Fr. Timothy Sparks, OP History Interview

Transcript

Interviewer: Fr. Cornelius Hahn, OP | Interviewee: Fr. Timothy Sparks, OP

Approximate running time: 39 minutes

Fr. Cornelius Hahn, OP (Interviewer)

[00:00:01] What's it like when the province was founded? And I really want you to talk about the people who stand out in your mind right off the top of your head, and maybe some of the events as you recall them.

Fr. Timothy Sparks, OP

[00:00:16] Yes.

Fr. Cornelius Hahn, OP (Interviewer)

[00:00:17] Who would be some of the people you remember?

Fr. Timothy Sparks, OP

[00:00:20] Well, I would think of the of the first provincial Fr. Peter O'Brien. Perhaps we can start with events in the sense that. It might be worth noting that the. The document establishing the province is dated December the second, nineteen thirty nine. Usually the anniversary is considered the twenty second of December because that was on December twenty second, nineteen thirty nine, that the document was read, and the. There was a certain solemnity for the inauguration of the Province. I can recall very well that at that day Father O'Brien, to expedite matters, took his oath early in the morning in the chapel at River forest before Father Joe Schroeder, who was subprior of the house at that time. So that this made it possible to have the reading of the document and the, shall we say, the, installation of the provincial later in the morning and done more expeditiously.

[00:01:47] And this, of course, was in the presence of Father McDermott and, the community and, quite a few guests. The affair was. As I recall, it was rather. Hastily, shall we say, planned so that it was near Christmas time. It was very difficult to alert everyone, but there was a good number. There was a good number there. I recall this event. There was a mass and then the installation. Father Reginald Hughes, I remember, read the document or documents in the middle of the quire. And then at the proper time, every the community in his place, Father O'Brien made the. And then we on our part made the venia. And this got us started. And then ever after that, December twenty second was always observed as the anniversary of the province, because in those days in our Dominican calendar. That was the feast of Our Lady, Queen of the Dominican Order, patroness of Dominican Order, so that it was always considered a special honoring of Our Lady and of her part and the progress of the province.

[00:03:12] The provincial presided on these occasions, these annual occasions, and I remember that under Father Hughes in a special way, it was as well as the other provincials. This was quite an observance in this. The student and the novice would look forward to this day. So there was a great day to sort of rally the spirit of the province and to get back now to persons again. I would like to go back again to Father O'Brien. He was, by nature a very retiring person, but very, extremely dedicated to the ideals of the order. I remember that the lectern, which is still there at River Forest, was selected by him in the text, as I recall from the book of Ecclesiasticus. And it's, goes along these lines that we shall speak and say many things, but he who is in all things, really knows how to express the word.

[00:04:26] And this sort of summed up Father O'Brien's attitude. He was very sparing in his words. And yet when he used words, they were always very well chosen, so that he was very good in his writing or any composition. He was always very careful to use the exact word so that characterize him. I would say that he was a very, fine Dominican, very learned Dominican, very dedicated Dominican. I think that he found the burden of the province are pretty heavy, especially because of the, of the debts that were there at the time of. He took over. He was he was so desperate, shall we say, to, get a bit of relief that he even ran a sort of carnival at Fenwick, which is very alien to his nature to do that sort of thing, you see. But he would do anything. And, anyone who would be interested would do well to look at the records Father Walker made.

[00:05:36] Father Walker was also his secretary as well as student master and also as the archivist of the province, made a record of her father had endeavored to pay off the debts, you see, and his, conservative spirit in this matter, I think, was shown to in his matter of. You know, he was careful not to overbuild. And yet he was. He was. Brought vision enough to build where where there had to be buildings. For example, I remember the development of Saint Vincent Ferrer Parish and that this was built from from very from scratch, really, although it was begun before the province was divided, province began. But as it developed, it was just bit by bit and yet sufficient, sufficient for the needs. So there was Father O'Brien, and I would think that one of the one of the things we should think about him is that which we all a lot was that he was very insistent on poverty.

[00:06:49] I remember in the acts of the first provincial chapter, first or second one. That was just a very plain statement. An ordination about the question of accounts of brethren in certain ministries, you see that they would turn in their stipends and so on. You see, to the house where they belonged. And it was a very simple sort of thing, but it touched the. It was sort of a key thing, so that they were there. And. And then from then on, there was this endeavour to practise poverty pretty carefully. And I think this helped a great deal to this community spirit that the they, you and I recall with in some cases that you would turn over your stipend and perhaps you wouldn't The superior would not give you a thank you, which he wasn't obliged to do, but it made you do it just for the love of God, and for no other reason, you see.

