

Interview with Father Barry Bercier

On the Life and Teaching of Ernest L. Fortin, A.A.

Interviewed by Peini Feng

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Peini Feng

Yes, I think we can hear you. It should be fine. As you were saying, Father Fortin seems to have embodied the problem of Athens and Jerusalem.

Father Barry Bercier

From the very beginning, I knew him early on when I was a student at Assumption College. And then later on, I went to Boston College, and Ernest was also there. So I had a long time that I spent with him.

I took a number of his courses. I never became what you would call a scholar. I taught at Assumption for many years, but I never got my PhD, for instance.

I completed the comprehensive exams for a PhD at Boston College. But when it came time to write the thesis, I decided not to do it. I had chosen Rousseau as the subject of my thesis against the advice of a number of people at BC.

And then I began the work, and I started to hate Rousseau personally. It got so that if I picked up his text, it would make me sick to my stomach. And I said, that's it.

And I was not sure what I would do after that. But what happened to me—this is sort of my particular slant on the question of Ernest—was that, after I joined the Assumptionists, I was asked, as a preparation for ordination to spend a summer at the Assumptionist place in Jerusalem, Saint Peter in Gallicantu.

Peini Feng

Oh, yes.

Father Barry Bercier

And I didn't want to go. I had no interest in going.

But the alternative was to stay at our house in Brookline, just over the hill from here, which I considered to be the most boring place on planet Earth, and so I decided to go. I would go anywhere, rather than have to stay there for another summer. And so with that spirit, not expecting much of anything, I went to Jerusalem and was there for three months.

And over the course of that three months, I had my world turned upside down. Jerusalem provoked in me a change that would last even to today when I am old. I began to have a very strong appreciation for the story of the Jewish people. And that became an enduring interest in my life...which shaped the rest of my education. So when I think about Athens and Jerusalem, I'm thinking about Jerusalem, the real, the actual Jerusalem now, as well as the biblical Jerusalem. Anyway, before that time, when I first got to know Ernest, very early on, being with his students, I learned that there was this ambiguity to Ernest.

People would ask, is he really a believer? That was a question the students would raise. We students would raise it.

And for myself, it was hard to tell. It was clear that he took Christianity seriously. But it was also clear that he was not thinking in a way that was conventional, that he was raising questions that other people did not raise.

And he was raising them with a kind of seriousness that was disturbing to us. I mean, yeah, the encounter with Ernest was disturbing... In my case, at least, he had this extraordinary ability to make me feel like I was incredibly stupid. I would say something, and you'd see it come across his face, this kind of disappointment that was, in a way, crushing. But on the other hand, he had this gift for making you not want to give up.

You wanted to measure up to the standard that he held. And you wanted to know what he knew, or you wanted to be able to ask the questions that he was asking in an appropriate way. So he challenged us to learn and to question in a way that, you might say, unbalanced the rest of my life—became a dimension of the rest of my life.

And it shows itself personally in—I do not know if I want to include this in the interview—but there is a kind of difficulty that I have had in living in an Assumptionist community. The fact is, I have spent many years living outside the community, and I do now. I do not live here.

I'm here just for a couple more days, and then I'm going back to the Canadian Arctic, where I've been serving as a pastor in a little parish.

Peini Feng

That is very interesting. Could you say a little more?

Why did it create difficulties for you in living in community?

Father Barry Bercier

Because Ernest got me asking questions that most people in the community didn't want to deal with. You could put it in terms of the crisis of modernity.

Ernest took this really, really seriously and made me feel that this is really a very serious concern. And it means questioning the origins of Christianity in a serious sort of way. The instinct of a lot of people in the community is to paper over the big questions and just try to get along.

Ernest one day was speaking about one of the members of the community. And he said, so-and-so loves peace more than he loves truth.

Peini Feng

That is not unique to priests.

Father Barry Bercier

No, it is not. But in this context, what it meant was that everybody has to get along. And if questioning things gets to be too disturbing or opens up vistas that people are afraid to look into, you just have to shut up. So I think that is why Ernest himself came to live outside the community: to think his thoughts and speak in a way that would not be muffled by concerns for peace in the community.

Peini Feng

When Father Fortin was teaching at Assumption College, he lived in the Assumptionist community.

Father Barry Bercier

He did that.

