

**New England Jesuit
Oral History Program**



**Rev. James C. O'Brien, S.J.
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Editor: Richard W. Rousseau, S.J.
Associate Editor: Paul C. Kenney, S.J.
Assistant Editor: Joseph V. Owens, S.J.

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Oral History Program
Campion Center
319 Concord Road
Weston, MA 02493-1398
781-788-6800
info@jesuitoralhistory.org
www.jesuitoralhistory.org

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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 sometimes two, they are an important historical record whose value increases with the inevitable march of time.

For whatever reason, New England Jesuits, among others around the world, have not made any significant number of oral histories of their members. Given the range of their achievements and their impact on the Church and society, this seems to many to be an important opportunity missed. They have all worked as best they could for the greater glory of God. Some have done extraordinary things. Some have done important things. All have made valuable contributions to spirituality, education, art, science, discovery, and many other fields. But living memories quickly fade. Valuable and inspiring stories slip away.

This need not be. Their stories can be retold, their achievements can be remembered, their adventures saved. Their inspiration can provide future generations with attractive models. That is what Jesuit oral history is all about.

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by Fr. Richard W. Rousseau, S.J.
April 1, 2009

FAMILY AND EARLY YEARS

RICHARD ROUSSEAU: Good morning and welcome to our conversation. We will be going chronologically.

JAMES O'BRIEN: OK, that sounds good.

RR: So, let's begin then. Tell us when you were born and where.

JO: I was born on July 2, 1930 in Nashua, New Hampshire. That is not exactly what you might have expected, because my family are all from the Springfield, Massachusetts, area. My father had been in the army in World War I. Though my parents knew each other and were thinking of getting married before he went off to war, they decided to wait until he came back. He got out of the Army and eventually found a job in New Hampshire, so that is where they went to live. They stayed there for twenty years and liked it very much. That's how I happened to be born in Nashua.

When World War II broke out, the textile industry in Nashua and along the whole Merrimack Valley

was falling apart. At that point my folks went back to the Springfield area, where everybody else in the family was living anyway. So I think of Springfield as home. I went through grammar and high school there, and joined the Society right after high school.

RR: Tell us something about your father.

JO: My father, whose name was Frank, was a wonderful man. Let's start with that. He was the youngest of five children and grew up in Monson, Massachusetts, which is a little town just outside of Springfield. His father ran the general store, which was attached to the house that they lived in on Main Street. He grew up living and working around supplies and food and that kind of stuff, and naturally he gravitated towards that kind of work later on. That is what he did all of his life.

When they were in New Hampshire, my parents managed a little hotel that was run by the textile industry in Nashua. It was mainly for visiting executives of companies that were going to buy textiles from the Nashua mills. They sometimes stayed a few days, and so the company actually had a little hotel for that purpose. My parents ran it for a number of years.

RR: Did you help them with that?

JO: I hadn't been born yet! Actually, I was born while they were there. When we left Nashua, I was only about nine or ten years old, so I didn't do much in the hotel. I liked Nashua—it was a nice place to start to grow up. I did my first few years of school at the James B. Crowley School on Lake Street, which has much more distinguished alumni than me. Scott Brodeur, S.J., who teaches over at the Gregorian University in Rome, went there, too. That is my claim to fame.

When we moved down to Springfield, my father got a very good job, ultimately running the food services of the Springfield armory, which at one point

had about ten thousand employees, especially during the Korean War. It was a good job, and that is what he stayed with until he retired. He was a very sweet man. People liked working for him, and he was a good father. They had one child before me, who died in infancy. So I was for all practical purposes an only child.

RR: Did your dad get you into sports and things like that at some point?

JO: Well, I never got too heavily into sports because I'm asthmatic; running and that kind of activity is not my thing. I was very active in high school. I was into newspapers and debating and a lot of activities at the school. There was a Passionist monastery across the river, and on weekends I used to work in their retreat house.

Springfield was a good place to grow up. It had wonderful museums. It had a great library. I worked at the library for a while. It had a good symphony orchestra, and I used to go there when I was a kid. That's where I developed an interest in music.

The Cathedral High School had a tradition of sending people to the Jesuits. There were no Jesuits working in Springfield, but Jim [T.] Sheehan and Jack MacDonnell had entered the Society from there a little before I did. I think that the first person that I ever seriously talked to about the Society was another Springfield Jesuit, who came to our parish to give a novena of grace when he was a tertian. That was Dick McCarthy—he was so nice in talking to me—and he encouraged me to think about the Society. I already had a pretty good notion that I wanted to be a priest, and I didn't think I wanted to be a diocesan priest. Dick put me in touch with a couple of Jesuits at Holy Cross, and he encouraged me to go visit Shadowbrook, which I did, and one thing just led to another.

