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**Fr. Alwyn C. Harry, S.J.
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Interview with Fr. Alwyn C. Harry, S. J.,
by Fr. Paul Kenney, S. J.
November 7, 2005

PAUL KENNEY: Good morning, Alwyn. Thank you for coming.

ALWYN HARRY: Amen.

PK: You may recall that I met with you before and presented some of the topics we are discussing. I recall you were born in Kingston, Jamaica.

AH: Kingston, Jamaica, British West Indies. God save the Queen!

PK: God save the Queen! Ah, yes. And grew up there in Kingston?

AH: Yes.

PK: Can you tell me a bit about your home life?

AH: We were not rich, we were not poor, call it middle

class. I went to St. George's College, which was run by the Jesuits. When I finished I went to work at the Bacteriological and Pathological Lab.

PK: Right after school?

AH: Yes. The Lab is right in Kingston. I thought of becoming a medical doctor. But then the Lord said, "Not the medical but the spiritual." And so I was what you would call a delayed vocation. Of course, I did the usual studies, such as Boston College and so forth, before I was ordained priest. Then I went back to work in Jamaica as a parish priest. I have come back up here now to Campion Center to wait until the Lord says, "Come home."

PK: All right. That is a very quick overview. Let us unpack that bit, and go back to your home life. What kind of home did you grow up in? Did it have a religious tone?

AH: Pretty good. No fear of that. I went to the Catholic college, St. George's College. The Jesuits were teaching there. Then I worked at the lab and thought of becoming a medical doctor.

PK: A medical doctor.

AH: But the Lord said, "No." But even now I am still very

interested in medical things.

PK: How about your brothers and sisters?

AH: There were five of us. The only one left is my sister in New Jersey. She is married and keeps in touch with me. The others have gone home to God. She is the only immediate one alive. I think there is a nephew, Owen, still in Jamaica. We were not rich, we were not poor: we were middle class.

PK: Yes. What did your dad do?

AH: He owned a merchant tailor business. He was not a tailor himself, but he owned the business. We lived comfortably. We were not rich, we were not poor, we just lived comfortably. I especially remember my mother. She was a very devout Catholic person. I almost feel I should genuflect when I recall her. They are all upstairs with God, preparing a place for me. That is it.

PK: And then you went to St. George's College.

AH: That is right.

PK: How was that as an educational, spiritual, and growth experience for you?

AH: I enjoyed it at St. George's College. After I left there, I was able to work right away at the Bacteriological

and Pathological Lab in Jamaica.

PK: That was for about seven years?

AH: Yes. And then the Lord said, “the spiritual...

PK: Did the Lord say that all at once, or was it gradually?

AH: Gradually. I was a late vocation, as you call it. After I was ordained I went back to work in Jamaica as a parish priest.

PK: All right, let us go back a bit to your early years in the Society. When you entered the Society after working in the Bacteriological and Pathological Lab, how was that shift for you from being in warm Jamaica to being in western Massachusetts with its four distinct seasons? How did you find life the novitiate at Shadowbrook after living on your own as an adult for seven years?

AH: It did not affect me. I am very fortunate in that I could adjust to winter, summer, any season and any place.

PK: You adapted.

AH: And I keep in pretty good health, now at 90, as you see. When I was at school, I used to play soccer.

PK: That helped you keep healthy. What position did you like?

AH: Right half. And I liked tennis.

PK: Oh, really? You were quite active.

AH: Yes. So even now I keep pretty healthy, thank God, as you see.

PK: Were you able to take part in the more violent sports at Shadowbrook, like American football and hockey?

AH: Oh, yes.

PK: How did you find the whole novitiate experience? How was the novice master for you?

AH: I do not recall anything special. I got along pretty well with everyone. As I said, I was a delayed vocation, since I had been thinking of becoming a medical doctor first. Afterwards the Lord said, "Enter the spiritual life."

PK: After the novitiate I see from your curriculum vitae that you had only one year of the juniorate, I see, and then philosophy here at Weston College.

AH: Our degrees were given from both Weston College and Boston College.

PK: In addition to the course of philosophy, I see you did some biology studies at Boston College. How did you enjoy that?

AH: Oh, I liked that very much. I mentioned I had once

thought of becoming a medical doctor, and had worked in the Lab for seven years. So I had a lot of experience.

PK: Yes, you did.

AH: I still am interested in medicine.

PK: Then after your regency studying biology at Boston College, you came back here for theology.

AH: Yes.

PK: And how was that for you?

AH: I was not a brilliant student. But I got through all right. I enjoyed it well enough. I have pretty good health and just keep going along.

PK: All right. And when you returned to Jamaica after tertianship, you went to Holy Rosary Parish in Kingston for a year or two.

AH: That is right.

PK: That was your first work as a Jesuit priest.

AH: Yes, as a priest, as a Jesuit priest. I was at Holy Rosary.

PK: Now, by chance that was not your home parish, was it?

AH: No, it was not the parish I had as a boy. I was born in Kingston itself, so Holy Rosary was more or less the

same as my home parish.

PK: I see. After Holy Rosary you were missioned to Immaculate Conception at Stony Hill.

