another went.

PK: OK.

GA: He’s the kind of guy with dreams, even in the Jesuits. He was in Europe studying, then in Vietnam, and then in the parishes. [Laughter] And he almost

didn't get out of Vietnam, right?

AB: Yes.

GA: He gives you that impression: I have everything controlled.

PK: Yes.

GA: Very calm. When he got up to give the homily at his friend, Roger's, funeral, at first he made me nervous—I get nervous about these things. But he just gave a nice homily with his gentle voice—he's got a nice voice because he's a singer. So I kind of admire people like that.

PK: Thank you, George, Eugene, and Arthur for helping us start this interview. Sorry you have to go.

GA: We didn't know we'd become part of Fr. Aram Berard's archives! [Laughter] We just came here to visit him today.

ASL: I'd like to say something good about him, OK?

PK: Sure.

ASL: He plays the violin, and he probably hasn't played in many years. But he was very, very good at it. And I remember there was a mechanic not far from my house who had an antique car in beautiful condition. Everybody wanted it. Guess who got that car? Aram. He had an antique car.

PK: Great. Thank you all for your help.

AB: Yes. [They say good-bye and depart.]

#### EARLY YEARS

PK: Aram, tell us a bit about your family.

AB: I'd like to start with my father. He was one of three boys, and I think there were four girls in the family. My grandfather owned grocery stores.

PK: OK.

AB: So my father grew up in that milieu. My grandfather built some three-decker houses. They lived in one and had a market. They had three markets at

one time. So after Dad finished his service in the Coast Guard, he went to work with his father in these grocery stores. In 1925 he married my mother. He was supposed to build a house close to where all his family lived. But instead he bought a farm about a mile away. It was a second-generation farm, so it was rather well-established. They had a nice 14-room farmhouse, a few chicken coops, a whole string of garages, a milk barn, and a few other barns. It was when they had no indoor plumbing, so they had outhouses. It was a 50-acre farm on the outskirts of Woonsocket.

And my father decided to build a new house for his wife as a wedding gift. So he designed the house and monitored the building of this house where we all later lived. Dad and I really enjoyed living in that house, at the corner of Carnation and Knight Streets. We had a big ledge with some caves in it on one side of the house. It was a real playground.

PK: You enjoyed playing there?

AB: I enjoyed it very much.

PK: How many were living on the farm?

AB: My father had made the farmhouse into three different apartments.

PK: OK.

AB: So we always rented them, and so had young people to play with.

PK: How about brothers and sisters?

AB: I had two older sisters. We were all two years apart. My sister, Frances, who built her home on my father's land when she married, and my sister, Claire, who married a fellow that moved around the country quite a bit and now lives in Cumberland, Rhode Island.

#### HIS MOTHER

PK: What was your mother like?

AB: She was a homebody. Her home was her castle. I

don't remember ever coming home without mother being there.

PK: Oh.

AB: She had a nice situation in the sense that, because my father came from a marketing family, she would get a telephone call around 10 AM from the market. And they would say, "Mrs. Berard, we have some very nice tomatoes today. The bananas are not that great, but I recommend the meat." She would order what she wanted. Just before lunch a truck would come up and give her whatever she ordered.

PK: Right.

AB: I compare that with what other women do to shop today. She didn't have to do any of that. [Chuckles]

PK: What was her family like?

AB: Her family was in construction. My grandfather made the foundation for Mount St. Charles Academy, for instance. But they were not academically motivated. My father's family was.

#### HIS EDUCATION

PK: Tell us about your education.

AB: I went to St. Claire's High School run by the Sisters of St. Claire. But I was kind of a rabble-rouser.

PK: Really?

AB: A rabble-rouser, yes, and creating a lot of problems. I remember, because my two older sisters were there, too. But I was always put in front of the statue of the Sacred Heart on the second floor, because I was "on penance" for doing something in the class. Claire would always be very embarrassed, when her friends would tell her, "Claire, your brother is on penance again today." So after the third grade they sent me to a school we called, "the Little College." There I met the Brothers of the Sacred Heart, and my behavior changed radically.

PK: How so?

AB: I had a wonderful teacher, Bro. Lionel, who took a real personal interest in me, monitoring everything I was doing, not only academically but musically as well. He started me off on the violin. Eventually I was studying the violin under his professor as well. I turned over a whole new leaf.

I was there only with boys; the other school was boys and girls. When I went to Mount St. Charles in the eighth grade, I really enjoyed it. In junior year I got a job at Peter Pan Ice Cream working nights. The Brothers were very good to me. They knew that I was working. I remember one of the classes, the first thing I would do is fall asleep [chuckles]. And the Brother never bothered me, because he knew that I had worked until 12 o'clock. I don't think I was a very good student.

#### GROWING UP

PK: Did you have to work?

AB: My family was neither poor nor rich. People thought we were rich, because we had fifty acres, a couple of houses, and all that stuff. But we were not really rich. My father was a real worker and a real provider. The money I earned, I kept.

PK: OK.

AB: I never went without money [chuckles].

PK: Was to get a motorcycle that you worked so hard?

AB: No. I liked to have motorcycles. I had two what we called "whizzes," motorbikes on Schwinn bicycles before my motorcycle. Education was not expensive. It was about \$75 a year at Mount St. Charles.

PK: And after high school?

AB: I started at the Rhode Island College of Education. I was going to go into business with my father; he was a developer.

PK: But something changed your career choice?

#### ENTERING THE SEMINARY

AB: Yes. It came to about October. My mother was in the house at her sewing machine. I just went to her and said, "Mother, I think I'm going to the seminary." By that Saturday I was at the minor seminary. We had a dormitory on the top floor and three other guys were there who had just graduated from Mount St. Charles with me. I was looking at the ceiling and I said, "How in the heck did I ever get into this place?" [Laughter]

PK: So it was very quick.