RR: Before we get there, though, tell us a little bit about

your mother and what she did.

JO: My mother was also born in Monson, Massachusetts. In fact, she and my father are successive names in the baptismal register of the parish there. They were that close together in birth. She was a very talented woman in many ways. She played the piano beautifully. She was a spectacular cook, and at one point she went to Fannie Farmer's Cooking School in Boston. She commuted from Springfield to Boston once a week to go to that school for a period of time. After high school she went to Bay Path, which is now a junior college, but in those days was a secretarial school. She learned secretarial skills and worked as a secretary both before and after marrying.

Her name was Agnes. She was the glue that held us together in many ways—a lovely person. Both she and my father lived to a great age. My mother was ninety-six and my father almost made ninety-eight.

RR: That's extraordinary

JO: So, you might be stuck with me for a long time! Except that their life was a little more moderate in some ways than mine! [Laughter]

RR: Could you tell us a little about the religious character of your home life?

JO: My parents were both very careful Catholics all the way. Let me tell you one little anecdote. When we were in New Hampshire, as I've told you, the textile industry began to fall apart, and so things at the place where my father worked also began to fall apart. In those days, when I was about nine or ten years old, the movies cost about forty-four cents, eleven cents for kids. One Saturday night my mother and my father and I were sitting there at the table counting the money we had, paying all the bills, paying the people that worked there, paying this and paying that. When we got to

the end, there were just two dollars and fifty cents left. My father said, “Well, there’s a dollar for church in the morning, so let’s go to the movies!” [Laughter] Now, a dollar in those days was like ten or fifteen now.

RR: That’s right! A dollar was a lot in those days!

JO: That was my dad’s priority: a dollar for church in the morning. Let’s go to the movies and we did!

EARLY EDUCATION

RR: [Laughing] Good! OK, tell us a little bit about high school, how it went, and what impact it had on you.

JO: In my grammar school days I didn’t do terribly well. I think the fact that I had to move a couple of times threw off my rhythms or something. I was not turning out to be a particularly great scholar. Then, when I got to Springfield and attended Cathedral Grammar School, the first teacher I had was absolutely wonderful. I don’t think she was too much older than we were—you know the way that they put some of those nuns into the classroom when they were still kids. She was bubbly and bright, Sister Cecelia James. She was absolutely marvelous, and I think she is still alive. She gave me a lot of encouragement.

Then I went on into high school and most of the teachers there were awfully good. They were Sisters of St. Joseph of Springfield. The school itself was extremely good, and it still is. Some survey recently rated it one of the best private schools in Massachusetts. I had some trouble getting started in Latin, because my first-year Latin teacher was, frankly, not all that great. One of the priests in the parish quite generously, I thought, told me: “James,” (he was very formal) “James, you will take a walk with me every afternoon, and we will be going through declensions and conjugations,” and we did for quite a while. That was Fr. John

Harrington, who was later the Vicar General of the diocese. His brother was the bishop of Worcester, Tim Harrington. John was a lovely man. We would just walk for about three-quarters of an hour, and it worked well, because I got to be pretty good in Latin in my sophomore year. I sailed through high school, and I ended up as one of the speakers at graduation, so I guess I was pretty good.

YEARS AT SHADOWBROOK

RR: Very good! So at the end of high school, what did you do?

JO: I had applied for the Society at the beginning of senior year, and on June 6 of my senior year I got the letter from Fr. McEleney, then the provincial, saying that I was accepted. I was to report to Shadowbrook on July 30, which I did.

RR: What year was that?

JO: That was 1948, sixty-one years ago.

RR: Tell us about your experiences at Shadowbrook and the people you met there.

JO: My first experience was dismal. [Laughter] I got there on the eve of the Feast of St. Ignatius, and of course I had no idea of what fast suppers meant. My first meal in the Society was a fast supper, which consisted of hard-boiled eggs, sardines, and lettuce and tomato. I was ready to leave. [Laughter] But, of course, I came down the next day, the Feast of St. Ignatius, and there was this feast of the gods! I said that I think I'd stay after all. [Laughter] The cook up there in those days was George Ginader. He was a strange man, but, my goodness, could he cook! He really put on a whale of a meal and continued to do so for the four years I was there. He was really something.

RR: What would be the years that you went there?

JO: Well, I entered in 1948, and I was there for four years. It was standard novitiate. We had John Post as the master of novices and Jimmy Hickey as his assistant. Those years were fairly uneventful, though there was some excitement when we had our hospital trial half-way through second year. We were sent down to Boston City Hospital to learn how to do humble things for the poor patients there.

