

**New England Jesuit  
Oral History Program**



**Fr. Victor F. Leeber, S.J.  
Volume 15**

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Interview with Fr. Victor F. Leeber, S.J.  
by Fr. Richard W. Rousseau, S.J.  
December 2, 2005

**RICHARD ROUSSEAU:** First of all, in the interest of proper notification, I should say that I was part of the history of the founding of Fairfield University and that I was there with you at the time. So let us start. You were born in 1922 in West Virginia?

**VICTOR LEEBER:** Yes.

**RR:** Your parents were down there for a time?

**VL:** Yes, in Elkins, West Virginia.

**RR:** Then they moved to Boston?

**VL:** Yes, the reason was that they were afraid that Italians were not in good repute. A friendly clergyman had asked, "Are you happy, all settled?" They asked him, "Is this a safe place to start a family?" He asked, "What's your name?" They said, "Leopardi." "Oh," he said, "there's a mafia here in Elkins, and the Ital-

ians are not in good repute. If I were you, I would change your name.” He had a German name, so he said, “Why don’t you change it from Leopardi to Leeber?” They said, “That’s a good idea.” So they officially changed their name to Leeber. After a while, they moved to Newton, Massachusetts, where we had relatives.

RR: Tell us about your father and mother. They both came from Italy?

VL: Yes. They naturally spoke Italian, but they could understand English, and they got along fine. My father was born in Sulmona, half-way down the eastern side of Italy. My mother, whose maiden name was Tocci, came from a Naples suburb. They married and started a family.

RR: Tell us about your brothers and sisters.

VL: They first had two sons. But my mother said, “Oh, I want somebody to help me.” So my parents adopted a girl named Daisy. “Well,” the Lord said, “Look, if you want girls...” So then my mother had three daughters in a row. Then they had sons, and I am the next to the last one. My brother, George, who lives in Rhode Island, and I are the last two.

RR: How many children were there?

VL: The family was a large one—twelve children.

RR: You were all living in Newton?

VL: With relatives in Newton Upper Falls.

RR: What was your parish?

VL: Mary Immaculate of Lourdes, the oldest church in all the Newtons. I grew up there, was an altar boy, and said my first Mass there.

RR: What did your father do for a living?

VL: My father had a combination restaurant-delicatessen, right opposite the train station in Elkins. My father and my oldest brother Tony were both very good businessmen. They always knew what to do—they were very intelligent. For example, when the price was low, Tony, who was a wholesale grocer, would go to the North End of Boston, fill his truck with produce and store it in a big warehouse. Then when the price rose, he said to me, “Kid brother, go, and take out the rotten fruit and vegetables, and replace them with good ones.” He made a hundred percent profit. Wherever we moved to, my father and brother had a garden.

RR: Tell us a bit about how your parents encouraged you with regard to the Church.

VL: They always were very religious people, and never missed Mass or anything like that. When my youngest brother was born, we went to parochial school in Elkins. Once the nun said to us, “You didn’t bring any pennies for the missions. Go back home and get some.” So we returned home, because we did not want the nuns to be angry. On the way home, my kid brother ran ahead of me to take a shortcut and went under a car. I thought he was run

over! When I did not see him, I went home immediately. But when I got home, he was there already and crying! The car ran right over him, but did not hit him. We were very delighted and grateful to the Lord. Yes, my parents were very religious people.

RR: Tell us about your grammar school.

VL: The nuns taught us the Palmer Method of penmanship. Ever since I have had terrific penmanship.

RR: Where did you go to high school?

VL: I started at Newton High, but then the more I thought about it, I wanted to go to a Catholic college. So I switched to Sacred Heart High School in Newton Center. I figured that way I had a better chance of getting into Boston College, the nearest Catholic college. I got very good grades at both Newton High and Sacred Heart. I decided to go to B.C. I had courses in history and in English taught by two scholastics, who were new to me.