Peini Feng

He lived with the other priests and, of course, with students. In my conversations with Professor Marc LePain and Father Dennis Gallagher, both said that they had no doubt about Father Fortin's faith because he was so faithful to his priestly vocation.

Father Barry Bercier

He really was.

You'd see him reading his breviary every morning. Yeah, I think he was a faithful Catholic and did not encourage us to infidelity at all. On the contrary, his faithfulness became a sort of basis for my faithfulness, because I could say, here he is, asking these huge questions and probing these matters with seriousness, yet is still faithful, even expresses his fidelity precisely by asking the big questions.

He's hanging on to the scriptural tradition and the tradition of the church. But I also think that he was looking forward to a time past his own death when the church would undergo some very significant changes to address the crisis of modernity more intelligently than it has so far.

Peini Feng

It seems to me that Father Fortin saw a challenge facing the Church that had to be confronted through serious questioning.

Such questioning may have disturbed people at the time, but failing to recognize the problem would create greater difficulties in the future.

Father Barry Bercier

If you don't deal with it, the institution will collapse, simply.

Dealing with it will seem to threaten the institution. But you have to deal with it.

Peini Feng

That suggests a deeper faithfulness: caring enough about the faith to challenge dangers that confront it.

One takes responsibility by raising questions that may seem disturbing to faith but may actually be good for it. This reminds me of Father Fortin's comments on Vatican II. He suggested that the Church did not understand modernity well enough to confront the questions modernity raised.

Father Barry Bercier

This is true.

Peini Feng

Professor Michael Foley also pointed out to me that Vatican II was pastoral rather than doctrinal. There was therefore room for discussion about how the Church should confront the crisis of modernity.

Father Fortin seems, in that sense, to have been faithful and respectful toward the Church while remaining very serious about the Church's foundations in the face of that crisis.

Father Barry Bercier

That is right. When I was a senior at Assumption, I had taken most of his courses, and I asked him to do a directed reading with me during my last semester.

And he was really busy, but he said, okay. And he gave me a stack of books and said, read these. And he called the course *The Anti-Christian Polemic*.

Peini Feng

Oh, wow.

Father Barry Bercier

And it was all the biggest guns of philosophy who attacked Christianity. So I read all these books, and then I graduated from Assumption.

And so I graduated in a condition of serious disorientation. For example, I went to Notre Dame after I left Assumption. But if I walked into the church at Notre Dame, or any church at that time, I got a splitting headache.

Ah, it was a terrible time. And yeah, I really came under Nietzsche's influence. And I have copies of his books that I read, and you can see my writing.

And I read them through several times. The first time, you see me saying, no, no, no. And then you see me kind of melting in front of Nietzsche and saying, oh, God, what he's saying is true.

What am I going to do? Talk about disturbance—it was a deeply disturbing experience. But it compelled me to raise what I think were really serious questions.

And then, sometime later, came this trip to Israel. ...I'll describe this experience. I don't know if this should go in the interview.

But when I was in Jerusalem that first time ...(I went many times after that) ... I was sick. I would not drink enough water.

You have to drink over there, because it's really, really hot.

Peini Feng

It is a desert country.

Father Barry Bercier

I was constantly dehydrated. People would say, you have to drink. And I would say, I'm not thirsty.

I was stupid. So I was sick. I didn't know what to make of the Jews, the Muslims, the various kinds of Christians that you find there.

It was a really disorienting experience. And I was there at the time of a terrible terrorist attack. Two big bombs were set off in the Jewish outdoor market in Jerusalem.

I was at home at the Assumptionist place when it happened. But I was outside, and I could hear, boom, boom. At first, I thought it was jets breaking the sound barrier.

But then I thought, no, that wasn't it. I turned on the radio, and sure enough, there was this attack. Many people were killed.

It was a terrible thing. The outdoor market on a Thursday, I guess, or Friday before the Sabbath, when people are gathering there to get things before the Sabbath. Until that moment, I did not know where to stand on the question of Jews and Palestinians.

But after that, I said, I'm not on the side of the people who set off those bombs. And then, a little later, it was my last week in Jerusalem. I used to spend my evenings going down to the Western Wall, the Kotel, because it was right near our place.