AB: Very quick. My mother knew that I was going to the seminary. Because I didn't have a classical course, I had to bone up at Our Lady of Providence Seminary. They were very good to me there. So I spent 1950 to 1954 there. Then Bishop McVinney sent me to Montreal.

PK: Why?

AB: I guess he was preparing me for French parishes. I spent two years there in philosophy. My spiritual director, Fr. Locas, was transferred the same year I was transferred to the Grand Seminaire, but he continued to be my spiritual director. We had a Jesuit teacher from Loyola College in Montreal, Fr. Gerry [John Gerald] MacGuigan, who was, I think, a relative of Cardinal MacGuigan. He was the first Jesuit that I encountered.

#### JOINING THE JESUITS

PK: I see.

AB: And so, speaking with my friends and my spiritual director, after first theology I said, "I would like to join a religious order." We were talking about the Dominicans and the Jesuits. That year, 1956,

Shadowbrook burned. And, of course, everybody was talking about that. I also had a friend who gave me a book by Gerard Manley Hopkins. I fell in love with his poetry. It was through his poetry, really, that I got to know the *Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*. And so I said, "I want to join the Jesuits." Then it was a question of joining the French Canadian Province, the English Canadian Province, or the New England Province.

PK: A choice for you.

AB: I said, "Well, I live in New England. I'm going to apply in New England." So I went to Boston and applied there. I was accepted.

PK: Where did you enter?

#### AT THE NEW SHADOWBROOK

AB: I went to Bellarmine College in Plattsburgh, New York.

PK: How was that for you?

AB: Oh, that was great. We had Andy Brady as our novice master. In late '58 we opened up the new Shadowbrook. So all the novices were brought in from Bellarmine in Plattsburgh, St. Andrew's in Poughkeepsie, and Wernersville in Pennsylvania to open up the new novitiate.

PK: How did you find that?

AB: That was great. Coming from a construction background, I always liked construction. It was interesting, because it had a number of problems. [Chuckles] One was that the building was very long, so it was in three long sections. Between each section they had a rubber bumper. But one of them went right through the novices' chapel. When the snow and rain came, that bumper was not holding too well. [Chuckles] Some of the ceiling tiles were coming down during the liturgy, when the little chapel was filled with

novices. We would look at those tiles and see that some of them were giving way. All of a sudden one would—boom!—come crashing down. That was one thing that happened. And then the kneelers also were not strong enough to hold the novices, so they collapsed under their weight.

#### TWO NOVICE MASTERS

PK: Who was your novice master?

AB: We had Fr. John Post as our second novice master. We were privileged to have two novice masters.

PK: Would you hazard a comparison?

AB: John Post had been injured in the fire in '56, so he was slow-moving compared to Andy Brady, who would play hard at handball with us novices.

PK: How about as novice masters?

AB: John Post had been novice master longer. He had more experience.

PK: How did that show itself?

AB: John Post was much more spiritual, analyzing the Exercises and the spiritual life much more. His daily lectures were constantly in a spiritual mode, whereas Andy Brady was more social.

PK: Emphasizing the relationships among the novices?

AB: Yes. And much more physical in playing sports.

PK: Was he more attentive to the details of living together?

AB: Yes. We were never really corrected on anything. It was a very nice place. It had been a resort before.

PK: OK.

PK: Did having two novice masters affect you in the long run?

AB: I was in my mid-twenties, so I already had my spiritual life pretty well established when I entered. I had a great love for Gerard Manley Hopkins, which I continued and developed over the years. So the nov-

ice masters were almost an added gift.

PK: How did you relate to the younger novices?

AB: We had some older guys there, too. We had college graduates and young fellows from high school. We got along quite well together. [Chuckles] There was a lot of recreation together and the task of opening up the new Shadowbrook.

PK: How was that?

AB: That was a difficult job. Thank God for our rector, Fr. Larry Langguth. He really knew what he was doing. He had been in charge of building it. So he knew where everything was.

PK: What did you have to do?

AB: We had to clean the building. It seemed as though it took about six months just to clean the place.

PK: The construction dust?

AB: Yes, constant dust. And some things would malfunction, so they'd have to repair them, and then there was more dust. It seemed as though the building never got clean. It was a nice building, though.

PK: I know: I had to clean it in my time!

AB: Then we came right to Weston after our short time there. I wanted to get some juniorate, but Pat Sullivan, the Dean, said, "No, you don't need any studies. Go right into philosophy."

PK: You really liked Shadowbrook.

AB: I felt pretty good about it, although I lost two years.

PK: How?

AB: That was typical of my training, that I would lose a year or two at each stage—juniorate, philosophy, and regency. Each time I would pick up a new year of scholastics. My ordination group was not the one I started with. [Chuckles]

## STUDYING PHILOSOPHY AT WESTON

PK: How did you like philosophy?

AB: I was glad to get back into it, and I was kind of hungry for it. We had a good philosophy professor in Montreal. I'd read a good book; it really, really opened me up to metaphysics. I never considered myself a very intellectual guy. But after reading that book and going through an exam, the professor said to us, "You all did very well in the exam. There's one exam that I'd like to highlight as the best of all." It happened to be mine. [Chuckles] It was because of that opening to metaphysics that I was hungry to get into it. I was delighted to come to Weston from Shadowbrook in '59.

PK: What field did you hope to work in?

AB: As a philosophy professor. That was my first choice. But I was somewhat imprudent: I was going to read everything in the library.

PK: [Chuckles]

AB: I was overdoing it, and I started to feel the repercussions. We had a spiritual director, who asked me, "Aram, don't you think your head is in the sand in trying to do all of this?" I could see the wisdom of that: I needed some help to slow me down.