RR: Did you do any sports at B.C.?

VL: I ran on the track team in high school and college.

RR: How did your vocation develop?

VL: I came across a little pamphlet, "Shall I be a Jesuit?" One of things it said was, "He must possess more than ordinary intelligence." When my two Jesuit teachers said, "We both think you do have more than ordinary intelligence," I applied and got accepted. The pro-

vincial asked, "Why do you have a different name, since you were baptized Victor Leopardi?" I explained everything to him.

RR: Right.

VL: Well, I did very well freshman year. But then I decided to come in, and I got permission to go to the novitiate. I had done terrific in freshman year studies and I was very good in athletics.

RR: You were a year at B.C.?

VL: Yes. Then I joined the Jesuits and went to Shadowbrook. As you know, in those days the Jesuits had to speak Latin. I was amazed at the way I picked it up. I became fluent. I loved it. Later I came here to 'Weston in the Woods' for philosophy, and did well in oral exams given in Latin.

RR: Right.

VL: When I arrived at Shadowbrook, Jim Skehan came in the same day.

RR: Oh, Jim Skehan.

VL: I was the very first novice there, and then he came in from Houlton, Maine. When I saw him with a big trunk, I said, "Wow, he must intend to stay." I had already said good-bye to my mother, so when he came, that was a diversion for me. I tried to lift his trunk, and I said, "Oh, what does he have?" He had a shot put! It was so heavy, I could not move it! I said, "Boy, he intends to stay!"

RR: Ha-ha.

VL: The next day, he got a javelin in the mail. We both were interested in sports right from the beginning, especially track. We got the novice master's permission to start the Shadowbrook Athletic Association. We set up the ball field for the shot put and other things. I went through four years there at Shadowbrook and then six years here at Weston.

RR: Did you do any language work then besides Latin? You were always interested in languages.

VL: Yes, I studied two languages, Spanish and French. I found them very easy, because I was very good in Latin, and could speak it fluently.

RR: Okay. After philosophy you went to regency at Fairfield?

VL: Yes. That was where things really started to speed up, because I did have ability in languages.

RR: Just to put this in a setting, at that time there were probably about ten scholastics there including myself. All of them except you were in the Prep.

VL: Yes, as a regent.

RR: What did you teach?

VL: I arrived when Fairfield Prep was quite new, so I thought maybe I would be a teacher there. When I was interviewed, I asked, "What are you going to give me to teach?" I thought they would say, "Since you're new here, you

will be teaching at Fairfield Prep.” Instead they said, “No, we are looking for more young blood, because we are starting a university here,” meaning you are young blood. I asked, “Well, what do you want me to teach?” They said, “You will teach Spanish and French and Italian.” I had never formally studied Italian, but in time I did very well in every way. Since I was young, I had no trouble teaching those languages.

RR: Right.

VL: I took advantage of Fordham by taking summer courses in Spanish. I also said, “You’re a new university. You need sports!”

RR: I was just going to say that—you started the sports program.

VL: “Yes,” they said. I had already done some sports at B.C. Now they call me the Father of Athletics, because I started it all off with cross country track. You know all the land there is at Fairfield?

RR: Yes, Fairfield has a lot of land.

VL: I was not going to ask superiors for football the first year, given the price of a helmet. I was very shrewd. I saw this beautiful land, and I started cross country. You know how we won our first meet? I had trained our cross country team to run a course I had mapped out. Although I showed it to the first visiting team, they still went the wrong way and we won. So it went down in the books that

Fairfield was going to be a great athletic school.

RR: You may not remember, but I used to help you with athletics.

VL: Imagine that! So I helped develop the sports one by one. The land was terrific, and we knew how to develop it. We did very well in all the sports.

RR: The Prep had football then, not the university.

VL: Yes. That came later.

RR: Right.