It was a dramatic place to be, to see the people praying and singing, dancing, crying. I loved going there. My last week, I was there again.

Have you been there? Have you been to Jerusalem?

Peini Feng

I hope to, but not yet.

Father Barry Bercier

At the Kotel, there's the wall itself, and then there's a low barrier, like a fence, and in the space in between, it's technically a synagogue. There's a big plaza outside that fence. And I would never go into the inner part because it was a synagogue and out of respect for the Jews.

So I had never gone up to the wall. But this one night, I was standing around there in the big plaza, and this big Orthodox Jewish guy came up to me. I didn't know him from Adam.

And he said to me, What's the matter with you? He said, You're here every night. You don't go in.

Go in. I thought, I'm being watched. But then I thought, well, if he says go in, I guess I could go in.

So I went in and prayed up against the wall. And when I did, this powerful rush of feeling came over me. When I pulled back from the wall, I said to myself, what was that all about?

What just happened? It was that I realized, as one of the popes said, the Jews are our elder brothers in the faith. That hit me very, very hard.

Then I came back to the U.S. and I started teaching philosophy at Assumption. But little by little, everything began to fall apart. I was losing my interest in philosophy.

I was having trouble with the community. And I eventually took off and went and served a small parish in central Quebec in the middle of nowhere. It was a French-speaking village, so I was limited in my capacity to speak.

My French was weak. But that was OK. I sensed that it was a time to just stop, shut up, and rethink everything. And I started writing.

And in the course of that writing, this question about the Jews recurred. And I realized that I had to think about this. And to my surprise, I became angry at my education...I said to myself, Why was it that, as someone who had been in Catholic school since kindergarten all the way through graduate school, why had no one spoken about our relationship to the Jews? It was like the Jews were in the past tense, and we didn't think about that anymore. I became angry that that was my state of ignorance.

After that, I decided I needed to learn Hebrew. I changed where I was. I moved from Quebec to the state of Maine.

The bishop of Maine put me on an Indian reservation in Down East Maine. There I had some time on my hands. I thought, now I have a chance to learn Hebrew.

He put me in a place where there were no Jews. Down East Maine is not Jew territory. I began asking everybody, do you know any Jews?

And everybody would say, no. The nearest synagogue was 90 miles away. One day, one of the Indians said, yeah, there is Mr. Silverman who lives in Calais, about 30 miles away. He's a Jew. I called up the Silverman household, and his wife answered the phone. I explained to her that I was a Catholic priest who decided he needed to learn Hebrew.

I said, I was hoping your husband could teach me. She said, "I am Israeli." She was born in Israel.

Her family were some Holocaust survivors. She had married this American Jew, Silverman, and moved to Calais. I said, will you teach me?

She said, "Call back in two weeks; we will see," and hung up her phone. It turns out that the two weeks gave her a chance to go down to Bangor, where the synagogue was, to find out whether it was okay to teach this goy Hebrew. Her rabbi said It was OK, so long as he does not try to proselytize Russian Jews who are arriving in Israel.

So I promised. She began to teach me Hebrew. The great advantage was that she was a strict Orthodox Jewish woman who ran her household according to Halakha.

She was following Jewish law. She knew it well. We spent much more time talking about Judaism and Christianity than we did Hebrew.

She became a great friend. Anyway, it was a great introduction into the life of the people of Israel. I eventually learned a little bit more Hebrew and went to Israel again.

I began to pay close attention to the Hebrew Scriptures. I was a pre-Vatican II baby. When you went to church in those days, the readings were the Gospel and the Epistle.

I was an altar boy for many years. You had to change the book from the “Epistle side” of the altar to the “Gospel side” of the altar. Those were the readings, the Gospel and Epistle.

Where was the Old Testament in this? It wasn't there, hardly at all. I think one of the great things Vatican II did was to put the Hebrew Scriptures back into the lectionary.

I started reading the Bible more closely. What I realized was that... I'll put it this way: I think I used to think a little bit like Philo, where there's the serious, clearly articulated truth of Aristotle, and then there's this more fanciful way of presenting it that you find in the Old Testament. My experience reversed that. I thought that, no, Moses is up to something that is vastly more interesting than Aristotle or Plato.

There's an intellectual vision here that's not Athens at all. And it's not stupid. It's something intellectual.