Fr. Paul Lucey directed my thesis. I started it off on St. Thomas Aquinas, who was always referring to "the philosopher" as his great teacher. I asked myself, "Why don't I write on 'the philosopher' who was the inspiration for St. Thomas?"

That's when I turned to Aristotle; "The Logos in Aristotle" was the subject of my thesis. That has always stayed with me. It's the way Aristotle used logos, which, of course, he had gotten mainly from Plato. It has always stayed with me how universities are centered on the Logos: physiology, biology—whatever it is, it's an *ology*, it's the *logos* of that particular branch of creation.

## REGENCY AT BC HIGH

PK: You then taught French at B.C. High for two years. How was that for you?

AB: The first year was difficult. I remember stopping by the chapel on the way to class. I said, "Lord, I have no idea how I'm going to get through this class, but here we go." [Chuckles] But the second year was delightful. The students were wonderful, and I also got involved with the Sodality. It was during Vatican II Council.

Joe Laughlin, now here at Campion as well, was the Sodality Director, and I was his assistant. I was getting a lot of literature in French on the Council. Joe and I organized a Junior Ecumenical Council at B.C. High: while they were having the Council in Rome, we were having one in Boston.

PK: What did you do?

AB: We had all the same commissions. I put students in charge of the commissions. We invited nearby Catholic schools, because Joe was in contact with them all. It even became quite a project for Cardinal Cushing, who wrote an article in *The Pilot* [the diocesan paper] about it, that this was the way we should go, getting students involved in Vatican II.

PK: So each group made a presentation on each commission.

AB: Yes, on the Eastern Churches, non-Catholics, the priesthood, the liturgy, etc.

PK: OK.

AB: Our B. C. High students ran the commissions, with the others participating. We had a wonderful day. It was quite exciting. [Chuckles] I think it was very profitable for the students.

PK: That was the highlight of your work with Joe Laughlin in the Sodality?

AB: Yes.

## THEOLOGY AT WESTON

PK: Then back to Weston for theology?

AB: Yes. That was very nice, too, although we didn't have the leadership that I was expecting. We were pretty much left to ourselves. So ordination in '66 and then fourth year theology in '67. I went to tertianship at Pomfret with Jimmy Coleran, who died just a few months later.

PK: What memories do you have of that?

AB: Wonderful memories, because Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, the present Fr. General, was a tertian there. We became good friends. We'd go hiking together regularly. That was a good friendship that has stayed with us. Whenever I'm in Rome, we have dinner together. I've met him a number of times in the States. The last time was at Wernersville.

PK: So after tertianship, your interest in philosophy led you to further studies?

## STUDYING PHILOSOPHY IN PARIS

AB: Right. I went to Paris to work in cosmology, because I thought that the cosmology we had was really outdated. We'd study hylomorphism and, while that is fine, it's fourth century B.C. [Chuckles] I wanted to work on cosmology, so I started to study for a degree on the development of modern science.

PK: How was it for you in Paris?

AB: Paris was a strange place. I asked Fr. de Lubac, when he was here at Weston, about going to Paris. He said, "Oh, don't go to Paris. Go to Rome." [Chuckles] But I wanted to go back to France, because my ancestors came from there back in 1619. I took the *France*, a beautiful ship, atomic-powered with stabilizers that so controlled for turbulence, especially in the British Channel, that we never felt it. The ship schedule was well organized, too. We'd have our dinner with young

people going to Europe.

PK: How about your time at the Institut Catholique?

AB: I was living at Rue De Grenelle with close to a hundred Jesuits—most of them priests—from all over the world. That’s where I met some Vietnamese Jesuits. I was also chaplain to the Sisters of St. Paul of Chartres. They had about a thousand members in Vietnam. During the Paris Peace talks between Le Duc Tho and Henry Kissinger, I was able to participate in that, too.

PK: How so?

AB: We’d pray at different places. There were a lot of Vietnamese present there. That was my initiation, you might say, to the Vietnamese people.

PK: How did that pastoral involvement affect your work at the Institut Catholique?

AB: For three years I was working at the Institut Catholique and the Institut des Hautes Etudes, which was part of the Sorbonne. My thesis was to be presented at the Sorbonne. But I realized why Fr. de Lubac had told me not to go to Paris, because it was during 1968 student riots—“Les événements de Mai.”

PK: Oh, yes.

AB: De Gaulle had the army establish peace and order. But I still wanted to be in Paris, and I’m glad I did. Paris is a wonderful place to study, because they have beautiful museums and wonderful collections. So I really enjoyed that. And we had a good Jesuit community.

PK: Tell me a bit about your thesis.

AB: My thesis was written in English, and then my director, Fr. Costabel, said, “You have to put it into French.” So I came home and had it translated it into French. But then it was turned down by the Sorbonne. So the Provincial then, Bill Guindon, said, “You can go back and take another shot at it.” But I

was 39 years old, and I had spent all my life in studies. So I said, "Bill, I've had it with studies right now."  
[Chuckles]

#### HIS WORK IN VIETNAM

AB: My second option was the missions, so I asked Bill Guindon to go to Palestine to work with the refugees. We had a number of Jesuits in the Middle East from Baghdad; they had been expelled in '69 under Saddam Hussein's party. They told me, "It'd be impossible for any American to work with the Palestinian refugees."

They also needed somebody in Saigon at the Jesuit Center. I asked, "Why don't I go to Saigon?" [Chuckles] So I ended up in Saigon. We had a wonderful superior there, Fr. Sesto Quercetti from Italy, who was a gifted linguist. He was in charge our communications center in Saigon, which was our main Jesuit compound and a student center. We also had a parish and Jesuit residence. Some of the Jesuits were teaching in the university. It was a complex but very interesting community.