Well, while I was there, just towards the end of the month, we had as a patient some fellow who had been in court contesting a divorce petition by his wife. He lost the case and very dramatically threw a pile of pills into his mouth in the courtroom and collapsed—it seems he was trying to commit suicide. So they brought him into the City Hospital to pump his stomach out, and I was there at the time. A Boston tabloid paper sent a reporter to cover the events, which were their lead story the next day. And right there on page one was this huge photograph of me and Bill Callahan helping to pump out that guy's stomach! [Laughter]

RR: How did you ever get involved with that?

JO: Well, we were just working there, and they told us, "Hey, we need some orderlies." So we went and did what we were told. We were afraid that Fr. Post wouldn't be pleased to see our pictures there on the front page of the Boston paper, but later he told us, "Well, as long as it was in the line of duty..." [Laughter]

RR: That sounds just like him.

JO: But other than that, life in the novitiate was all pretty uneventful. I tried to start learning Greek as a novice, but I never got terribly good at it. Then the juniorate came along, and it was wonderful. We had some terrific teachers, like Bill Carroll. He was extraordinary. Also, Bill Murphy was a wonderful man and a won-

derful teacher. Steve Mulcahy was teaching Latin—very strong but really good. The juniorate experience was a very good one. I really got to like the classics a lot.

Incidentally it was in my Shadowbrook days that I picked up the moniker, “J.C.” We couldn’t use first names back then—it was Bro. Jones, Mr. Smith, etc. But there were as many as three O’Briens in the house, so I became J.C. and it stuck. Some people may not even realize you’re talking about me, if you call me Jim.

PHILOSOPHY, MUSIC, AND ENGLISH

RR: Then did you go directly to Weston?

JO: Weston, yes. We had some good teachers for philosophy. The best was probably Paul Lucey. Some of the others were adequate. [Laughter] I didn’t terribly much enjoy philosophy, but I ended up directing the Weston College Choir, and that was a great experience.

RR: Tell me about that.

JO: When I was a junior at Shadowbrook, they needed somebody to direct the choir for a while, and Bill Finneran asked me to do it. I don’t know why, because I could barely read music, but I do have a pretty good ear. Anyway, I did it for a while at Shadowbrook and then, when I got to Weston, they asked me to do it for the whole sixty-voice choir there. Doing that became the thing that really kept me alive while I was there. I liked it a lot. When I came back to theology, I did it again for two-and-a-half years. That was a great thing for me.

RR: Did you do any singing yourself?

JO: I didn’t do any solo stuff. We had some wonderful singers—Ray Bertrand, for example, had a beautiful tenor voice. We had others who were very good, too.

We also had people who were very good on the organ. When I first started at Weston, Dick Tetreau played, and he was superb. At other times, I had people like Paul Manning, and I think that the last one that played for me was Paul Harman.

RR: Oh, really? I didn't know he was a musician.

JO: He was really quite good. So the music helped keep those years of philosophy interesting. I also had a *disciplina specialis*, as they called it in those days, in English literature. That was kind of a high point for me, because they used to bring professors from BC to teach us. There were some top-rate people, like Ed Hirsh.

RR: Oh, yes! In fact, I took some of his courses at BC myself.

JO: Yes, he was absolutely marvelous. We also had Tommy Grace and teachers like Brendan Connelly and Bill Johnson. We had some really fine people coming out to give those English courses.

TURNED ON BY HIGH SCHOOL TEACHING

RR: So you finished philosophy, and then what?

JO: I fully expected that with my huge talent and all [laughter], they would send me somewhere like Holy Cross or Fairfield to teach poetry or something like that. Instead they sent me to BC High to teach first year Latin. I was not thrilled, but I went obediently, and it turned out to be wonderful. What I discovered was that I felt really cut out for high school work.

RR: Wonderful. What was that experience like?

JO: I spent three very happy years there. I started off teaching freshmen and then moved up to sophomores, which meant I had to teach Greek, but I managed! I really loved high school work. Later on, in theology, there was some talk of my being asked to go to Rome and

study moral theology. I said that I'd do whatever they asked, but I didn't think there were many people as enthusiastic about getting back into high school work as I was. I told them to think about that. Ultimately, they let me stay in high school work, which I did for over thirty years.

RR: That turned out very well then.

JO: Yes, it did. It was a turning point in life, literally, and I was very happy about it.

RR: Were there any special incidents or interesting things that happened during that time?