AH: Oh, yes.

PK: But just for a couple of years.

AH: Oh, yes.

PK: But then the major part of your work was at St. Michael's College, which was the diocesan seminary, as superior and as treasurer?

AH: Oh, yes. But I cannot recall too much of that.

PK: All right. That was in a different part of Kingston, more rural, up in the hills?

AH: Rural, yes. That is right, now come to think of that.

PK: You were there at the time of Vatican II and all those changes.

AH: It varied in the language. Everything was in Latin before, then afterwards in the vernacular. "Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa." Everything was Latin. "Dominus vobiscum. Et cum spiritu tuo." I learned that as a child. Oh, yes.

PK: And you still remember it. How did you react to the changes yourself?

AH: The change did not trouble me much. Anything like

that does not bother me. Some people, I know, got very upset. No trouble to me. I always said the Lord, He belongs to every Tom, Dick, and ...

PK: Harry!

AH: Harry! I was very fortunate in that it did not trouble me. Some my own age were very upset when things were changed around.

PK: And in fact, you were teaching liturgy right at the time of the Vatican II changes.

AH: I say that I was being taught, things were changing so fast, so hard to keep up with.

PK: It must have been a challenging time to be teaching liturgy. Did you enjoy teaching the young students?

AH: Oh, yes, I enjoyed that. Again, I was very fortunate. Anything, almost anything they asked me to do, I would do. Naturally I enjoyed certain things more than the other.

PK: What did you enjoy most?

AH: Parish priest. I remember I was in charge of the prison, as a chaplain. At that time I was in charge even of what you call Death Row. I would be present for the hangings, giving absolution to those being hanged. Many of the other priests would not undertake any-

thing like that, or even be present there. Yet it never troubled me one way or another. Christ himself was crucified, so...

PK: Did you get a chance to know anyone of the men who were hanged?

AH: Yes, I did. I had a chance to meet them. I was told they were to be hanged. So I would go and visit with them, to talk and things like that. Many other priests I know would not want to be there for the hanging. I am against capital punishment, it is true. But hanging was practiced then.

PK: I suppose that after Jamaica became independent the political and economic situation changed. I remember from my year there, 1974-75, that there seemed to be more crime. The Gun Court came in, where criminals using a gun were convicted and jailed very quickly, and for a long time.

AH: That is right. Yes. One of things that caused a lot of these crimes was marijuana. Some of them would take it, and it would make them mental. They would do anything, rather than deal with their lives.

PK: I notice that you lived at St. Anne's for almost twenty years.

AH: That is right. Kind of rough there. There was a lot of violence.

PK: How was that experience for you?

AH: As I said, thank God, it never troubled me. Some other priests I know would not deal with them while they were in those living conditions. But it never bothered me.

PK: Yet you survived living at St. Anne's for a very long time.

AH: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. As I said, that was a very rough part of the island. Dangerous in a lot of ways. The smoking of marijuana caused a lot of murders. "Thank God," I said. Christ Himself was put to death not for murder, so I could follow Him. I said, "Lord, you were crucified. If anything, I will follow you."

PK: You were at peace with the possibility of being shot, it seems to me.

AH: Yes, oh, yes. That is true. But years ago people did not live very long. Nowadays, you can live up to a hundred. Years ago, when I was growing up, sixty, sixty-five, seventy, then you are going home to God. Now I am ninety; I just feel I have another two more years here before the Lord says, "Come home." Then I will

say, "Today, that's it." See. Generally people, you know yourself, that they live a much longer life now than years ago.

PK: Do you remember particular people at St. Annes? Poor women, poor men, children growing up in such violence and poverty?

AH: Yes, I remember them. Oh, yes. That is true.

PK: Can you describe what they might be like under those conditions?

AH: Oh, Lord, as I said, in St. Anne's parish they used to smoke ganja; that is what Jamaicans call marijuana. I got along with them, without smoking anything. Even nowadays I avoid cigarettes. A lot of people smoke ganja.

PK: How about the good people and the virtues they would show? The poor people that had to live there amid the crime, the elderly widows of people killed in the gun violence?

AH: Oh, yes. I could move among them. I could say that I got along. But that is the way in that sort of situation. That is the most you can do in violent situations, just be with them in their grief.

PK: OK. Did you have any relations with the Anglicans

and other churches in the area?

AH: Oh, yes. We got along very well with the non-Catholics, in that respect. In fact Jamaica was very Anglican, but I got along very well. I was able to interact with them, you see.

PK: At one point you were the vicar general of the Archdiocese of Kingston as well as pastor at St. Anne's.

AH: Oh, that is a good way to put it. Yes, I was.

PK: That must have been an interesting combination of responsibilities, being pastor of a very poor inner city parish but also vicar general of the whole archdiocese with its wealthy areas and its poor areas. Were you able to bring a sense of what it was like to live in a poor parish to those who lived in very rich areas?

AH: Yes, I was very fortunate in that I could deal with that, you know. Rich, poor; black, white, pink— anything you want, fortunately.

PK: And then after being at St. Anne's and vicar general you became pastor at St. Richard's Parish in Kingston.