PK: What was your responsibility there?

AB: I was going to be working with another American Jesuit, Fr. Joe Devlin, from California. He had been working with Vietnamese refugees under the French.

The Vietnamese were used as directors of operations in Laos and in Cambodia. So you had communities of Vietnamese there. The communists from North Vietnam were using those Vietnamese communities as bases of sabotage. Then the Cambodian president, Lon Nol, expelled all the Vietnamese from Phnom Penh, and just threw them in the river. It was very tragic, because mothers would lose one or two of their children in the current.

PK: Which river?

AB: The Mekong River separates Cambodia and Laos, then it goes right through Phnom Penh before coming into Vietnam. A Vietnamese diocesan pastor in the Mekong Delta, Fr. Bach, took it upon himself to fish these people out of the river as they came floating down the Mekong of Vietnam. And he would re-establish them. The first establishment was back in 1968 with 700 families.

The Plain of Reeds in the northwest delta of Vietnam is a big geological bucket, a huge lake for most of the year—and I mean huge, maybe 75 to a 100 miles wide. Fr. Bach came there with all these families, each one in a boat. Fr. Bach stuck an oar in the water and said, “This is our new home,” right there in the water.

Eventually Fr. Bach met with Ngo Dinh Diem, the president of Vietnam. They were good friends. Fr. Bach asked him to dig a canal there, which they did. By the way, in digging the canal they threw the dirt on one side, creating some high ground, which became a much-needed road.

PK: What was your role in all this?

AB: Fr. Joe Devlin worked with Fr. Bach. When I came to Saigon, I said, “I’m going to work with Joe Devlin and Fr. Bach.” The Jesuit superior said, “If you don’t learn the language, you won’t be able to do a thing in Vietnam. So the first thing is learn the language.” I could see the wisdom of that. So that’s what I did for one year. There was a small school of linguistics run by the Wycliff Society in Da Lat up in the highlands, where there was also a Catholic university and the Jesuits had a major seminary.

#### STUDYING VIETNAMESE IN DA LAT

PK: This was in 1973?

AB: Yes. The communists were always coming in, but

the Americans and the Vietnamese forces were able to keep them at bay. The little Wycliff Society school there was run mostly by Americans. They were preparing the missionaries to work with the Montagnards mainly. The Wycliff Society's goal is to translate the Bible into all the languages of the world. So they teach their missionaries the language of a country, and then send them there to translate the Bible. For many Montagnards, it was the first time they saw their language written down.

PK: How did your studies go?

AB: During 1973, I would study Vietnamese about three months. The routine was very intensive. We had to master every item in a lesson before we could go to the next. I'd study seven days a week. After three months I was really fit to be tied. I'd go and work with Joe Devlin just to straighten out my nervous system. When I got in shape, I'd go back for another three months. That's how I did it for a year.

I was supposed to study for three years, but then the end of the war came. During my break from study, I had been given two villages in the Mekong Delta to develop. My main village was Hoa Binh right near the Cambodian border on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. We were attacked every day. They'd come at night, abduct people, and bring them away into the high grass. They were constantly shooting at people. Hoa Binh was a little village with three compounds and a military post. We had a little parish, a rectory, and a little school that had been bombed out. But we managed. I was also enlarging the village into a city.

RK: How so?

AB: Building a square kilometer of big ramparts, a protective wall with lookout towers. That way the people could farm year-round, because during the wet season, everything was so flooded that they saw the

ground for, maybe, two months of the year. They would plant rice during the dry season. When the water would rise, the rice would rise, too. They would harvest the floating rice into their boats. But with these quadrangles, they'd be able to grow rice year-round without concern for the flooding. That's where we were at the end of the war in 1975.

We had completed one square kilometer and started a second one. It was the first time that people were actually able to walk to church instead of using their boats. Everybody lived on the water; they had their little huts on stilts anchored by wires, with four generations of people living inside.

#### THE END OF THE VIETNAM WAR

PK: How did you conclude your work in Vietnam?

AB: OK. Now we're getting close to the end of the war. The American forces were very good to me. They sent a helicopter. I was repairing a tractor in a neighboring village, and the pilot came in and said, "Father, your superior in Saigon would like to with speak with you in the worst way. So would you come with us?" I said, "Sure. Let's go down to Can Tho (the capital of the Mekong Delta) and I'll call him."

So we went down to Can Tho. But all the telephone lines were plugged up. Everything was chaos. The head surgeon said, "Father, why don't you go up to Saigon and meet your superior?" So I got a plane from Can Tho to Saigon; this was a Wednesday before the end of the war. So as soon as President Nixon had resigned, the communists knew they could do anything they wanted and no one would say a word about it. So they massively invaded the South, in violation of the Paris Peace talks' agreement. Of course, the Vietnamese forces, no longer supported by American aid, were not able to hold

them back, and Nixon had withdrawn the American forces. So the communist forces were massively taking over and, of course, always going towards Saigon. A lot of people from all over the place ran into Saigon thinking that Saigon would hold. The American Embassy compound was jam-packed with people.

PK: Right.

AB: I'm sure you've seen some pictures of that, thousands of people around the American Embassy and a helicopter leaving the roof of the embassy with the refugees. And so that was the situation and I had to find a place. First of all, I met the superior and said, "Father, I'd like permission to remain in Vietnam." We knew that everything was going to fall, because the Americans had withdrawn. He replied, "Aram, we just received Fr. Dargan, a delegate from Fr. General, who's going to make all decisions for Vietnam this Friday, so why don't you wait and see?" This was Wednesday.