[00:07:57] But all this helped, because that. Then you weren't serving yourself. You see, you were you were. You were serving the community. I think this helped. This helped mightily. I recall one time Father Driscoll, who was a prior at the time, and he used to often take walks, and he was telling me that I don't recall the exact detail. But the point was, he said, the provincial was anxious to promote poverty. And he, for his part, as prior felt that he should do everything he could to cooperate with it, you see, so that there was this general spirit of and deepening of the, of the evangelical observance of poverty, all of which contributed to the a better and deeper, deeper community spirit. Another, another. Apostolate that comes to my mind and I'm taking your word that I may speak as I wish, or what comes to my mind is, the, interest in the laity at the beginning.

[00:09:15] Some of it goes back to before the province was divided. For instance, father, Father McGlynn had Matt McGlynn had worked at the, I think he was the founder of the Blessed Martin Center. And then later on this, was taken up by Father Carlson. But, this was one evidence of that, along with the aspect of social justice, there was a great, great sense of, trying to give everyone their due. Similarly, in the. In the. The third order from her Father Gillis was very, very, very apostolic. And in the, in the it was a group of Saint Catherine of Siena that the he worked with. He was director. And there was emphasis on, of course, he himself was quite interested in this, in the, in the aspect of social justice. Then there was another group and this really came out of the Rosary College alumni.

[00:10:23] And one person in particular, Mary Weinert, who is still living. And she was an investment counselor in Milwaukee. And she had been she was a graduate of Rosary College. But when Rosary College was here at Saint Clara's. And so she was part of Rosary Alumnae, and she got them interested. And she'd been to Rome and talked to Father Vaults, Angela's Falls. The historian. She was a friend of his. And anyway, she came back and she wanted to get lay groups studying theology. Now, this had been started by Father Vincent Donovan, for example, before the province divided. And then Father Father Walter Farrell carried on in New York. But this group, which took the name of the Thomist Association, was had its own distinctive format. It was patterned a bit on our Dominican formation Dominican study. There would be a mass with a homily, and then usually they had.

[00:11:32] There was breakfast together and then a lecture with discussion. And this took place over between October and May. Try to start near the feast of Our Lady of the Rosary and end up the first Sunday of May took place about twelve times, and there were at its peak there were twelve different groups. They all had a special name and. And it was highly organised, but very, very well and very intelligently structured. It was really amazing what these lay people. They were. I remember there was a lawyer and doctors and all, and they took all this and they also made a point of making it was this was their wish that they, that they, give a reasonable stipend for each lecture so that it was never. And besides the expenses of the journey, at one point there were twelve centers in, Illinois, Wisconsin, Kansas and Minnesota and mostly staffed by the priests from the

House of studies.

[00:12:40] And the endeavor was to, the idea would be to take them through all the philosophy and then through theology. But this had to be adjusted at times depending on what lectures were available. And this went on up and up and up to in the sixties, you see. And then after that it rather declined. There are still two or three chapters, as they were called, one in Milwaukee and one in Chicago area. The Milwaukee area still uses the name. They carry on yet, but this, in its date, in its beginning was quite exceptional because you had to go to the bishop and get permission for it. First of all, it was on a Sunday morning usually, and this was frowned upon because you were taking them away from the parish and so on. But. For laypeople in those days, especially not in a college, Catholic college, to have philosophy and theology was something rather extraordinary for the times.

[00:13:40] But this. Lay endeavor was a very fruitful. Among other things, they also, they were anxious to establish verses and they actually did give some thousands of dollars for education at dominican's, at the Dominican centers in Jerusalem and Rome and Fribourg, you see.

Fr. Cornelius Hahn, OP (Interviewer)

[00:14:03] Where do we go from here? Now? See, that's a breathtaking, concept. And I know that you were involved in this from the beginning. Who were some of the other people who were?

Fr. Timothy Sparks, OP

[00:14:15] Well, Father O'Brien, as I recall at the beginning, was the was the prior. This was at the beginning of it. And but that and then, then later on, Father Driscoll and they, I would say, you know, that they were particularly strong movers.