JO: Well, lots of interesting things. Actually, my career has been all over the lot. I've done just about everything that you can think of except the missions. What I end up remembering most isn't the jobs; it's the people. I am still in touch with many of the people and the kids that I dealt with over the years. It is marvelous. Some alumni are celebrating their fiftieth out of BC High this year, and they're insisting that I've got to be there. That for me is a big thing.

And I've had many special moments—one special moment involved Paul Kenney's brother, Chris. Dan Lord used to run a Summer School of Catholic Action down at Fordham. One summer they let Eddie Hanrahan and me take a bunch of kids to New York for that. We went and had a good time down there. On the last night, the kids were appreciative, because Eddie and I hadn't been too hard on them, so they wanted to take us out to dinner. We picked a very classy place at Rockefeller Center called the Café Louis Quatorze. So we went there, and there were violinists playing, and it was all very French. I can remember we sat down and the waitress put menus in front of us. At one point, one of the waiters rather condescendingly said to Chris Kenney, "Allow me to suggest something

from the menu for the young gentleman.” And Chris looked at him and said, “At these prices, just translate.” [Laughter] We had a nice time.

RR: Anything else about your regency you want to mention?

JO: I spent the summers studying, usually at BC, taking one course or another. I think the first summer we were at Holy Cross learning how to teach. They had people like Leo Ecker and Algie [Alphonsus] Yumont up there, showing us what to do when we walked into a high school classroom. But generally we spent the summers at BC, which was nice.

THEOLOGY AND TERTIANSHIP

RR: Tell us now about your theology studies.

JO: I studied theology at Weston, and it went pretty well. Again, we had some terrific teachers. In moral theology John Lynch was absolutely marvelous. In canon law, Moe [Maurice] Walsh was absolutely superb. In theology, of course, some were better than others. The one who was the most memorable for me and for many of my classmates, I think, was an English Jesuit who came for two years to take Phil Donnelly’s place while Phil went over to England. His name was Peter Lyons, and he was a marvelous teacher. He had a lot of things wrong with him physically, but, my goodness, his ideas were wonderful. He could be funny. He was very profound and deeply spiritual. He was a wonderful, wonderful person. We had him for two years in systematic theology, and he was just marvelous.

RR: Just one of those great things that came along.

JO: I stayed in touch with him afterwards. Later on, I was involved in programs that would take me to England almost every summer, and I went over to see him. He spent his last years as a parish priest at Farm Street—a

truly extraordinary person. So the years of theology went pretty well for me.

RR: Were many ordained in your class?

JO: We were a pretty big class, about twenty-seven ordained all at once. Cardinal Cushing was the presiding bishop. After theology, since I had never been outside of the province, they asked me if I'd be interested in doing something different for tertianship, and I definitely was! I had heard pretty good things about the new tertianship up in French Canada, so I asked about it. They told me that they would see what they could do.

RR: What was the place called?

JO: It was Notre Dame de Montserrat in the town of St. Jerome, which is about thirty miles north of Montreal. It was a beautiful facility, and in those days it housed novices, juniors, tertians, a retreat house, and the province infirmary.

RR: Wow, it must have been a big place!

JO: All of these groups in the place functioned separately. We had our own chapels and our own dining rooms. We came together in the spacious dining room and the large chapel only for major events. It was an incredibly well thought-out building. It had a big indoor gym—an essential in the Canadian winters.

That year turned out to be a defining moment in my life. The tertian instructor, Fr. Jean Laramee, was an extraordinary individual, with a wide kind of experience. He had worked in Rome, he had been a rector, and he had done this, that, and the other thing. He had three brothers who were Jesuit priests, one of them a missionary in China. He had a wide range of knowledge about what the Society does. He was very good giving the Exercises, and just a lovely human being. Again, I stayed in touch with him for years and years afterwards. He died just within the past couple of years at age one hundred.

The amazing thing about the tertianship was that he gave a directed retreat to every one of the twenty-six tertians there. You ask how can that possibly be, but he did it. He would talk to the group for five or ten minutes in the morning and sometimes for a few minutes at night. Then, he would tell us that he wanted to see us at least every other day—if the green light was on, we could just walk in. There were a lot of us, but he managed not to get us all mixed up. He knew where each one of us was—it was quite an experience.

RR: When you went in, would it be for a half an hour or so?

JO: Something like that. He'd see ten or twelve each day. I couldn't believe what this man was doing, but he was just marvelous. During tertianship I also had some experiences outside. During Lent I gave retreats at an English retreat house that they had in Montreal at the time, which was nice. It was mostly high school retreats there, but some were for adults on the weekends. During January, I went to Toronto and worked at St. Michael's, the big Catholic hospital there, for my hospital trial. That was a fine experience.