When I met Fr. Dargan on Friday, I said, "I'd like permission to remain in Vietnam after the communist takeover." He said, "Aram, we're going to be having a meeting Sunday night to make all these decisions. So I'll see you Sunday." That night he said, "Aram, you've got to leave Vietnam. There's no way that you can stay and do anything in communist Vietnam." I said, "My villagers are down there in Hoa Binh, and they think I'm still repairing a tractor in Tran Chim, the neighboring village. They don't know where I am." I asked permission to go back there to tell them I had to leave the country.

#### STRUGGLE TO RETURN TO SAIGON

AB: He said, "OK, so long as you are back here on the 30<sup>th</sup> of April to take the first plane out." I said, "OK, I'll be back then." So Monday, April 28, I flew to

Can Tho, alone with the pilot. He said, "The end is very, very close." I said, "Yes, I know. It's very close." The communists had surrounded Saigon already. From Can Tho I took little taxi boats. And so I met with my people. We had many projects, a lot of people working. I put that in order and told them that I'd be leaving, and then we parted. We had arranged for a boat to leave early on April 30 from Tran Chim, but the darn engine would not start. He must have worked on that thing for an hour, but it wouldn't go. So we were still stuck there.

One of the guys said, "Well, why don't I take you in on the motorcycle?" I said, "Fine." But you had to cross the Mekong River twice to get into Long Xuyen, the capital of that area. Finally I got there right after noon, and went to the seminary. They said, "An Binh, (their name for me), did you get the news? All the Americans took off at two o'clock this morning and the communists have taken Saigon." That was the first time I heard about it, and I was due in Saigon that day to take the first plane out.

I said, "Well, I've got to get into Saigon somehow." I started to go down the road. There I could see the effects of the communist takeover. People were pouring out of Can Tho and going to Long Xuyen, because that was a militant Buddhist center, ferociously anti-communist. There they hoped to be safe. (Later, whenever a pair of communist soldiers on patrol would go down a side street, they would just simply disappear. So the communists eventually abandoned Long Xuyen.)

I was just put on the side of the road there by the guy that had given me a ride. He was far from his home, so he said, "Father, this looks pretty bad. I'd better try to get back to my family." I said, "Just leave me and try to get back as best you can." There

I was all alone and all these people were going the other way, and I was the only one going the opposite way out of Can Tho. [Chuckles]

I started to pray. It wasn't fifteen seconds later that a young Vietnamese officer came by on his motorcycle. He said, "Father, I'm an officer, Catholic. Hop on and I'll take you into Can Tho." It was because of him that I was able to go through all the security checkpoints manned by the South Vietnamese Army. He would go to the post commander for permission to cross. Then we'd have to stop at the next one. He'd go there, and explain the situation, and get permission.

It was not until we got into Can Tho that I realized that this was really the end. The officer who was riding the motorcycle went over to the side of the road to speak with some other officers that had come out of the camp. Then they all took their ID cards and ripped them up. I said, "This is the end. The communists have taken over." Then you could see all the soldiers leaving the camp and putting their guns outside there. They were just coming out in their underwear, really. They had left their military uniforms behind. People would throw them a shirt and trousers. That's the way it was.

The officer said, "I'll take you to the bishop." He lived in a little compound across from the headquarters of the general of the Mekong Delta region. The compound was surrounded by South Vietnamese soldiers with machine guns. We went up and the soldier just put a machine gun to my face. He said, "You don't go any further. We'll blow your head off." [Chuckles]

My officer driver said, "I'll take you to see a priest friend of mine in the city." That priest said, "I'll take you to see the bishop." We went through

the back way, and [chuckles] came up right in front of the bishop's house. The bishop says, "You—being an American—are not in the best position to be in right now. You'd better go to Saigon. It'll be a lot better for you in Saigon." He gave me a soutane, because all the French priests wore them, a hat, and some glasses. He says, "Go off as a French priest, not an American priest." One of his priests gave me a ride down to the canal. There was no crossing. The communists were in charge, little communists, you know. They were flexing their muscles: "We're the big boys now. You don't move. Nobody moves." A Buddhist officer came up and said, "Father, follow me and I'll see that you get across the River."

PK: Danger all around, yet help, too.

AB: We went on board a big boat, and he motioned to the father, who had a little boat with his little boy, to come over. He came over, I slid down into that boat, and he took me across.

On the other side there was absolutely nothing—no taxis, nothing. So we had to walk. I always spoke French [chuckles] with anyone interrogating me. That night I got into Vinh Long, another city in the Delta, and went to the cathedral. By then my feet were all bloodied from walking; a nurse there bandaged my feet. I had dinner and went to bed. But that city had not yet fallen to the communists. They said, "Well, tonight it'll fall," because the communists had surrounded it. Then about 8 o'clock I heard, pop, pop, pop, pop, pop, pop! All hell broke out. I said, "This must be the communist takeover." And so I fell asleep. The following day, the first of May, I found out at breakfast what had happened. They said, "Oh, the kids were shooting guns in the air last night." [Chuckles] It was like Fourth of July.

Then I had to cross the Mekong again, and there I got a bus that eventually took me to Saigon. I didn't want to go directly to our Jesuit center. I had a friend at the French Embassy. He said, "I'll find a place for you to stay." He picked up the phone and you could hear the conversation. The people were saying, "Who is he?" "He's just a good friend." But eventually they'd say, "He's an American! Oh, no. We don't want an American here." So he'd call another place and, "No, no. We can't take an American here." The situation was too tense to house an American. In the end he said, "Why don't you go to the Vatican Embassy?" I went there, and the secretary was a Jesuit.

PK: Really.

AB: He said, "The best thing is to go to our center. When the communists come, they will expect you to be there, and that's where you should be." The communists had established a curfew, and by then it was very close to the curfew. I had, maybe, twenty minutes to get from there to our center. A fellow gave me a ride on his motorcycle. I got into our Jesuit center just in time. The people there said, "Oh, Cha An Binh (Fr. Berard)!" I said, "Shh!" I didn't want anybody to know that I was there. Eventually I got in with the Jesuits there and got very good care for my feet. They had a nurse there, and I stayed there over three months.