Fr. Cornelius Hahn, OP (Interviewer)

[00:14:35] Yes.

Fr. Timothy Sparks, OP

[00:14:36] Then all the fathers, though, were who gave the lecture. And so practically all the professors at the time, took their turn giving the lectures, which was a bit of a burden for them because that meant teaching all week.

Fr. Cornelius Hahn, OP (Interviewer)

[00:14:52] Oh sure. Sure. Was that once a month, twice a month,

Fr. Timothy Sparks, OP

[00:14:55] It work out twice a month. And then in that intervening week you might be sent out somewhere to. You see it occurring.

Fr. Cornelius Hahn, OP (Interviewer)

[00:15:03] Yeah.

Fr. Timothy Sparks, OP

[00:15:03] So that was a bit of a bit of a burden, but I think it was worthwhile.

Fr. Cornelius Hahn, OP (Interviewer)

[00:15:08] What would you say the spirit was like in the province? You've talked about the debt in the that the province had to deal with. What was the spirit among the.

Fr. Timothy Sparks, OP

[00:15:17] Yes. Well, let's begin this way, that first of all, the mean age must have been the late in the thirties somewhere, you see. So that there was they were young people were young and therefore dreaming dreams and very, had great vision, you see, and willing to dare and that sort of thing. You see, later on, especially as it came to expanding Materially to meet these dreams. Father Hughes was very courageous and broad minded. You see, to. He was the great material, the great builder, materially. But he didn't neglect the other, you see. But I would say there was a great therefore a great, community spirit. And I still think that the that the poverty helped that as well as the emphasis on community life and the community mass, that the choir service because. I am convinced myself that you can't really have a good community spirit unless you have these observances that, are, are, we've been accustomed to for centuries in the order there was a great, love of the order and of the Dominican saints in the formation, for example.

[00:16:43] A period there where it was customary that we had this from Washington. We just carried it on in River forest. You'd always have a room before the feast day and in some cases, a novena. And, this helped a great deal. The way the liturgy was set up with our Dominican rite and the, what we call the second lessons, which had the history of our Dominican saints and blesseds worked into the actual prayer. This was a great help. You see it. Everyone knew. Everyone was sure to know the basics. You know, we say in the lives of our Dominican saints. I recall one time Father Norbert Georges, whom I respect as one of the great Dominicans of the world. Huh? Let me go off a minute here, because we owe a lot to him, you see? I can see him yet at River forest one summer, was very hot, sweating away, typing out the translation of A Life of Blessed Martin.

[00:17:49] He submitted it to the censors and they refused it. Later on it was revised and came out as meet Brother Martin and saw at least a half million copies. At any rate, Father Georges, to whom, humanly speaking, is due, we can say, I think in great part, the canonization of Saint Martin de Porres. Father George is one time told me, he said the reason I love to search the lives and to the lives of Dominican saints and blesseds. He said. I wanted to see how how they met their problems. And I try to do the same myself. But I'm very happy to pay this tribute to Father Georges. We really one of the great Dominicans. I think this is getting off of the province, but I'll go. I'll come back. Father Brendan Reese told me that after Father Georges died, he was assigned to, going to, putting in final order the accounts of the Saint Martin Guild in New York.

[00:18:55] And he was amazed to see how widespread were the charities of Father Georges throughout the world. Any missionary in trouble could write to him and find some help. And I remember reading in the Dominican magazine from Bologna, an article after he died on Father Georges, and it said that he's probably the best known Dominican in the world. And I think this is true. Not that he'd be known so much in the States, but he was known by Dominicans throughout the world, whom he helped. So what really one of the great Dominicans and he we were blessed to have him. So many years of forest, during which time he traveled widely about this region. He came from Iowa, you know, and especially push the cause of Blessed Martin and gave us the example of this interest in, minorities and in social justice, that sort of thing.

[00:19:54] Another Dominican, I think we should mention is, Father Joe Schrader, Father Joe Schrader was, for years a domestic missionary, but he was always a very scholarly man. And when he was, his last assignment was to River forest. And there his room was just filled from floor to ceiling, filled with books. And he was he had some marvelous sets of, foreign language periodicals and others on church history. And he did. And his later years he did two produced two great works, one they both had to do with the General councils, one where, as I recall, were the early councils and the second one on the on the disciplinary decrees of the Council of Trent. And he was so exacting and did such a perfect job that in graduate schools, these books were considered as primary sources. The professors would accept these as primary sources.