It is reason, but a different kind of reason than you find with Aristotle or Plato. I remember I got a copy of Rashi—you know Rashi.

He's this Jewish interpreter of scriptural texts. He's supposed to be the most simple and the most clear and most basic. I got a copy of his commentary on Genesis.

I thought, well, this would be a big help. I'd be reading Genesis, and I would have a question. And I'd go to Rashi...and Rashi never once had my question in mind.

I was asking all the wrong questions. At first I thought, well, that's just stupid. Rashi is stupid.

But I thought, he can't be stupid. It must be me that's stupid. And I realized I was asking the wrong questions.

I was trying to think like the Greeks, when Rashi is deliberately not thinking like the Greeks. He is thinking according to another way of thinking. And that became—

Talk about a disturbance. After you've been raised on Plato and Aristotle and all these philosophic types, to say there's another kind of thinking that is really and truly serious and maybe even superior to the philosophers, that means you have to rethink everything. So that's what I set about to do in my own limited capacity.

And I've been trying to articulate the mode of thought that characterizes the scripture and the Jews as distinct from the mode of thought that characterizes Athens. It's sort of the criticism that I would have for Leo Strauss, because he was raised in the Jewish tradition, but then he kind of sets it aside. He always showed reverence towards it, but he set it aside and he became a Greek thinker.

I mean, that's his mode of thought. And when he describes scriptural thinking, he does it in a way that treats it as much less serious than philosophic thought. And what I say to myself is, if Strauss had lived longer, he would have gone back to the scriptures.

Peini Feng

In a way, he did so toward the end of his life. I am sure you know Gershom Scholem.

Father Barry Bercier

Who?

Peini Feng

Gershom Scholem.

Father Barry Bercier

Yeah.

Peini Feng

He was a lifelong friend of Leo Strauss.

Toward the end of his life, Strauss stopped most of his writing and correspondence with other friends, except for Gershom Scholem. I believe the last book Strauss was reading was Scholem's *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah*. Sabbatai Sevi was—

Father Barry Bercier

Oh, yeah.

Peini Feng

Yes—about the man who claimed to be the Messiah.

Father Barry Bercier

Yeah, yeah.

Peini Feng

And who converted to Islam. In a letter to Gershom Scholem, Strauss wrote something to the effect that he had previously had many questions about messianism, but that reading Scholem's book had dispelled many of his doubts.

Toward the end of his life, Strauss also used a great deal of Hebrew in his correspondence with Scholem. He said that he read every sentence of Scholem's book like a student, taking notes because there was always something new to learn.

Father Barry Bercier

I didn't know about this at all.

Peini Feng

That might be a very interesting place to investigate.

Father Barry Bercier

I've read parts of that book. I've got it upstairs on my table.

Peini Feng

Oh, that is good.

Father Barry Bercier

I didn't know that Strauss had read it and taken it seriously, and that it changed him in some way.

Peini Feng

Strauss was initially a Zionist but later moved away from Zionism because he thought the Zionists were not Orthodox Jews: they were taking a modern approach to solving the problem facing the Jews while ignoring miracles and Jewish traditions.

That reduces Jews to just another race or nation, whereas they are not—

Father Barry Bercier

I think that is sort of true, but I also think that, as history works itself out, the Zionists are becoming more Jewish, especially since October 7, a couple of years ago. A lot of Israelis were on the left, and they had the kind of leftist illusions that, if they were nice to everybody, everybody would be nice to them, and that we all want the same thing, basically. After October 7, these people are all saying, we were wrong, we were wrong; we have to defend ourselves. And that means we have to discover why we are worth defending, and that means rediscovering the depth and splendor of Judaism.

So I think there's a kind of return, teshuvah, on the part of a lot of Israelis right now, who are saying, we have something that is absolutely worth defending, something of extraordinary value for the human race.

It's our duty as Jews to live, because we have something that the human race really needs. I think that sense is beginning to develop among the Israelis.

It is a very interesting country, and they are all so argumentative. They yell and shout, and there are all kinds of divisions. But I think that, out of all that discussion, there is going to be a—Judaism has to alter. You talk about the crisis of modernity for Christians; something like that is true for the Jews.