AH: Yes, that is it.

PK: That was in a quite different area from St. Anne's.

AH: Oh, yes, quite different. St. Anne's was a very rough place, but St. Richard's was more upper class, as we

call it.

PK: In your preaching at St. Anne's and at St. Richard's would you give the same kind of sermon or would you change it?

AH: I would. At St. Richard's the people were well educated; at St. Anne's, they were not. You would have to speak the patois, as they call it, to a certain extent. I was very fortunate in that I was able to intermingle with rich, poor, anybody like that. In that respect, I was very fortunate. Be all things to all men, as they say.

PK: Then you were at St. Thomas Aquinas Rectory as assistant pastor and working at the University of West Indies in campus ministry.

AH: That is right, not teaching, but spiritual work.

PK: That is what you loved, the pastoral work.

AH: Oh, yes, that is right. I am not much of a brilliant mind; I am just ordinary, you know. Although I taught, I was never really into it. I did it well enough. But I could adapt to every Tom, Dick and Harry. Even when they had capital punishment by hanging, I was able to be with the convicted men as readily as with parishioners, rich and poor, and seminary students at

St. Michael's Seminary.

PK: Right. So that was a special gift that you had, and you were able to bring, your adaptability, your flexibility.

AH: That is a good way to put it, yes.

PK: I suspect that might be something that was one of the graces of your life, which you would like to celebrate. I refer to your ability to minister to those most in need wherever they might be.

AH: That is right. Correct. That is a good way to put it. Yes.

PK: Then you came here to Campion Center in 2000.

AH: That is right. That is when I came here.

PK: How has that transition been for you?

AH: I have been very fortunate. I can adjust very well with waiting. Now I am just waiting for the Lord to say, "Come home." That is the next step, the final step. Again I repeat. People used to live until they were seventy. They were living a long life, or so they thought then. But nowadays some of them live to be a hundred, until the Lord says, "Come home." So it is the same now as it was then, however long we live. We still live until the Lord calls us.

PK: All right. I noticed the other night you were watching

television. I think you were watching a game. That continues to be one of your delights, sports.

AH: In the States they call it soccer, but other places call it football. Whatever you call it, to me it is a delight to watch.

PK: How about music. I frequently hear you singing at liturgy or as you go down the hallways. You sing, "Dum da da dum dum...."

AH: DUM DUM! I enjoy music, but I cannot play any instrument, apart from playing a harmonica, nothing else. Some people can play the piano, play the violin. Not my speed. I cannot play any of those instruments.

PK: But you enjoy music.

AH: I enjoy it. Very good. Excellent. Positively.

PK: Well, as we come to the end, is there anything else that you would like to say on your own behalf?

AH: No, except that I very much enjoy being here at Campion, that is, until the Lord says, "Go home!" That is all.

PK: All right.

AH: I am sure that is all that I can say. Again I say, people live much longer than years ago, longer than I had ever expected to.

PK: I am grateful to you, Alwyn, for joining me today.

AH: Verily forsooth. Thank you, too.

Rev. Alwyn C. Harry, S.J.

Born: August 2, 1915, Kingston, Jamaica, W.I.

Entered: August 23, 1944, Lenox, Massachusetts,
Shadowbrook

Ordained: June 19, 1954, Weston, Massachusetts
Weston College

Final Vows: June 21, 1977, Kingston, Jamaica

1929 Kingston, Jamaica: St. George's College - Student

1935 Kingston, Jamaica: Bacteriological and
Pathological Lab - Employee

1944 Lenox, Massachusetts: Shadowbrook - Novitiate,
Juniorate

1947 Weston, Massachusetts: Weston College - Studied
philosophy

1950 Boston, Massachusetts: Boston College - Studied
biology

1951 Weston, Massachusetts: Weston College - Studied
theology

1955 Pomfret, Connecticut: St. Robert's Hall -
Tertianship

1956 Kingston, Jamaica: St. George's College - Taught

- second year and biology
- 1957 Kingston, Jamaica: Holy Rosary Parish - Parish ministry
- 1959 Stony Hill, Jamaica: Immaculate Conception Parish - Pastor
- 1962 Kingston, Jamaica: Saint Michael Seminary - Superior (1962); treasurer, dean (1962-68); taught English, Latin (1962-63); taught liturgy (1962-65); scientific questions, biology (1963-64); psychology, theology (1963-73)
- 1973 Kingston, Jamaica: Saint Anne Parish - Pastor; Archdiocese of Kingston, Vicar General (1983-1989); sabbatical (second semester 1989)
- 1990 Kingston, Jamaica: St. Richard Parish - Pastor
- 1992 Kingston, Jamaica: St. Thomas Aquinas Parish - Assistant pastor; campus minister at the University West Indies
- 1994 Kingston, Jamaica: Patrick House - Pastoral ministry
- 2000 Weston, Massachusetts: Champion Health Center - Praying for the Church and the Society

Degrees

- 1949 Bachelor of Arts, Philosophy, Weston College-
Boston College
- 1950 Master of Arts, Philosophy, Weston College-
Boston College
- 1953 Master of Science, Biology, Boston College