I got a feel of living under communism—how different it was! The city died overnight. Saigon was a bustling city and the communists simply shut off the gas and they confiscated everything. They told the owner of a Mercedes Benz, "You're not going to be able to use that. There's no gas. It's just going to rot there in the back yard. But we'll give you \$60 for it." —a car worth maybe \$35,000, but the people

needed money for food. They were selling their furniture, selling everything they had. The communists would load all of that up on convoys to North Vietnam at night, because the North was very poor.

#### GETTING OUT OF VIETNAM

PK: How did you get out of Vietnam?

AB: Then we started the negotiations. Fr. Dargan, who had ordered me out, was still there. He said, "I was supposed to leave, too, and the end came quicker than expected. And here I am. We're here together." There were 60,000 foreigners in Saigon when the communists took over. One thing they abhor is having foreigners around. They don't want foreign eyes around; they want to get rid of everybody. Our Vietnamese superior said, "Try to get out of Vietnam." I was given permission to leave after about four months. I took a Royal Laotian flight to Bangkok. During my walk through the Delta, I gave up my passport. I was supposed to be a French priest. So I arrived in Bangkok with no passport. When I saw the American consul, they gave me a provisional one.

After a few weeks, I went to Hong Kong. The bishop had just received a few thousand Vietnam refugees. He asked, "Why don't you stay here with them?" So I stayed until Christmas '75, when there were only a hundred left in the camp. Then I came home through Hawaii and California, and bus-tripped through Arizona, visited my aunt and uncle there, and my other aunt and uncle down in Florida. I eventually came up to Boston. [Chuckles]

There's an interesting story about the bishop's compound in Can Tho where the soldier put a handgun to my face and said, "You don't move any further." When I was at Harvard from 1983-84 studying the history of the Vietnam war, I wanted to know

what was going on in Can Tho on the 30<sup>th</sup> of April, 1975. I found out that the general in charge of the Mekong Delta had blown his brains out at 10 AM. He was still in his bunker, but the soldiers guarding him didn't know that he was dead.

#### WORKING IN DENVER

PK: Let's move to 1976.

AB: Right. I think we can start with Denver. In 1975 you had a lot of refugees from Southeast Asia. They were spread all over the country and looking for people who could work with them. They needed somebody in Denver to work with the Denver Public Housing. So I was sent to Denver. They had a very nice housing project right in the center of Denver

PK: OK.

AB: It was built during the Eisenhower years. But the Platte River had flooded the whole place. They closed all the units until 1975. They had fifty Indochinese families there. They had a program to control the Platte River, so there would be no more flooding. I was hired to put that village back in shape for the fifty Indochinese families in there. That's what I did from '76 to '77, a very enjoyable time living at Regis College—now Regis University—and working down there in Sun Valley, just south of the Mile High Stadium.

#### INDOCHINESE MINISTRY IN AMARILLO

PK: How about the next year when you moved to Amarillo?

AB: Let's back up a bit. After I came back to Boston, there was a Jesuit, Fr. Louis Robert, who was sent by Fr. General to contact all of the Vietnamese priests throughout the country and Canada. He was not that

familiar with the United States, so he asked me to accompany him, contacting all of the Vietnamese priests with communities in various states.

PK: I see.

AB: In Amarillo we found a Vietnamese priest, who said, "Fr. Berard, would you take my place, because I want to go to Florida where my community is living?" I said, "When I finish this tour, I'll see the Provincial. If that's possible with the bishop, we'll do that." In 1977, when we finished touring the United States and Canada, I told the Provincial about this place in Amarillo. He contacted the bishop there, Bishop Lawrence DeFalco, who said, "Yes, come on over." So I went to Amarillo in '77.

Amarillo is a completely different place. It's totally flat and without trees. It's a huge place, 200 miles square, in the Texas panhandle. It's called the high plains; underneath lies a huge reservoir, which has made the panhandle productive for ranching and farming.

I was sent to Amarillo to care for two communities, one from Vietnam, the other from Laos. When I started in 1977, I had both Amarillo and Lubbock, about 120 miles south. There were Vietnamese communities in both places.

I would always stay in Amarillo. After my Mass there, I'd go down to Lubbock one week and to Dumas, fifty miles north, the other.

PK: How did you do in Laotian?

AB: I started to learn Laotian, but only enough to celebrate Mass. My sermons were translated.

PK: What do you particularly remember from these years?

AB: As I started to work with the Indochinese, I became aware that there was a section right in downtown Amarillo that was kind of the center for drugs from Mexico and fanning out throughout the United

States. It was also a prostitution center; prostitution and drugs went together. It was totally black.

PK: I see.

AB: Right next to T. Boone Pickens.

PK: Who is he?

AB: He's a great oil man from Texas. He had his main office right next to this drug center.

PK: I see.

#### STARTING A HOMELESS SHELTER

AB: So I spoke with the bishop and got permission to sell my house in northeast Amarillo. I bought a big building that had been a small hotel; we renovated that.

PK: Who did it?

AB: Me and the Vietnamese and some others.

AB: We called it Another Chance House.

PK: Another Chance.

AB: I moved in there and started to work in that area. Eventually Another Chance House grew so we had twenty houses for homeless people.

PK: Twenty?

AB: Yes. We would house homeless or poor people, who would pay whatever they could. Now there are some women running it. Another Chance House works with the City of Amarillo and with Catholic Family Service.

PK: All while working in Lubbock and Dumas. You got involved with Pro Life work.