VL: So we developed it in no time. The land was very good. I was faculty moderator and chaplain for sports for years. The players gave me a cap with "Fr. Leeber, without you we never had a prayer" embroidered on the top. I even had time for a tomato garden while I was teaching there.

RR: I want to emphasize this was the time of the founding of the university in which you were involved directly as one of the first faculty members. Fairfield has grown tremendously since then. So it was an important moment. When did you go to Spain?

VL: Well, I decided, of the three languages, the one I knew well was Spanish. After tertian-ship in Florence, I decided to get a doctorate in Spanish. I studied at the University of Madrid, and I loved it!

RR: Did you really like that experience?

VL: Oh, yes! I did very, very well. See this?

RR: It is your dissertation.

VL: This is my doctoral dissertation. It took me two years to do it.

RR: Is the doctorate in Spanish?

VL: Yes. I wrote about a Mexican Jesuit, Diego José Abad. I knew Latin poetry and I loved epic poetry. When I discovered his work, I said, "This man is a natural for my doctorate." He wrote a terrific poem in Spanish; it was a beautiful work of art.

RR: What is its theme?

VL: It was a religious theme. I graduated summa cum laude. Here is the only copy of my published dissertation I have left. The experience helped me at Fairfield when I put out a book of literary profiles, a textbook for my intermediate college Spanish. It was in our bookstore, and it sold out. Those in charge at Fairfield gave me very good opportunities to continue learning. They said, "You can go to any country whose language you speak." By that time, I had mastered Spanish, French, and Italian, because I knew Latin so well. One summer Fordham even sent me to South America on a course for their better students.

RR: Right.

VL: This is what I got when I left Fairfield: "Dear Father Leeber, the guests at your reception wrote you these messages." And when my students come to visit me, I show them the book that they all wrote in.

RR: All personal testimonies, handwritten?

VL: Yes, handwritten. So I kept it as something they gave me. One reads, "Father, we'll all miss you, for your friendly smile and charming stories."

RR: Right.

VL: See this testimonial they gave me: "The familiar picture of the original faculty and administration of Fairfield University consists of four laymen and twelve Jesuits. Among the latter is a young and earnest scholastic named Victor Leeber, who earned the respect and affection of his colleagues and students by his enthusiastic teaching of Spanish, French, and Italian, by his initiative in organizing the first intercollegiate athletic teams, and by his kindness and understanding. When he retired this past spring, some forty-five years after that picture was taken, his earnestness, enthusiasm and compassion were undiminished. He left the university after his first three years to study theology in preparation for ordination in 1953. He earned his doctorate at the University of Madrid, and in 1957 returned to Fairfield and served as chairman of the Modern Language Department, a position in which he distinguished himself for twenty-six years. During that time, he developed a program for majors in modern foreign languages, obtained the first federal grants to support the retraining of secondary school teachers in French and Span-

ish, and for eighteen years led our summer workshops in Spain.” And this is nice: “In addition to his popularity as a teacher, Father had also been prominent on campus for his whole-hearted support of the athletic teams, for which he has served as faculty moderator and as chaplain. His constant concern for the academic, social, and spiritual life of his students kept him a favorite, even among the alumni, who continue to seek him whenever they return to campus. His loyalty to Fairfield, his commitment to the University’s aim to excel, and his devotion to his students, have been consistent with the Ignatian ideals to which we aspire. Today we are proud to bestow on Father Leeber of the Society of Jesus this Fiftieth Jubilee Medal [in 1992].”

RR: Very nice.

VL: Very nice. I still have it. While I was at Fairfield, I said, “I’m going to become a notary public.” So I became a notary public for Connecticut, and it came in handy.

RR: How did you get started? Did somebody ask you to do this?

VL: I thought it would be useful. I had to take a test.

RR: Yes, but what was the idea?