WORKING AT XAVIER HIGH

RR: At that point, I imagine you had a talk with the provincial to decide what the next step might be.

JO: Well, in those days you didn't discern the way they do nowadays. You just read the *status* [the annual list of assignments]. I kind of thought that I might be going back to BC High, because I knew the rector at the time, who had said he'd be happy to have me. As it turned out, I was sent to Xavier, the new high school in Concord. It had been open only one year. I was a little surprised, but I went and it turned out to be marvelous. Those were six of the best years of my life.

I was basically running the English Department there, and we had a nice bunch of Jesuits on the faculty. The rector, John P. Foley, was a lovely, lovely man. John Vigneau was the principal. He was a very competent principal and ran a really good school.

RR: Right. I knew him well.

JO: Those were excellent years. I remember telling the provincial one time while he was on visitation, "If you want to leave me here until I am ninety-three, that's all right by me!" Actually, that's not the way it turned out, but I did have six happy years there.

RR: What do you think really happened to make Xavier close?

JO: I have a feeling that we won't know on this side of eternity. I remember that there was some kind of a province gathering to discern the future of Xavier High School. The word was getting around that it was going to be closed, unless we could come up with compelling reasons to keep it open. I very distinctly remember Bill Guindon, the provincial, getting up and saying, "All of the input that I am getting leans towards closing that school, which is a very good school. Do we want to do that? If you think that that is not a good decision, will you please let me know?" He was very emphatic: "Please tell me if we are going in the wrong direction." Apparently, he didn't get enough information to make him change the direction. I often wondered whether in the internal forum he had some information that would have suggested that he shouldn't go that way. I don't know, but in any case it closed.

RR: It's always been something of a mystery to me how something so successful could end up being closed down.

JO: Well, part of it had to do with the fact that it was a

very young school, and it had no alumni to help with fundraising. Secondly, the tuition was going up rather steeply, although by today's standards it was nothing. Jesuits were beginning to be in shorter supply, so we had to hire lay teachers, and you don't pay them peanuts if you want good ones. So the combination of expenses, lack of alumni, and a somewhat falling enrollment seemed to suggest that the school wasn't going to make it.

SHAKING UP BC HIGH

RR: Where did you go after leaving Xavier?

JO: Well, it's interesting that we are having this interview on April 1, because it was forty years ago today, on April Fool's Day 1969, that I got a letter from Bill Guindon appointing me principal of BC High. [Laughter] You can think of that what you want! I was still very young—I wasn't yet thirty-nine. Some of the older faculty members started calling me "Brother Manuductor" [a kind of beadle for Jesuits in formation]!

Anyway, I went to BC High, and I had a mandate to really shake up the place. BC High was a great school in many ways, but it had some features that were really crying out for correction. For example, half of the kids were flunking out.

RR: Flunking out? Are you serious?

JO: Yes, and they used to be proud of that. At the beginning of school year, they'd tell the kids at the assembly: "Look to your right and look to your left. One of those guys that you've just looked at won't be here by June." They were almost proud of that kind of thing.

RR: Oh, my! That's a terrible attitude!

JO: It really was. So we had to revise the curriculum in a way that would still give honor to the classics, but

would not take it for granted that every kid was cut out to be good at inflected languages. Again, unbelievably, there was no Spanish being taught in those days, so they put that in. The science department was pathetic, and we had to beef that up. We were strong in classics, English, social studies. Those were all very good. The religion department was very good, and the math department with [Fr. John] Whitney Sullivan had really taken off. What really needed attention were those areas of languages and the sciences.

Another thing that I had to do was unite the school. It was as if there were two separate schools. For some years, before they opened the second building, the juniors and seniors were over at Morrissey Boulevard, and the freshman and sophomores were still in the South End. When they did open the second building, Cushing Hall, it continued as if they were two separate schools. That went on for a number of years. So, when I got there I said it was time to change. We unified the school and did a number of other things like that.

RR: Well, that was a great contribution.

JO: And those were tough years, too, because they were the years of Vietnam and Kent State and that sort of thing. There was also the busing controversy in South Boston. We went through a lot of struggle, but we got through it all. To make a long story short, I felt very good when my six years there were coming to a close.

RR: You were there only six years?

JO: Well, in those days that was considered pretty good. That was longer than my two predecessors put together!

RR: What I meant is that six years is usually for someone who is a rector or superior.