[00:21:12] I remember he was so exacting that Father Cain had been. Father Humbert Cain had been the censor of one of them, and because he had forgotten a period or didn't catch the omission of something like that. While this radio was quite upset, it was so perfect. And the. The publisher herder said they'd never received a manuscript as perfect as Father Schrader's manuscript.

Fr. Cornelius Hahn, OP (Interviewer)

[00:21:33] You mentioned he was a domestic missionary. Can you recall anything about the early preaching bands here in the province.

Fr. Timothy Sparks, OP

[00:21:43] Not in detail. I would say that there was in regard to the. There was an emphasis of making them. As much as possible part of the local community. As far as the missionaries manual, I think that they took the manual from Saint Joseph's Province. I remember there was a new edition of it, but I don't know if there are any drastic changes in it.

Fr. Cornelius Hahn, OP (Interviewer)

[00:22:11] So the format of the missions continued about how many men were involved on the preaching band?

Fr. Timothy Sparks, OP

[00:22:17] Well, this would be a guess, but I would think, perhaps, there were there were three or four bands like, I mean, like, I'm not sure of the names, but let's say the Northwest Band, the Southern Band and so on. And maybe one or several may have been kind of, not independent, but not part of a band. Like I think for a while, Father Marco Nugent, as I recall, was somewhat like that. But to your number about how many there were. Let me estimate there would be twenty five or thirty, although I'm not sure it's really. It's really a guess. Really a guess. I'm almost finished with Father Schroeder. I had something else to say about him, but I did want to pay tribute to the to his scholarly work. And also he was a very good religious. He was always very careful about his, the, his attendance at community exercises. He also was quite a, quite a singer.

[00:23:17] He, it was understood that he would always have the exultant for Holy Saturday. This was his sort of understood to be his distinctive role. Another one I would mention, and I'd like to mention them because, What I owe to him personally, even though he was not a member of the province, but still did much for the province and lived within the territory in his latter years as bishop. Edward Celestin Daly. Do you remember? He was for twenty five years or more at the Apostolic delegation in Washington, and he was the first one of the. Yet since then others, Father Gallagher and Father Bishop Kelly in his day, and Father Halligan. But Bishop Daly, hailing from Boston or Newton. Was there many years in the early years taught at the House of studies. They say that during his years of formation he spent two or three years in bed.

[00:24:19] He had a heart condition, but later years seemed to have overcome that entirely. And I remember Father Aquinas Burns, told me that the bishop was quite disturbed when he was named a bishop. But, anyway, he, after his retreat he seemed to be very calm about it, and so he was very. Had a very, very many had quite fruitful, very fruitful years as the Bishop of Des Moines and as Bishop of Des Moines. Then he often came to Dubuque, and especially when we were concerned with the teaching in the seminary, he was involved there in encouraging us so that we all very, very much to him. And in fact, the whole. I think the whole order owes very much to him because of the. I remember one time in Rome, Father Fanfani, telling me that there were about three Dominicans in his in his long career, whom he would consider could well be raised to the altars.

[00:25:21] I mean, you know, he mentioned Father Cormier and two others, you see. Well, I would say Bishop Daly is outstanding in my mind as one who practiced heroic sanctity. So I have great veneration for Bishop Daly.

Fr. Cornelius Hahn, OP (Interviewer)

[00:25:37] Where did the Apostolates go? As the province grew older, we had parishes in the beginning. We had Fenwick High School and we had preaching.

Fr. Timothy Sparks, OP

[00:25:46] We haven't touched another one that was very widespread and very important, and that was the teaching of theology in colleges. This grew remarkably. You see this because, as I mentioned earlier, that the having lay people studying philosophy and theology was new. Well, then I think perhaps Father Walter Farrell's work as an example. And then his companion, although I guess he did himself didn't really mean it as a text, but it turned out was often used as such. Then there were these, these endeavors to write texts. There was one or two endeavors at Fenwick. And, then there was the volumes that Father Cunningham, Father Donlon and Father Rock will put out the three volume set from Priory Press before the College theology. But the teaching of theology in college grew by leaps and bounds with it. At one time, I would perhaps say a third third of our men were engaged in this work.

