



Transcript of Fr. Jack O'Malley, OP Recording (PF-O'Malley.V1):

When I was five years old, my mother asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up and I said I wanted to be a priest, providing I could deliver laundry after Mass.

And 30 years later, the reason I wanted to deliver laundry was because the laundry man drove a panel truck and I thought it would be neat to drive one of those.

So, 30 years later, I found myself ordained, teaching at Fenwick High School, and going out early in the morning to say a Mass in one of the neighboring parishes. And what am I driving, but a pickup truck. So, God has a way of fulfilling all our desires.

My mother told me later on in life that when she found herself pregnant with me, she said to God, if it's a boy, I'd like them to be a priest.

And I saw my parents saying their morning and evening prayers. My dad was a labor foreman in a construction up early in the morning down the basement to put on his overalls. Sometimes I was up at that hour and if I went down the basement, I'd see my dad kneeling on the back of the chair saying his morning prayers.

And then later on in life, my mother, when she wasn't cooking anymore, she used to go into the living room with a pocketbook full of holy cards. And she'd be there for an hour, saying all the prayers on the holy card.

So, I came from, not an overly religious crowd, probably, basically, certainly people who knew the Lord and were in love with him.

And I was a student at Fenwick, we used to have Benediction on Friday afternoon in the gymnasium. And one Friday when I was coming out of the gym, one of the priests grabbed me by the collar and pushed me up against the locker, it happened to be the Dean of Discipline. So, I was wondering what I had been guilty of.

And he said to me, "Have you ever thought about being a priest?" and I said, yes. And he said, "Well, you ought to pray about it." With that, he dropped me to the floor and walked away. So that was my introduction to the Dominican priesthood.

I've had six or seven assignments in the last 50 years, depending on how you count them. And I'd like to talk, have one memory from each of those assignments.

My first assignment was teaching philosophy at the University of Dallas in Irving, Texas, a suburb of Dallas. It was owned by the Diocese of Dallas, and it was new. And there was one of the students, who was named Carol Cunningham. And she had a severe melody whereby her legs never grew. So, she spent her entire life in a wheelchair.

But she was very up and doing when the school was under construction. She wrote, telling, reminding them to put in ramps, not stairs, so take care of the handicapped people. And in fact, there were very few stairs on that campus, everything was accessible.

And in class, I used to kid her if she didn't have the right answer. If you don't have the answer, I'd say, I'm going to put you out in the express way and let your friend for yourself out there in your wheelchair. So, the students were scandalized, but Carol loved it. So, we became buddies.

And in my travels over the years, I always made a point to go visit Carol when I went through Dallas. And I knew her mother as well. And her mother said to me one time that Carol said in a conversation, "Oh, I would never ask God to make me any different than he has." And her mother thought there would be a good title for an autobiography if she ever got around to writing one. But she never did. She passed away a couple of years ago in the late mid-60s.

But every time I'm feeling sorry for myself, I think of Carol who said, "I would never ask God to make me any different than he has."

My next assignment was in Chicago teaching philosophy at DePaul University for one year. I lived at St. Pius, 1900, South of Ashland. And there was an African-American gentleman there. He was a porter on the City of New Orleans railroad. And in his moon lighting had come to St. Pius and do some light housekeeping for us, vacuuming et cetera. And he and I were friends. We'd have coffee break together.

Allen was a convert. And I knew that. And one morning, a coffee break, I meant to ask him, "Allen, how long have you been Catholic?" And instead of that I said, "Allen, how long have you been colored?" Allen didn't miss a beat. He said, "Well, of course I had born Irish." So that's my memory from St. Pius.

Next, I was a fellow high school Dean of Discipline for two years. We'll skip over those two years in silence. I still have friends from those years, surprisingly. There are, some of them were at my anniversary mass this morning. But after two years, excuse me, I escaped to the Air Force as a chaplain.

My first assignment was in Louisiana. I was in my office one morning and a woman came in with a toddler in tow and sat down and said she wanted to make an arrangement to have twins adopted. So, I said, "Well, where are the little twins?" And she said, "They haven't been born yet."

So, I'm not real swift, but it dawned on me, and I said, "So you're pregnant and your husband is not the father?" And she said, "That's right."