JO: Yes, but in those days for administrators that was considered enough power as well. Two high points I might

mention. First, in my fourth year, I was elected to the very elite (one hundred active members) Headmasters Association. I am the only Jesuit who has ever belonged. When I was no longer running a school, they made me an Honorary, so I was able to continue going to their annual national meetings, which I did for over thirty years.

Then, second, in my last year there, we did the self-study that was required, and we got a full ten-year renewal of accreditation from the New England Association. So I felt pretty good about leaving on a high note.

A WELL-EARNED SABBATICAL

JO: At that point they gave me a wonderful sabbatical, half of which I spent out at the Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley, taking some theology courses. The other half I spent at the Institute of Education at the University of London, where I got a scholarship, so that it didn't cost me a nickel to go there. I lived in a family house in London for a while and enjoyed that very much. The sabbatical was really quite a marvelous experience, and I had a chance to do some traveling.

RR: Had you done any special studies before?

JO: I did a couple of other things on the side during my time in theology. Jimmy Burke, who was prefect of studies in those days, encouraged me to apply to the Harvard Graduate School of Education to do a degree there during the summers, so I applied and I got in. Nobody had ever done that in the Society before. It was a very nice experience—they gave me credit for a lot of stuff I had done in philosophy. I could pick really wonderful courses all over the place, and I did. Harvard was extremely generous—they never charged

me any tuition. I explained that I was a poor seminarian, so I always got a free ride. I've always been very grateful to them for that.

RR: Also, you were a kind of pioneer for others to follow.

JO: Yes, several followed after me and took that degree as well. Actually, there was a whole bunch of them. Later, after theology, while I was at Concord, I went to school during the summers and took various courses. I then began to get interested in overseas education. There were some companies that were taking groups of American kids over to Europe for six weeks of summer study. I asked John Foley about it and he said, "Sure, if you want to look into it, go ahead." So I did, and I found one company that I thought was pretty good. I was the first Catholic school contact that they had had. Then they made a big pitch to a bunch of Catholic schools for a program in London studying theater. They asked me if I would be the director of it, and I did that for about two hundred kids in the summer.

RR: That sounds like it must have been a wonderful experience.

JO: Actually, I did that for about eleven years, and it was a great experience. The programs were mostly in London, but not always. That was a very enriching thing. I started doing that while I was at Concord and continued when I was at BC High.

RR: What was the focus of the courses?

JO: It was a little different from year to year. We would get them over to London and do workshops in drama. I recruited some American teachers who knew theater well, and we would take the students to a lot of plays. In the course of six weeks, they went to at least twenty plays in London. For a number of years I brought with me Elliot Norton, who used to be the drama critic of

the *Boston Post* and the *Boston Herald*. He would analyze the plays with the kids and help them get a critical perspective on them. So it was a very enriching experience for everybody. We did that off and on for eleven years, which was quite a lot of fun.

STILL ANOTHER HIGH SCHOOL

RR: Sounds like a unique experience.

JO: Yes, it was. Anyway, after that sabbatical, I was sent to Bishop Connolly High School in Fall River. Again, that was kind of a surprise. I had had a few job offers, and Dick Cleary, then provincial, told me to choose three that I could live with and we would talk. Well, I got it down to three, and Fall River was one of them. It wasn't actually my first choice, but he sent me there, and it turned out fine. About fourteen months after I went there, the principal got quite sick, and they needed someone in a hurry who had done the job. I went in as acting principal for the better part of two years. The people at Fall River are marvelous, and the school was a good little school. I'm not convinced that it was a good thing to move out of there, but that is another story.

I was always trying to talk somebody into taking the principal's job full-time, since I felt I had done my share of administration and wanted to get back into teaching. Fr. Fred O'Brien agreed to come and take the job—he had been assistant principal down at Fordham Prep. He came and took the job, and just as I thought I'd be going back to the classroom, Ed O'Flaherty became provincial. He asked me to come aboard as his *socius* [administrative assistant], so I went to Boston.

PROVINCIAL'S STAFF

RR: Well, that was quite a change.

JO: I had been a province consultor, one of those people who stuck him with the job of being provincial, so he asked me to help him. I suppose I couldn't say no, but that was probably the worst job I ever had in my life. I didn't like being *socius* at all, because you were always just hanging around the office while everybody else was on the road all the time. You were doing all the things that the provincial didn't feel like doing! Within the year and a half that I was in that job, we restructured the administration of the province. We did away with most of the vice-provincial posts and put in a system of assistants for the different apostolic areas. So I asked Ed O'Flaherty if I could segue over to become the assistant for secondary education, and he said OK. I did that and worked happily in that job for a few years.

RR: So you were still on the provincial staff, right?