They've been following a kind of Judaism that was developed for life in the diaspora, during the exile, but that's over. They're back there now. When you see different groups coming back from the exile, dressed in fur coats and things, because they lived in northern Germany someplace, and now in the Israeli desert heat they're still dressed in this stuff, you say, this is a bit absurd.

It makes visible the absurdity, or at least the paradox, of attempting to live as exilic Jews, when you're back in the land, and you need to be defending your country and when you're back in the land, and you begin to think that this is a fulfillment of the promises of God. Strauss is correct in his critique of the Zionists, but I think the Zionists are undergoing significant change in the crucible of modern Israel.

Peini Feng

I see. I have another question, and I am very interested to hear what you think. You described another mode of thinking in the Old Testament, or the Torah.

How would you describe it, and how does it differ from the so-called Greek mode of thinking?

Father Barry Bercier

The thing about the Greek mode of thinking is that it seeks a kind of objective truth and knowledge of the whole. Strauss talks a lot about that.

I haven't studied much of Heidegger, but I have the impression that what Heidegger gets at is that Western thought has always had a kind of technical shape to it. In objectifying things, it treats the world as objects. But the scriptures don't want to do that.

The easiest way to begin to get at it is to think in terms of the first function of speech, which is not the objectification of the world but communication between persons. Truth is not an objectively verifiable, factual thing; truth is a quality of the persons who are talking to each other. The word for truth in Hebrew, *emet*, is related to the Hebrew word *emunah*, which means covenantal trust. If that is the most fundamental form of speech, then that is the way in which you enter into the truth.

If technical thought alienates us from the world, separates us from the world, this is not the way to get to the truth. There's a thing about Strauss that always frustrated me enormously, and it kind of killed my devotion to Plato. This idea that at the end of your philosophic life you know that you don't know, that there's something...I almost want to say, something absurd about insisting on pursuing a knowledge that is not attainable. I came to find that frustrating, and this is certainly not something you find in the scriptures. There's certainly an awareness of awesome mystery, but it's the kind of awesome mystery that in a sense we should experience in the case of any persons, including ourselves, because yourself is an inexplicable, singular mystery, about which philosophy can say very little, but deep into which we can nevertheless penetrate. The covenantal wisdom of Torah is exceedingly deep. Put most simply, objectivity removes the persons, and scripture insists that the truth is located in persons.

Peini Feng

So rediscovering the emphasis on personhood in Jerusalem's mode of thinking helped you see why you did not like the so-called Greek mode of thinking, in which reason objectifies the world, neglects personhood, and emphasizes only objective knowledge. In Jerusalem's mode of thinking, by contrast, truth—as you were saying—comes from covenantal trust and from relationships among people and between God and humanity.

This mode of thinking places greater emphasis on personhood and therefore on human dignity. Greek philosophy may seem to tell us that, in the end, we know nothing; Jerusalem's mode of thinking tells us

that there is a great mystery in personhood. We should try to understand it not through objectified knowledge of nature, but through real relationships among human beings, because truth is relational.

Father Barry Bercier

That is part of it. And there is another dimension, which is that this covenantal, personal relationship is something initiated in freedom. Adam—I think the story of eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil—is the pursuit of knowledge such that you know how to govern the world.

And the scriptures are saying that's not it. And when God seeks to remedy the mess that the children of Adam make of the world, especially summed up in the construction of this giant global universal empire of Babel, what does God do? He takes one old guy and says, go away. One singular man.

Go away. Go away from there. Leave everything.

He doesn't even tell him where to go. I'll show you later where you're going to go. If you go, I'll give you offspring, life.

And God ends up making a covenant with Abraham and his seed forever. So there's a kind of singularity in the mutual knowledge of God and Abraham. And there's a singularity of the people that come from Abraham in the world.

They have a unique and irrevocable role in human history. So the story of man is understood in reference to these strange and singular historical events rather than some universal principles governing the operation of human life on earth. The Bible is as far removed from Hegel as you could possibly get.

History is the logos of God's free interaction with human beings in their freedom. And it's a narrative. It's not a theory.

It's a narrative. And it's open-ended. One of the peculiar things about the Old Testament is that it doesn't have a beginning, middle, and end.

It just stops. It just stops. Because it's open-ended.

It's like the whole text is saying, go to a place that I'll show you. But you're going to have to find it along the way. I think that's the way life is.