[00:26:55] You know another another thing I think we should I should mention is this, that this goes back to early before the division of the province, but it was carried on after the province and intensified after the province divided. And the same thing happened in Saint Joseph's Province. But it was the consideration for the lay brother. There was there was always, In the it began by a separate novitiate in order to give them a little special training. And then later on, there was, there was, there were special courses for them and special. Including theological courses. And this grew and grew and grew. So that I think that this is worth noting, that one of the ideals of the province was to do everything possible for the cooperator brother. But. I want before I finish, I want to get my my two cents in for Saint Thomas.

Fr. Cornelius Hahn, OP (Interviewer)

[00:27:56] Go ahead.

Fr. Timothy Sparks, OP

[00:27:56] Yes.

Fr. Cornelius Hahn, OP (Interviewer)

[00:27:57] Whatever you've done, whatever comes to mind.

Fr. Timothy Sparks, OP

[00:27:58] Yes. I'm not sure just when this started, but I remember that when we, the province divided, it was rather astounding. The number of, brethren who were found themselves here or were here with a doctor's degree. And so, Father O'Brien immediately jumped on this, grasped this, you see, and wanted to, profit to the utmost by. Buy it in two ways. First of all, he. Perhaps he might have had rather boldly in the provincial acts. Sort of took it for granted that the stadium would be a Studium generale, which was an amazing thing for a province just starting to begin with the Studium generale. Amazing. See, because that meant you had to have a regent and a vice regent and a moderator would be as a registrar, you see. At any rate. He did this and it went through the acts of the chapter. I mean, it was sort of put there without.

[00:29:11] He didn't ask for it. He just took it for granted and sort of filled the those spots. You see those, those slots there with the officers. And then, right away he started encouraging the ad Gradus so that there would be people who would be fully qualified for these, these, these places. But besides that, he was mindful of the fact that Washington through especially through the efforts of father, father, Paul Sheehan, Gus Sheehan, and had petitioned and had obtained the establishment of the Pontifical Faculty of Theology. So that Father O'Brien insisted that a similar petition be drawn up for a for a philosophical faculty of, here at River forest in this here in this province, at River forest. I recall one official felt, well, this isn't the time and that sort of thing. But looking back now, it seems to me that Father O'Brien was very wise because you would hardly ever get such an accumulation of, qualified professors, you see.

[00:30:18] So anyway, the Father Sheehan lent the copy of what he had petitioned, you see. And so the petition here was the petition was sent to Rome and the Pontifical faculty approved at this time. Two. There was a emphasis on Saint Albert as the patron of the natural sciences. As I recall, there was a special letter of Pope Pius the twelfth on one on Saint Thomas, and then one on the two of them together. And Father Bryan put these out in very special editions and in the Pontifical faculty and in the studio there was this emphasis always on, the, should we say, the albertinian approach to the sciences. And there was actually formed a special guild. I remember under Father Keene, I forget the exact title. Father Marczewski was a part of it. And Father Nogat. Father, actually, I think Father Corcoran. But that was distinct from the Pontifical faculty.

[00:31:23] But the. This is rather unheard of to that. A province scarcely formed had a pontifical faculty, you see, and thought that there was a great, a great interest in Saint Thomas and further in the Studium. Aside from the faculty in the Studium, in theology from the beginning, the there was not, as it was formerly known, a material and formal course in theology, but everybody took Saint Thomas. And so that every student then was expected to have their set of the summa and they took, the regular course in Saint Thomas. But there would be supplementary courses on moral always in view of the faculties examination and that sort of thing. But this, I think, was intended to make a well intended, I would say, to make a good spirit. You see, that everybody had the this access to Saint Thomas. So there was a there was always a then a great interest in Saint Thomas.

[00:32:32] And, this, was heightened from another aspect, especially in the early years and really began before the province divided, I think, or at least around the time. Anyway, at the beginning of the province, there was this interest in Saint Thomas, the University of Chicago, with Hutchins and Adler. And out of this eventually came into the order. Then father came out of this, you see, and there were there were others among the ones that the original ones interested were Doctor Herbert Ratner. You remember. You know him, and then Doctor Raphael Simon, who's now Trappist. And he wasn't Rayfield Rayfield, his name as a Trappist, but he was among them. There were quite a group. And these people used to travel often take the Illinois Central downtown and the Yale out and the bus to get to the House of studies. But there was a lot of communication.