JO: That's right, and it worked out well. I visited all the schools and got to Jamaica every winter!

RR: Wonderful! [Laughter]

JO: That job was fun. After I had been doing it for a few years, Fred O'Brien, who had succeeded me down at Fall River, was offered a job that was such a plum that you hated to tell him that he couldn't take it. He became headmaster at Regis High School in New York, so Fall River wanted me back. So I went back there for another five years.

RR: As principal again?

JO: That's right, and it worked out well. We had a big drive to build outdoor athletic facilities, and that was successful. As a city, Fall River is a different place, a very ethnic sort of place. It's depressed economically, but the people are wonderful.

RR: Yes, I know that well, because I'm from New Bedford.
JO: OK, then, you don't need any lectures from me on that subject! [Laughter] Then, after about four or five years, I was getting a little tired of that kind of work, frankly. I had done as much administration as I wanted and was able. I was doing not only the administration of the school but also fundraising. It was suggested that maybe I should concentrate just on the fundraising for a while and then eventually step aside. And that's what happened.

NEWBURY STREET COMMUNITY

RR: How many years was this before the Jesuits left the school?

JO: Oh, it was quite a few years. After that, Bob Manning, then provincial, asked me to take over the Newbury Street community. The novices had just left there, and Bob wanted to move the Loyola community from Commonwealth Avenue to Newbury Street. He put me in as superior and [Bro.] Paul Geysen as minister. I had three very nice years there. It was a very lovely community, and had a nice big budget to fix the place up. I would have been happy to have stayed there for quite a while, but after about three years Bob said he thought I was underemployed! [Laughter] He said that they needed help at the parish of SS Peter and Paul in Norwich, Connecticut. I said, "All right."

So, I went down there, and actually the first year was absolutely marvelous. Don Keegan was the pastor, Dick Stanley was the other associate, and the three of us got along famously. We had a great time, and it was a nice parish. After Don left, the new pastor and I did not quite hit it off, shall we say, but we managed to live together for a couple of years.

BOSTON COLLEGE CHAPEL

JO: In the meantime, I was getting requests from BC, asking if I would be interested in going there to run St. Mary's Chapel. Finally I told them I would. So in 1994 I was sent to Boston College, and I was there for ten years running that chapel, and I liked it very, very much.

RR: Oh, really? I didn't know that. What did that work involve?

JO: Well, it was a big operation. In those days, they had as many as thirty-five Masses a week, five every school day. On weekends, you had Masses in different languages. For example, there were Filipino Masses, French Masses, and many others.

RR: All in that chapel?

JO: All in that chapel. There were even Indonesian Masses, run by some of the graduate students. They would get people from all over the city to come in. St. Mary's Chapel is a wonderful place for chamber music, too. We had a lot of concerts there.

RR: In that chapel itself?

JO: In the chapel, yes. Then I organized a lecture series. It was kind of a faith-sharing thing. All kinds of people attended, from Catholics and Episcopal bishops to Buddhists and Muslims. All kinds of people would come in and talk about what their faith was. So, it was an interesting ten years.

ANOTHER SURPRISE AT 74

RR: It certainly sounds it.

JO: Then, finally, in 2004 I was surprised again. I thought by the time that you were seventy-four years old, they'd leave you alone! But Tom Regan, then provincial, said, "I want you in Portland, Maine." I protested, but he said his decision stood, so here I am at St. Pius X Par-

ish! Actually, I've been here for five years, and it has turned out well. I've got some disabilities right now, but I can still function pretty well here. I wouldn't be able to continue doing some of the stuff I was doing at BC if I were still there, so it has worked out OK.

RR: So, what are you doing here?

JO: Well, I am a regular parish priest, doing all sorts of ministry, but I've developed this peripheral neuropathy condition, which means my balance is very precarious. In this building, which is connected to the church, I can function perfectly without any trouble at all, because there's always something I can hang on to. There are a couple of things that I can't do, like give out communion, but apart from that I can do just about everything. I can also manage over at the other parish we have, St. Patrick's. It's not quite as easy, but I can do it. I also go to a monastery of nuns, where we've been saying Mass every day for forty years! I take my turn on that. And I do other things here in the parish, such as running bible study courses.

RR: Sounds like you keep pretty busy.

JO: Yes, I do. I'm finishing my fifth year now. I don't imagine that I'm going to be able to do it for more than another year or so, but we'll see.

SURROUNDED BY WONDERFUL PEOPLE

RR: Let me ask you a final question. As you look back over the years and you see all of the things that have happened, do you have the feeling that divine providence is working in our lives and leading us to things that sometimes we never even thought about, but turned out to be very important for us?