AB: I was working in the Pro Life movement constantly. So Bishop Leroy Matthiesen made me the diocesan director.

#### ON SABBATICAL AT HARVARD

PK: Then after that work you had a sabbatical year 1983-84.

AB: Yes, at Harvard. I studied Vietnamese and the his-

tory of Vietnam.

PK: Did you write anything?

AB: I wrote one on the war in Vietnam. I was interested in the war, especially April 30<sup>th</sup>, the last day of the war. I had crossed maybe 40 percent of country, from the Cambodian border all the way to Saigon.

PK: Did you write anything else?

AB: Yes. It was the life of Alexander De Rhodes, who was the major missionary to Vietnam.

PK: I recall he romanized Vietnamese spelling.

AB: That's right, and they consider him the father of their language. Vietnamese once used Chinese characters, but it's not pronounced like Chinese. So they added a phoneme to each character. When Fr. De Rhodes arrived in Vietnam, he knew all the European languages, some Indian languages, and Japanese. So the superior told him to learn Vietnamese. He had a teenage boy shadow him around everywhere. That boy became his teacher, because Fr. De Rhodes would walk around and the people would talk to him. He would ask, "What did that lady say?" As the boy would say it, Fr. De Rhodes would write it down in a script that was meaningful to him. Eventually he had a whole dictionary.

As other Jesuits were assigned to Vietnam, the superior said, "Go and see Fr. De Rhodes, and learn the language." He would use his own system to teach Vietnamese. Little by little the Vietnamese themselves became aware of that. They asked, "What are you doing there, Father?" He said, "I'm teaching Vietnamese." They said, "That's not Vietnamese." He said, "Yes, this is Vietnamese in the alphabet form." Now everyone uses that way of writing Vietnamese based on the Roman alphabet.

PK: Was that a good bridge between the East and the West?

- AB: It was a tremendous bridge for the Vietnamese people, because they had an in to study Western culture, science, technology, whatever.
- PK: Fascinating. So there you were, studying Vietnamese at Harvard.
- AB: I was living at Loyola House. During that sabbatical a Vietnamese priest replaced me in Amarillo. I had told the bishop, "When we have a Vietnamese priest here, I'll go back to Boston." So he came, and I went to Boston.

#### WORKING IN READING, PENNSYLVANIA

- PK: What did you do after that?
- AB: I resumed my work at Amarillo from 1984 until 1995. I had a sabbatical at Campion Center 1995-96 and a year in pastoral ministry out of Loyola House in Boston 1996-97. On the last day of my yearly retreat that year at Morristown, New Jersey, one of the sisters working down there said, "They need a Vietnamese priest in Reading, Pennsylvania." I called the pastor, who said, "Yes. I need a Vietnamese priest here. Come on down." I said, "If it's OK with the Provincial, I'll be down." That's how I went to St. Paul's, built by German Catholics in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the last church commissioned by St. John Neumann before he died in 1860. It's an exceptionally beautiful church; it could be a cathedral anywhere. I was assigned associate pastor. The pastor had taken in about a hundred Vietnamese families.
- PK: OK.
- AB: And so that's where I was until the present time.
- PK: What were your responsibilities?
- AB: Marriage and CCD [religious instruction]. About five years ago we began working with Hispanics, because Reading is more than 50 percent Hispanic.
- PK: Working in the mushroom industry?

- AB: Yes. Low-wage workers, many from Mexico, some not legally. But they're a very poor community, much poorer than the Vietnamese. The Vietnamese are academically motivated, so they rapidly get college degrees and professional work. We have a number of doctors, lawyers, engineers, computer specialists, and pharmacists. The Vietnamese community in general is doing very well. In Reading, the girls usually work in what they call the nail industry—they paint women's nails. There are many little businesses. They make very good money with that.
- PK: What do you remember about Reading?
- AB: It is a very beautiful place. I fell in love with Reading, really. It was established by the son of William Penn, Richard Penn, who came from Philadelphia down the Schuylkill River. When he came to this area, he said, "This is a place for a city." He himself designed it; we still have that design in the downtown area. He donated a large piece of land on Mount Penn, just three blocks from St. Paul's, called City Park, a very beautiful park with a shell for concerts, a lake, tennis courts, etc.
- PK: Did you walk there?
- AB: The whole of Reading is a mecca for hikers. They have beautiful trails along the creeks, the rivers, in the mountains.
- PK: How about you?
- AB: I was a great hiker—every weekend we'd go hiking, usually with the Vietnamese.
- PK: What were the challenges there?
- AB: One was the fact that the beautiful school building is rented out to Prospectus, a state organization for the mentally handicapped. We usually taught our CCD program in the church, and we could use the school on Saturdays as well as some rooms in the nearby hospital. That's kind of a blessing.

## ALWAYS JOURNEYING WITH THE LORD

PK: Recently you've had some health concerns.

AB: Over the years my health concerns have not been that great. I always had problem hearing—my right ear has not been very good over the years. When they discovered a tumor on my brain, they operated on that a couple of years ago. Then I started walking with a cane, which helps a great deal.

PK: What brought you back to Campion?

AB: December the 28<sup>th</sup>, 2005, was a Wednesday. Every Wednesday I'd go to Wernersville on my day off. I was always the first one in church between 5:00 and 5:30 AM. A Vietnamese man opens up the church every morning. He saw me on the floor—there was blood all around me. He brought me to my room. I was completely unconscious. Four hours later I realized I was in the hospital, but didn't know how I got there.

I used to fill a five-gallon bucket with water, bless it, and then carry it to the other end of the church to the holy water tank. The Hispanic people love holy water. They bring their own containers. I would do that once or twice a week. The doctor said, "That was a 50-pound bucket." I could feel that it was exhausting, but I've done that throughout life, carried things like that. I think that caused the blood to pour out, because with that surgery there was an opening there. Next week I'll see the doctor about the CAT scan.