And I think the attempt to gain intellectual mastery over the whole is futile.

Peini Feng

That brings me to a question raised by medieval thinkers. In the syllabus for Father Fortin's course *Early Christian and Medieval Political Theology*, he included Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*.

In the *Guide*, Maimonides presents the tension between the eternity of the world and creation out of nothing as a central question. As you have said, if the world is eternal, then a principle that always exists lies behind everything.

The purpose of our life would be to understand that principle and live according to it. We would be trying to attain knowledge of what always is.

With creation out of nothing, by contrast, nature would not be the highest principle; God would be the highest principle.

Nature would not be understood as the Greeks understood it—as that which always is—but as a free act and manifestation of God. Under the eternity of the world, nature is the highest cause; under creation out of nothing, God's free and good will and action are the highest cause.

As you said, the Jerusalem tradition places greater emphasis on personhood because of the connection between God and human persons. It also creates a stronger connection between divine providence and human history: history is not merely a repetition governed by natural principles, but a continuing revelation of God's good will and free action. Historical events therefore become occasions on which God reveals himself and teaches us what to do.

After discovering Jerusalem's mode of thinking and becoming discouraged by the Greek mode, how do you understand the role of Maimonides?

Father Barry Bercier

I don't know. I haven't read enough of Maimonides.

What you described to me, I'm a little bit familiar with. I know that Maimonides is an oddball in the Jewish tradition.

Peini Feng

To some people—

Father Barry Bercier

Right, to some. But his approach is different from the approach of the Talmud. What we just said about creation versus nature, I think, is really crucial here. The word for "create" in Hebrew—"God created the heavens and the earth," *bara Elohim et ha-shamayim ve'et ha-aretz*—is bara.

I thought, what is this word? And I got a Hebrew etymological dictionary to see where the word comes from. It does not have much to do with creating being out of non-being.

That is not the way it thinks. The word *bara* means, first of all, to create a clearing in the forest. It is to open up a space for something that could come to be.

And that's what's described in the six days of creation. There's infinite void and emptiness, the waters of chaos. But then in the midst of it, some place, I have no idea where, there's this dome, like a bubble, and the water is drained out.

This becomes the place where God chooses to bring into existence all the things that he causes to be. But it's an act of opening up a space, clearing out the water...

God says, let there be. It's like he's giving a permission for things to leap into being. He doesn't create by the imposition of abstract form on matter. He allows concrete individual beings with their own agency to act and be.

That's such a different view of the origins of the cosmos. And I like it because it is a reflection of the way that our mind works. When you're thinking, it's not like you're imposing form on matter.

It's like ideas emerge into your head. You have to sort of let yourself think. And you don't even know what you're doing when you do this.

You just do it. You let ideas and insights emerge in your head. It is creative—in the modern sense of the term—an activity not governed by controllable rules but utterly real.

And then there's yourself who came to be in a similar manner. Your own existence cannot be predicted. It doesn't fit into any necessary set of rules or laws.

And yet it's the most important thing. And I think that that's the model for the thinking of Moses as he's relating the story of the creation. It's an action entirely of divine freedom.

And it's in that freedom that man is the image of God. So it's a pushing aside of Hellenic notions of form being imposed on matter and necessity, kind of eternal necessity as governing the universe. It's not.

It's an outflowing of freedom that is the story of the universe.

Peini Feng

Yes, exactly. That is the story told in the *Zohar* and the Kabbalistic tradition.

It is their commentary on Genesis, in which the creation of the world is, in a way, an overflowing of the essence of God. The visible world results from that infinite overflow, and wisdom is the point at which the infinity of God breaks through the visible manifestation of the world.

For the Jerusalem branch, then, there must be something beyond nature and the visible world. Wisdom is not merely knowledge of the world itself; it is the highest point within the visible world, from which one can see beyond it and into its essence—the overflow of God.

That brings me back to Father Fortin. He was a priest familiar with both Jerusalem and Athens, and he tried to bring these traditions together in a way that remains for us to discover.

I often compare Father Fortin with his good friend Allan Bloom. Bloom begins *The Closing of the American Mind* from the foundation of Athens, whereas you begin your reflection on education from Jerusalem. You wrote the book *The Skies of Babylon: Diversity, Nihilism, and the American University*.