JO: Very much so. Many of my appointments have been surprises to me, but by and large they have all been good. I feel very blessed, and it's been a great ride. I'm

grateful to God for it all.

But there's something that I said earlier that I wanted to mention again. As I look back on it all, the thing that I think about with the greatest gratitude is not the jobs that I've had, but the people that they put me in touch with, both Jesuits and others. I have had some of the most wonderful friendships with Jesuits, who have served me as spiritual directors, confessors, and friends. I'm not going to name names of the living, because, if I did, I'd leave somebody out who is very important. But some of the ones who are no longer with us people like John P. Foley and Larry Skelly—they meant so much to me.

RR: Yes, they were wonderful men.

JO: Some of my classmates who have gone now, too, like young Jimmy [P.] Sheehan—you know, "James the Less." The people I've known over the years have been marvelous. Another thing too that has struck me is that in every place I've ever been we've had these women who are just so dedicated to us and who are the ones who really keep the place going. Like Cyrilla Mooradian at BC, Gloria Dion at Norwich, and Margaret Sheehan at Xavier in Concord. Here in Portland we have Mary Gordon, and gosh, she is wonderful. If you go down the corridor, you'll see the pastor's office on one side and Mary's office on the other. In between the two offices there's a sign which is meant to be funny, but is really pretty accurate: "Would you like to speak to the man in charge, or to the woman who really knows what's going on?" [Laughter]

RR: So true!

JO: We have people like that all around, who really just can't do enough for us. They are marvelous people. And another thing that has come across to me forcibly just recently is how impressed I am with certain Jesu-

its. Again, I am not going to name names, but you can probably figure out who I'm talking about. There are four or five Jesuit friends who are people of immense talents and immense gifts, and they are just totally unselfish when they use what they have. They put things totally at the disposal of the poor and those who have nothing. And these people are grateful for the service they get, but they have no idea how big the gift is that they are getting, and that doesn't bother these guys at all.

It suddenly dawned on me: isn't that what we love about Jesus? The *kenosis*—he emptied himself. He had it all, and he gave it to people like us. So I find that when I look at some of these Jesuits who are so generous with who they are and what they are, that tells me an awful lot about God and about Jesus. I get some very important insights from that. In fact, that's what the second reading coming up for Palm Sunday is about, so I have been thinking about it all week.

RR: Well, thank you so much, Jim, for a fascinating interview.

JO: You're very welcome.

Fr. James C. O'Brien, S.J.

Born: July 2, 1930, Nashua, New Hampshire
Entered: July 30, 1948, Lenox, Massachusetts, St.
Stanislaus Novitiate / Shadowbrook
Ordained: June 17, 1961, Weston, Massachusetts,
Weston College of the Holy Spirit
Final Vows: August 15, 1965, Concord, Massachusetts,
Xavier High School

1944 Springfield, Massachusetts: Cathedral High School –
Student
1948 Lenox, Massachusetts: St. Stanislaus Novitiate /
Shadowbrook – Novice, junior
1952 Weston, Massachusetts: Weston College – Studied
philosophy
1955 Boston, Massachusetts: Boston College High School –
Taught Latin and Greek
1958 Weston, Massachusetts: Weston College – Studied
theology
1962 St. Jerome, Quebec, Canada: Notre Dame de
Montserrat – Tertianship
1963 Concord, Massachusetts: Xavier High School – Taught
English and religion
1969 Boston, Massachusetts: Boston College High School –
Principal
1975 Sabbatical
Berkeley, California: Jesuit School of Theology
London, England: University of London Institute
of Education

1976 Fall River, Massachusetts: Bishop Connolly High School
1976-1977 Taught English
1977-1979 Principal
1979 Boston, Massachusetts: Provincial Office
1979-1980 Socius
1980-1983 Assistant for Secondary Education
1983 Fall River, Massachusetts: Bishop Connolly High School
1983-87 Principal
1987-88 Chairman, Board of Regents
1988 Boston, Massachusetts: Loyola House – Superior
1991 Norwich, Connecticut: SS. Peter and Paul Parish –
Assistant pastor
1994 Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts: Boston College –
Prefect of St Mary’s Chapel, Assistant to rector for
pastoral ministry
2005 Portland, Maine: St. Pius X Church & St. Patrick
Church – Pastoral ministry

Degrees

1954 Bachelor of Arts, Philosophy, Weston College-Boston
College
1955 Master of Arts, Philosophy, Weston College-Boston
College
1962 Licentiate in Sacred Theology, Weston College
1964 Master in Education, Harvard University

AMDG