VL: To help others when they got into legal trouble, sometimes even Jesuits, as when their car was stolen. I notarized their statement that it was their car. So I became a notary public,

- and I loved it. I did use it a lot.
- RR: When you returned to Fairfield, then, with your doctorate, you worked there for a long time.
- VL: Oh, yes. 1957 to 2003.
- RR: When you began teaching modern languages at Fairfield, it consisted of just following the lessons in the text. Later you got funds for a language lab and built up all the resources for the various foreign languages. Tell us about the innovations in the teaching of modern languages during your years as department chair.
- VL: First I had to prevent them from murdering the pronunciation. So I stressed correct pronunciation. I used every kind of aid to make sure that they started out pronouncing correctly. Doing that took a lot of patience. We had a modern languages laboratory, and they all had to use it.
- RR: If I remember correctly, your original laboratory was fairly simple, but then you later replaced it with a new system.
- VL: We put new ones in as the technology developed. That was one reason Fairfield developed as a university—because we had graduate courses. Therefore I could teach graduate Spanish, and people came there for that.
- RR: Have you continued your interest in teaching here?
- VL: One of the tertians wanted me to teach him Spanish, so I said, “Okay, here’s your first

book, *Spanish for Dummies*.” That book is one of the best. Why? They stress pronunciation as most important in learning a second language: you must get the sounds. Do not murder the foreign language. The book has a CD inside the back cover. I also helped another Jesuit, Aram Berard, learn Spanish to use when he was working with Hispanic workers in Reading, Pennsylvania.

RR: I see you walking about the house here all the time, where there are many workers from South America.

VL: I always got along very well with all of the people working at Fairfield, especially the women. I try to help out as I can. I help Vin Brennan get ready for evening recreation and put out the popcorn. At Fairfield I used to do the same thing.

RR: You have had a tomato garden since you came here.

VL: My father and older brother always had a garden wherever they were. So I guess it is in my blood.

RR: Do you hear from any you knew at Fairfield?

VL: From time to time. It is funny how it happens. The Campion Renewal Center people here usually give me a prayer partner for their retreatants. One of them said, “Oh, I like the Jesuits. Do you know why? Because, when I got my nursing degree at Boston College School of Nursing, I had very good teachers.”

Then she said, “I have a nephew who graduated from Fairfield University.” I said, “You do? What’s his name?” But then I did not remember having him, because I was there many, many years, and I could not remember every single student I had. I can look up names in my alumni directory.

RR: That helps you find out their names.

VL: Once Al Cardoni asked me, “At Fairfield, who was the graduate school teacher in such and such a subject?” And he gave me his initials, and I said, “Don’t ask me. I myself have to look it up in the catalog.” By the way, I still get a lot of mail from Fairfield University. My former students come to visit, and they bring me gifts. You want to hear a funny one? I said, “What, are you giving me as a gift?” It was a bottle of red wine. And guess what the name of the wine was: Sangre del Toro—the blood of the bull!

RR: Ha-ha.

VL: I thought that was very cute! They still remember me, and they still come to visit. And they were from Fairfield.

RR: Now, over the course of time, the Jesuit community at Fairfield also developed. At the beginning, there was just a handful.

VL: Exactly.

RR: One of the major developments was when the Jesuit community finally built their own home. Could you tell us a little bit about that?

VL: How they lived was very simple at first, and then they got a nicer building to suit their actual needs. The novitiate of the Sisters of Notre Dame abutted Fairfield University. We said Mass there.

RR: Did you teach there at all, or did some come over from there?

VL: I only said Mass for them. They appreciated it. As Fairfield has developed into a major university, it acquired their buildings and property.

RR: And the original property combined two major estates, which were linked together, and so there is a lot of land.

VL: And it is beautiful. You should go there and see what they have done. Oh, there is another thing. Guess what I get named after me.

RR: A street, right?

VL: Leeber Road.

RR: Could you describe where it is?

VL: It is in a very prominent place in the center of campus, right near the football field, since my name is associated with football.

RR: Well, that is very nice.