So immediately I picked up a phone and called a phone number. I had been given to a nun who ran a home for unwed mothers. And handed the phone to the woman and walked and stepped out of the room. And five minutes later, she came out of the room, thanked me and kept on, walked off.

I only saw her once after that. She was strolling along the base sidewalks there one time with her toddler in tow and very pregnant. So, I stopped the car and asked her how she was doing. And she said, "Fine all your arrangements had been made." And her husband had accepted the situation. He was overseas.

So, my involvement was one minute, but because I was a priest, she came to me. I picked up the phone. It was all God's doing, but I was involved in making, I think, about six people happy. The children were happy, they were born, I'm sure, and the adoptive couple had double happiness. And the husband did the right thing, and the mother could feel good about herself. She did the right thing as well.

This was 1967, six years before Roe vs. Wade, which things might have been different, you never know.

After my last assignment in the Air Force was in California, and my fondest memory there was Sunday Mass. It was 1969, and folk music had come on. And not everybody likes folk masses, but I did, and do, if it's how well it's done.

And I inherited a good music director. She had a choir ages 7 to 70, and they would rehearse once during the week, but I had them start their singing 15 or 20 minutes before Mass began. Not rehearsing but singing the songs.

And I also had all the words to the songs, Xeroxed, and put in pamphlets, booklets. So they were in the pews, and when people came in, they could pick up the booklets and sing along with the choir. I found out later that was illegal to Xerox, all that stuff.

But anyhow, every Sunday morning, and I increased the attendance by over 100 people. Young children, especially liked to come, it was very lively. So, every Sunday morning was just a delightful liturgy of this lively music and full participation which is what the church wanted. So that's a very happy memory from those days.

After four years in the Air Force, I went back to Fenwick, instead of teaching philosophy, I went to Fenwick, and I taught morality to the upper classmen for 17 years, which I enjoyed. I don't know if they did, but I did. I also stayed in Illinois Air Guard all that time.

And one day there was an accident on the ramp of where the planes are, the tarmac. A fellow got jettisoned out of the plane, and hit his head on the tarmac, and I got into the ambulance with him to the hospital, he was unconscious, so I didn't know there was Catholic or not. But one of the sacraments of the last rights is absolution, so you give conditional absolution. If you are capable, I absolve you from your sins, if you're so disposed.

And he woke up at one point, and he saw the cross on my collar and said, "So are you a chaplain?" I said, yes, "Did you give me the last rights?" I said, yes, he said, "What did you do that for?" So, I thought it was doing my favor, and he was upset that I did that, but then he went into a coma. Again, I found that later, it wasn't Catholic, but I'm sure God gave him a merciful judgment. Although I think he lived with brain damage.

When I class, I taught, I tried to give him some substantial thing, I didn't water down the doctrine, and at the end of each semester, I used to ask them to critique the course, and my own critique is, we weren't allowed to learn much theology, but we had a lot of laughs.

But anyhow, it was one kid when he handed in his critique. He said, this was a good course, if you're going to be a bishop. Another time in class, I dropped some papers in the front of the room, and a student in the second row, said in a low voice, humorously, "Father's not too bright," so I picked up the papers and stood up and said in a low voice, equally humorously, I said, "Fortunately, I didn't hear that."

And with that, a kid in the back of the room named Bill spoke obviously. He said, "Father's not too bright," so that caught everybody's attention.

Well, after 17 years, I found out there is life after high school, so I went off to be a hospital chaplain for four years.

First year, I was in Washington, D.C., in a chaplain's course in mental health and mental illness. In the mornings, we'd have a lecture on health or illness, and in the afternoon, they wanted us to be on the ward with the patients.

And there was the most... I walked away from teaching adolescents for 25 years with no strings attached, but when I left for mental hospital after 10 months, it was a great tug of my heart, because, I prefer to call them emotionally disturbed people, and there was a great tug on my heart, because they're such needy people. Emotionally they're such poor self-image.

And they counteract that by adapting the highest image, so as you walk around the grounds, you meet some fellow who's not confined, and he'll say, "Hi, I'm Jesus Christ." Well, I learned from the psychiatrist that his image is so bad, he goes to the opposite extreme and adapts the highest image for himself. And if you chuckle, he'll say, "What are you laughing at? The Blessed Virgin's in the Lady's Ward," and she was.