[00:33:28] And this helped, I think, to sort of make us be more on our toes about contemporary problems. And these people were interested not only in the theoretical aspect of it, but also in the spiritual aspect that came out. They would make retreats and this sort of thing you see at the House of studies, so that there was in various ways manifested this interest in Saint Thomas. But there was, of course, at the same time interest in Saint Thomas throughout the church, you see. Now, just last night I gave a lecture on Attorney Patricia. What's coming up for centenary, August the fourth. Attorney Patrice, the letter on the restoration of Christian philosophy under the leadership of Saint Thomas. The rest, the encyclical of Leo thirteen, which will observe his centenary or centenary, will be observed on August the fourth, nineteen seventy nine.

[00:34:32] Well, To me, I think that we that we must now, be aware of the trend because first of all, Saint Thomas himself came out of Vatican Council, two stronger than he went in. And I wrote an article on that one time, and I could document this very easily. The chief doctrinal document, Lumen Gentium, has seventeen places of Saint Thomas are referred to in it. Then the, there was a letter from from the congregation on Education, Sacred Congregation on Education in nineteen seventy two, on fundamental points in philosophy. Our bishops and their Committee on Priestly Formation, of which Father Ashley was the chairman. That letter came out in January. In May of seventy two. This committee, chaired by Father Ashley, came out and expressed their wholehearted approval of this approach to philosophy, which emphasized Saint Thomas main positions.

[00:35:37] Then the delegate Apostolic delegate, Archbishop Jadot, in November of the same year spoke about it. Then this was finally crystallized in the legislation so that Saint Thomas, as far as formation goes, priestly formation is even more strongly than ever approved. And then in nineteen seventy four, there was the seventh centenary of Saint Thomas. And I think the Holy Father was surprised, really, when there were fifteen hundred showed up at the Angelicum and at Naples for this. And he closed the centenary in November of nineteen seventy four, in which he wrote the letter Lumen Ecclesiae, in which he tells Dominicans. And he says, I'm addressing to teachers everywhere in ecclesiastical schools that they must take Saint Thomas's main position. It isn't just, he says, if you say, well, I'll do for my age. Well, Saint Thomas does for his.

[00:36:32] He says, all right, maybe you can accomplish something there, but you won't give to the church the good it should have from you. And what he's trying to say is this, that you can't have a real, authentic pluralism in the church unless Dominicans are able to give them Saint Thomas. If we don't know Saint Thomas, then obviously no one else will, except perhaps the Jesuits. In speaking about them already for this centenary, Father McCullough Fordham has written about it. Then, in nineteen seventy four, Father Henley, the president of Georgetown, spoke in the cathedral on the observance, and he gloried in the fact that he had fifty years of. Of a Thomistic career. Oh, a beautiful, beautiful tribute. So, as I say, if if we don't develop this for at least the Jesuits will. And give the church that authentic aspect of Thomas which is necessary for even for a healthy pluralism

in the church.

[00:37:32] So I would hope that the province will make sure that we do everything to train our young men in this spirit, not in any, any, restricted provincial spirit, just the opposite, but rather that the dynamism of Saint Thomas ideas can be, shall we say, fertilized by the developments of our age. And then the solutions be given to problems that need our times.

Fr. Cornelius Hahn, OP (Interviewer)

[00:38:09] If you had one minute to say something to the whole province, what would you like to tell them?

Fr. Timothy Sparks, OP

[00:38:17] I would tell them. I think that we, ask the Lord Jesus to, teach us through His Holy Spirit, the riches of his infinitely merciful love and that he do this, especially through Our Lady, through her Immaculate Heart, Our Lady, Queen of the Most Holy Rosary that he help us to understand as Saint Dominic understood that the whole mystery of salvation is contained in these mysteries, that we meditate there while we praise our blessed Lady. And so I would hope then that in the province, through the infinitely merciful love of Lord, Our Lady, Queen of all the angels and saints, Saint Joseph, to interceding that we reach the end. Saint Albert, the patron that we could reach the goal the Lord has in mind for us.

Fr. Cornelius Hahn, OP (Interviewer)

[00:39:18] Thank you.