You observed that Bloom begins with Athens and reason, whereas you begin with Jerusalem, which you believe may be more important to the Western tradition's understanding of human dignity. You have explained why Jerusalem's roots matter. If Father Fortin was trying to bring these traditions together, how do you see him combining human dignity and reason—Jerusalem and Athens?

Father Barry Bercier

Say that again?

Peini Feng

How do you see Father Fortin combining Jerusalem and Athens—the concern for human dignity and the concern for reason?

Father Barry Bercier

I think there's no doubt that he's trying to hold these two things together.

But I also think that he was unresolved in that. And I think it was because his vision of Jerusalem contained so much Athens already. I think Aquinas remained a serious influence on Ernest.

And I think that, in some way, the crisis of the Church has to do with trying to figure out what to do with the tradition that gave us Aquinas. That was the formation of Church people for a very long time. It certainly was for me.

From first grade, we were given the *Baltimore Catechism*, which was actually a kind of super-dumbing-down of the *Summa Theologica*. And then you got a new catechism every year where you got a little bit more sophisticated. And then you went to college, finally, and you read the thing.

And Aquinas gives the sense of having a grasp of the whole. I took a course with Joseph Bobik at Notre Dame. He taught a couple of courses on the Five Ways—the proofs for the existence of God—and another course on *De Ente et Essentia*.

Bobik was a very kind man, a very nice guy. And he loved Aquinas. He would go to the blackboard and start working out some of Aquinas's arguments for us.

And he would sort of forget that we were there. He would go into a trance. He was so absorbed.

One day I said, Dr. Bobik, it seems like you think Aquinas has all the truth. And he said, "Yes!" And I thought, I didn't say it, but I thought, I don't believe that.

I do not think that is true. There is something missing. I took another course with Gerhart Niemeyer at Notre Dame.

He taught political theory in the Political Science Department. He was a really sharp guy, a very short guy, sensitive about his height. When you got in the elevator with him to go to his class on the fourteenth floor of the Notre Dame library, he would be standing there, and everybody would be taller than him, and he would just stand there and look down at his shoes.

But he would criticize Aquinas as opposed to Augustine. He said, Augustine's thought is rooted in experience. Aquinas is based on a conventional academic mode of argumentation, which ends up

separating you from experience. So the Church was saddled with that. You know the story of the end of Aquinas's career. I take that pretty seriously.

One morning while saying mass with his scribe, he just stopped, froze there at the altar... he had some kind of experience, stops his writing and says to his scribe that it was all straw. How do you do that unless you really think that it was all straw? He just stopped writing.

Just boom. Experience replaced a world of academic convention.

Peini Feng

Did you also happen to take a class with Eric Voegelin?

Father Barry Bercier

Yeah, I took a couple of classes.

Yeah, he was there at the time. He was a riot. He was really fun.

What was so much fun about his classes was that he would get so many people angry. One day a student raised his hand and said that what Voegelin was saying was all "value judgments." Voegelin stared at him in disbelief and then, clearly upset, and as if spitting out the words in disgust, shouted, "*Falue* judgments! *Falue* judgments! There is no such thing as *falue* judgments."

Students would be spouting off some kind of ideological objection to what he was saying. And he would just shoot them down mercilessly, utterly mercilessly. And then they would storm out of the classroom or out of the lecture hall.

Peini Feng

They would storm out of the classroom during the lecture?

Father Barry Bercier

Time and again, during the lecture. But he loved Assumption students.

Peini Feng

I have heard about that.

Father Barry Bercier

Yeah, this is true.

Peini Feng

Father Dennis Gallagher told me that three or four Assumption students went to Notre Dame and that Eric Voegelin was very impressed by several papers in the class.

He asked the students where they were from. The first said, "Assumption College." The second said, "Assumption College."

The third also said, "Assumption College." Father Fortin was very proud of that, according to Father Gallagher.

Father Barry Bercier

Because these were all Ernest's students.

Peini Feng

Yes.

Father Barry Bercier

And Voegelin could see something in them that was sympathetic to what he saw. He was a proud man. I think Voegelin was a proud man.

I think he thought he was pretty much smarter than everybody else in the universe. But it didn't prevent him from being a really interesting teacher.

Peini Feng

The published correspondence between Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin—which Father Fortin reviewed—is also interesting.