My altar boy was a murderer. I had a discussion group, the guy, the fellow on my left was an arsonist. He burned down his house, and he eloped, they didn't, they were patients, they didn't regard them, I'm sorry, they were patients, sick people, they didn't regard themselves as inmates. So, they didn't say he escaped, he eloped, and the altar boy on my right said, "He'll get caught."

He said, "He doesn't have any skills, he's going to have to steal to eat, and so he'll get caught." He said, "Now, when I eloped, I had a car waiting in the parking lot, I was in Philadelphia from Washington, DC by nightfall, by the next morning I had a fake ID card, and I got hired on as a truck driver, I was in Chicago within 24 hours, on my way to the west coast." But he came back to the scene of the crime, was captured, and was now in there for his life.

After that, I was worked at the Alexian Brothers Hospital for three years, and there was a woman that came in there with cancer, and just terribly frightened, with the thought of death. And so, I got to talking to her over a long period of time, she was in and out of the hospital. She was Catholic, raised her children Catholic, but they were not church goers, and she was just afraid of death.

But I reminded her that everything she learned as a child was true. There is a God, there is life after death, Jesus is God, He's our Savior. He came to save us from our sins, just tell them, you're sorry, and you'll be right with the Lord, and you'll go see God face to face eternally. And eventually, she found that very consoling and died a very peaceful death.

Her husband wasn't Catholic, but he wrote me a lovely letter afterwards saying, complimenting, thanking me, and it was a sentence in there that I think I've kept somewhere that says, "You turned something ugly into something almost beautiful." I didn't do it. I was a priest just communicating the love of Jesus for this woman.

The other incident, when I was working at the Alexian Brothers, I never went to the maternity ward, unless I was asked to go there, they're all walking around in kimonos and so forth. But one night after supper, I was making my rounds, and the door to the maternity ward was open, and the door to the first room was open, I saw a young woman lying in bed.

So, I had my collar on and so forth, so I stepped in the room to say hello, and she said, "Oh, it's interesting that you stopped in," she said. "I've just been lying here thinking, wondering whether I should have my second abortion or not."

So I went into the high gear, saying, "Give the kid a chance, and you'd be a wonderful mother, and you could have a good life together, or if that's beyond you, there's zillions of couples out there looking to adopt your child," etc. And she said to me, "You know, you're the only one telling me that."

She said, "My parents say abort, my boyfriend says abort, my girlfriend says abort, even the doctor says abort, but I don't want to do that." She said, "Because I did that once already, and I'm not very proud of it."

So, I don't know the outcome, but I'm pretty confident she did the right thing also. So that's one of the joys of priesthood that you're walking past the room and all of a sudden, you're in this deep conversation about life and death, and God uses you, and He can use laypeople too. We're all counselors to one another.

The last 20 years almost, I've been going around the country, raising money for the poor, at a different parish, somewhere around the country every weekend. Many times, I'm in Chicago, other times I'm at O'Hare go out on Saturday and fly home on Sunday. And somehow, they do that and keep the overhead low anyhow. I don't ask questions.

One of our leaders was down in the Caribbean Islands, probably Jamaica or Haiti or someplace, and he was a very spiritual man, used to write spiritual books, he was a dynamic fellow, had a conversion experience, he was very in love with the Lord. So he was down there and there were some people who said, "You've got to come over and see this invalid woman. She too is very spiritual, and you too need to have a," you know, "she'd like to meet you," etc.

So, he went over and he met the woman, she was lying in bed on straw. We're talking Haiti, you know, probably in a lean-to or in a straw bed, and all she owned was the clothes on her back. And they had this nice spiritual conversation, and at the end he said to her, he was a wealthy man, he said to her, "Do you know what would you, anything you need, anything you'd like say, whatever it is, I'll get it for you."

And she thought for a minute, and she said, "Well, I would like Holy Communion." This woman had nothing, except she had her priorities right. What she wanted was Jesus.

I'll conclude with the sermon, with the conclusion of my sermon that I've been giving for the past 20 years. It's varied a little over the years, but down at the end, my last sentence is this: If you take care of God's poor, God will take care of you.