VL: I also got many gifts from alumni. Two of them returned from Florence, Italy with a beautiful life-size statue of the Blessed Mother. I did not know how they got it back. They dedicated it to "Their former teacher, Fr. Leeber." Joe Miko, one of my great athletes, and his wife put a bench in front of the statue.

- All the players came to make homage to this beautiful statue of the Blessed Mother.
- RR: Your students' gift surprised you.
- VL: It was amazing the scholarships they dedicated to me! My family even dedicated one. Oh, and you know what else they did for me?
- RR: What?
- VL: They said, "All your nieces and nephews, while you're teaching here, have free tuition for four years." I do not know of any other Jesuit colleges that do that. I thought that was very nice of them to do that. They favored me because I was there from the very beginning, when they had nothing. But how it has grown, everything the Jesuits undertook. I still think very highly of Fairfield University. For me, it is a place I could go to any day, and the memory is right there.
- RR: What do you think is special about the spirit of Fairfield University?
- VL: Well, with the Jesuits there, it is unique. There is something about it, they say. People like the way they teach. I am not kidding you. The Jesuits did that from the beginning. It is not just another college. I think there is something special about it—they give retreats, and the teaching is very, very specifically Catholic. I do not know why, but right from the first, it developed.
- RR: The theology department?
- VL: Exactly. Yes, they always had very good teach-

ers in theology, always.

RR: So, what do you see of the future of Fairfield, now that the Jesuit numbers are diminishing?

VL: Well, one write-up says it is developing into an outstanding university, and you know why?

RR: Why?

VL: Because word has gotten around: this is a Jesuit university that teaches subject matter and ideals. Also that it is near New York. I think that is what is drawing a lot of parents to send their kids to Fairfield.

RR: The *cura personalis*, the care of the individual—not merely students, but individual persons?

VL: Oh yes, they mention that.

RR: It is in their promotional literature. I think it is basically correct.

VL: Definitely. One of the testimonials from October 1992 reads: “His loyalty to Fairfield, his commitment to the university’s aim to excel, and his devotion, have been consistent with Ignatian ideals to which we aspire.” I will tell you how I used to bring these ideals into my work. It was when the football team started and we were just developing our sports. The parents had come for a Sunday game. Instead of skipping Mass, their parents and the team always came to my Mass first, if we had a Sunday game. And guess how I started the first homily. I said, “We would not be here, you would not be here, if a person who is very important to this university did not get hit by a

bombshell in northern Spain near the French border—Ignatius of Loyola.” Well, they were amazed, because it was different, and they liked it. That St. Ignatius was of course.

RR: An important figure.

VL: You see, I copied that from an alumnus, who was giving a homily and said that to get their attention. We were taught: Be bright, be brief, and be gone.

RR: I remember.

VL: St. Ignatius. The first thing I did when I was studying at University of Madrid was I went up to Loyola to see where he was born, and where he lived, right near the northern border of Spain.

RR: Being in Spain for two years gave you a chance really to see Jesuit roots and traditions.

VL: Oh, yes, very much. The parents and students wanted a Jesuit education after that homily. They spread the word. Oh, the alumni. Terrible alumni we had and we still have. They still come to see me here at Campion.

RR: Did you do priestly ministry in other places?

VL: I went to California, because the bishops kept asking for priests who could preach in Spanish. In Bridgeport, which is nearby, they wanted the same thing. So I helped them find Spanish-speaking priests, because there was a big section of Hispanics there.

RR: Can you say a bit about being here?

VL: Yes. I intended to write the first academic his-

tory of Fairfield University, since I was there from the beginning. But when I developed diabetes, I had to stop, even though I had all the material to write about multicultural education. It is a shame not to have the energy to finish it.

RR: Right.

VL: For example, I was able to keep going to Spain the summers of '83, '84, '89, '90, '95. But I still see people who come here to make retreat and some of them are my prayer partners. One person said his nephew graduated from Fairfield University.