PK: I understand you have done a bit of writing.

AB: Yes. In Amarillo I wrote a weekly article on social issues for the local paper. In Reading, I wrote a monthly article for the pro-life newsletter. I also translated Vatican II preparatory reports and was co-chair of a Shroud of Turin symposium at St. Louis University in about 1991.

- PK: As we end, I'd welcome your reflections upon how you have journeyed with the Lord.
- AB: I've always journeyed with the Lord throughout life. My great influence was Gerard Manley Hopkins to bring me into the Society. I kept my spiritual life going with daily prayer, monthly recollections, and yearly retreats throughout life as a Jesuit. That's about it, as far as my journey with the Lord goes.
- PK: Did your escape from Vietnam give you a sense of God's special providence?
- AB: Yes, although I really never wanted to leave Vietnam. I was ordered to leave by my superiors. But then Fr. Dargan, who ordered me out, himself got caught behind. We could chuckle over that, how we were in the same boat: we were both under communism in Saigon.
- PK: Thank you for sharing all this.
- AB: You're welcome.
- PK: Would you have a favorite prayer?
- AB: Yes. Here is one I wrote to Andre of Phu Yen, the first Jesuit martyr from Vietnam.

*Andre of Phu Yen, you who were the first to give your life for the Church and for the Society of Jesus, and for your people, help us on the way to always grow in Christ, in spite of setbacks now and then. Pray that we may win the Eternal Prize at the end. Through Christ Our Lord. Amen.*

+

Born in 1625, Andre of Phu Yen became a Jesuit. He was beheaded as a Jesuit novice at the age of nineteen in a spot just south of Da Nang, Vietnam. His executioners were actually looking for a catechist, also called Andre. When they could not find him, Andre of Phu Yen said, "Why don't you take me? I do the same thing." And so they killed him, too. His death marked the start of a persecution which still continues.

A Spanish merchant, en route to Macau, brought his body there, where it has been venerated ever since. Fr. Alexander de Rhodes, who was present at his execution, brought his skull to Rome, where his beatification is being promoted. It is noteworthy that all the Vietnamese canonized so far died in the 18th and 19th centuries, whereas Andre died in the 17th century.

Fr. Aram J. Berard, S.J.

**Born:** January 1, 1933, Woonsocket, Rhode Island  
**Entered:** August 14, 1957, Bellarmine College,  
Plattsburgh, New York  
**Ordained:** June 11, 1966, Weston, Massachusetts,  
Weston College  
**Final Vows:** June 17, 1989, Boston, Massachusetts,  
Loyola House

- 1946 Woonsocket, Rhode Island: Mt. St. Charles Academy - Student
- 1950 Providence, Rhode Island: Our Lady of Providence Seminary - Student
- 1954 Montreal, Canada: Seminaire de Philosophie - Studied philosophy
- 1956 Montreal, Canada: Grand Seminaire - Studied theology
- 1957 Plattsburgh, New York: Bellarmine College - Novitiate [to November 1958]
- 1958 Lenox, Massachusetts: St. Stanislaus Novitiate/ [new] Shadowbrook - Novitiate
- 1959 Weston, Massachusetts: Weston College - Studied philosophy
- 1961 Boston, Massachusetts: Boston College High School - Taught French
- 1963 Weston, Massachusetts: Weston College - Studied theology

- 1967 Pomfret, Connecticut: St. Robert Hall -  
Tertianship
- 1968 Paris, France: Institut Catholique, Institut des  
Hautes Etudes - University of Paris - Studied  
history of science for philosophy
- 1971 Weston, Mass.: Weston College - Special studies
- 1973 Pittsfield, Mass.: St. Luke Hospital - Chaplain
- 1973 Da Lat, Vietnam: Studied Vietnamese language;  
Hoa Binh, Vietnam: Refugee work
- 1976 Denver, Colorado: Regis College [University] -  
Ministry with Vietnamese
- 1977 Amarillo, Texas: Second Chance House - Ministry  
with Vietnamese and Laotians
- 1983 Boston, Massachusetts: Loyola House - Sabbatical:  
Studied Vietnamese language and history at  
Harvard University
- 1984 Amarillo, Texas: Another Chance House - Pastoral  
ministry with Vietnamese and Laotians  
1984-1995 Consultor to Bishop about Indo-  
Chinese/American relations  
1988-1995 Director of residence for homeless  
1992-1995 Director of Diocesan Pro-Life Program
- 1995 Weston, Massachusetts: Campion Center -  
Sabbatical
- 1996 Boston, Massachusetts: Loyola House - Pastoral  
ministry

- 1997 Reading, Pennsylvania: St. Paul Church - Ministry to Vietnamese and Hispanics
- 2005 Weston, Massachusetts: Campion Health Center - Praying for the Church and the Society

#### Degrees

- 1956 Bachelor of Arts, Philosophy, University of Montreal
- 1961 Master of Arts, Philosophy, Weston College-BC
- 1967 Bachelor of Divinity, Weston College
- 1972 Master of Arts, Philosophy and History of Science, Institut Catholique and Hautes Etudes, University of Paris (Sorbonne)

#### Publications

*Preparatory Reports: Second Vatican Council*, translated by Aram Berard, S.J. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1965. A translation of reports by the preconciliar commission, issued in *l'Osservatore Romano*, and published in *La Documentation Catholique*

*History, Science, Theology and the Shroud*. Proceedings of the St. Louis Symposium. Aram Berard, S.J., ed. St Louis, Missouri: June 22-23, 1991.

#### Manuscripts

- "The Life of Alexander de Rhodes," 1984, 20 pages
- "The End of the War in Vietnam," 1984, 20 pages