RR: As you look back over your years as a Jesuit and recall all the things you have accomplished at Fairfield and wherever you were, what do you see as an overall providential aspect of God's guidance and support?

VL: Well, I think that there is something unique about the Jesuits, and St. Ignatius knew that. I think, from his own experience, there is something unique about what we preach and we Jesuits act in general.

RR: In what sense?

VL: Well, the ones I have heard who are considered great retreat-givers, there is something about their whole approach—I cannot diagnose it—that makes it different from others' approach. That had a great impact on me, and I tried to do the same thing that the Jesuits since the beginning with St. Ignatius have done.

RR: Sure.

VL: Just the other day we had a lecture here by a Jesuit. I think there is something about them that they give. I do not know exactly, but it does make an impression, because people have told me that, that they think Jesuits are terrific.

RR: Well, thank you for your time.

VL: You are welcome.



**Rev. Victor F. Leeber, S.J.**

- Born:** February 18, 1922, Elkins,  
West Virginia
- Entered:** July 30, 1940, Lenox, Massachusetts,  
Shadowbrook
- Ordained:** June 20, 1953, Weston, Massachusetts,  
Weston College
- Final Vows:** August 15, 1957, Fairfield University,  
Fairfield, Connecticut
- 1935** Newton, Massachusetts: Sacred Heart High  
School - Student
- 1939** Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts: Boston  
College - Student
- 1940** Lenox, Massachusetts: Shadowbrook -  
Novitiate, juniorate; beadle of juniors
- 1944** Weston, Massachusetts: Weston College -  
Studied philosophy; Master of Ceremonies;  
Director of Mission Stamp Bureau
- 1947** Fairfield, Connecticut: Fairfield University  
Taught modern languages; Moderator of  
Sodality; Moderator of Athletics
- 1950** Weston, Massachusetts: Weston College -  
Studied theology; taught catechism in  
Weston; Assistant Prefect of House Library

- 1954 Florence, Italy: Villa San Ignazio -  
Tertianship
- 1955 Madrid, Spain: University of Madrid -  
Studied modern languages
- 1957 Fairfield, Connecticut: Fairfield University  
Taught modern languages (1957-93, 94-97),  
chair of Modern Language Department (1963-  
85), faculty moderator and chaplain to ath-  
letes, assistant to Director of Athletics (1993-  
1998), academic advisor to student athletes  
(1999-2001), subminister of Jesuit community  
(1974-99), professor emeritus (1993, 1999-2003)
- 2003 Weston, Massachusetts: Campion Health  
Center - Praying for the Church and Society

### Degrees

- 1946 Bachelor of Arts, Classics, Weston College-  
Boston College
- 1947 Master of Arts, Philosophy, Weston College-  
Boston College
- 1949 Master of Arts, Spanish, Fordham University
- 1954 Licentiate in Sacred Theology, Weston  
College
- 1957 Doctorate, Spanish Literature, University of  
Madrid, Spain

## Publications

*El Padre Diego José Abad, S.J. y Su Obra Poetica*, [Fr. Diego José Abad, S.J. and His Poetic Work], Madrid: Ediciones José Porrúa Turanzas, 1965, (Colección Chimalistac de Libros y Documentos Acerca de la Nueva España, Vol. 21). 320 pages. Description: Fr. Diego José Abad, S.J., a Mexican, wrote an epic poem in Latin hexameters, *De Deo, Deoque, Homine Heroica*. The dissertation was a comparative study of religious works in Latin or Spanish by other Spanish writers, to bring out Abad's poetic and humanistic genius.

*Perfiles Literarios*, edited by Rev. Victor F. Leeber, S.J., New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967, 334 pages, plus 97 pages of vocabulary. A graded cultural reader for intermediate college-level courses, in the form of a collection of thirty short stories and essays. In the preface Fr. Leeber acknowledges "Fr. Richard Rousseau, S.J. for his advice and encouragement."