In that correspondence, Strauss told Voegelin that he was happy to discover more and more clearly that they stood on different ground. Their difference pleased him because it allowed him to learn from Voegelin.

Voegelin seems to stand fully on the Christian side, whereas Strauss stands on the other side, and yet they sustained this correspondence.

Father Fortin valued that conversation because it witnessed to the possibility of good intellectual exchange in the modern world. Another occasion on which he brought together scholars of many kinds was the Bradley Lecture Series. Do you remember it?

Father Barry Bercier

What was that?

Peini Feng

The Bradley Lecture Series.

Father Barry Bercier

Yeah, I was only at a few of those lectures.

But they were always terrific. They were always really insightful. And Ernest's presence at them displayed another aspect of Ernest's personality, which is he could be extremely charming and funny.

He had a wonderful wit. And he could mock himself. He was living in Brookline, and when I was also living in Brookline, the priests would take turns presiding at Mass for us guys who were in formation.

And I used to like Ernest's Mass best because he said interesting things during his homily. He did not have a dramatic manner of presenting a homily. He would just sit down and talk without moving.

His ideas were always wonderful. But he was not a liturgist. One day he came out for morning Mass and came to the altar, and he had forgotten to tie the cincture around his alb.

So the cincture was just hanging out of its loops sideways. And he put his stole on in a kind of crooked fashion. It wasn't on straight.

And he was just standing. He was often standing with his arms kind of limp beside him. And he started the Mass by saying, I'm not really a very religious person.

And that struck me so funny that I could not stop laughing, and I had to leave the Mass and sit outside and calm down. I still don't know exactly what I was laughing at, except that in a way he was saying something that was manifestly true, and yet not what most people would think.

I remember another time he took a trip to India. And when he came back, he did a video presentation at Assumption College for us students. And in one of the pictures, he had to dress up, I think, as a Sikh in order to get to a Sikh temple. And again, he was standing there the way he would stand, with this Sikh outfit on, which failed so entirely as a disguise because his personality remained utterly undisguised.

They had another picture of a Bengal tiger. It was very difficult to see because branches and plants partly covered the tiger. Ernest just said, "Doing what it did every morning..."

The tiger was taking a crap. That was the picture he displayed. Yeah, he could be very funny.

And also, really, I'm kind of wandering around now, but I left the Assumptionists at one point. I didn't quite get along with the novice master. I took off and didn't really know what to do with my life.

I went back to Florida, where my family lived, and spent a year working as a lifeguard on the beach. But I wanted to go back to school, so I saved all my money and decided to go to BC. I came up here looking for a place to live, but the rents were sky-high. I was riding around town on a bicycle, going from place to place that advertised rents in the newspaper. Filthy rat holes were too expensive for me. I was really disappointed because I had no place to go. I was standing on my bike, ready to give up, and waiting for the light to change at Cleveland Circle.

And this red Volkswagen pulled up alongside me. It was Ernest.

And he said, “Barrio”—he used to call me Barrio—“where are you going? What are you doing?” And I said, “I am wandering around looking for a place to stay, and there is nothing I can afford.”

He said, “Live with us!” And that was the beginning of what became a residency program that lasted until last year.

Peini Feng

Wow.

Father Barry Bercier

Yeah. So I moved in and became breakfast cook for the Assumptionists and then eventually returned to the community.

Peini Feng

That is very good.

Father Barry Bercier

But he was capable of that sort of thing. He was a free guy. He was not bound by unnecessary conventions.

Peini Feng

I see.

Father Barry Bercier

But he did not suffer fools, as people say. If somebody was a jackass, he did not approve—.

Peini Feng

As your own thinking evolved from a more Greek mode toward a more Jerusalem-centered mode, did your understanding of Father Fortin change?

Father Barry Bercier

Well, I just came to appreciate him more and more. I try to do some writing every day, and it is all about questions that he raised.

This is now many years later. Those are still the questions that occupy my most serious thoughts when I get down to doing some serious work. Yeah, I miss him.

He was a wonderful presence.

Peini Feng

Again and again, Father Fortin’s students and friends say that the questions he raised inspired them to keep thinking. I have also heard another view: that the tension between Athens and Jerusalem can be destructive because it keeps asking questions without giving answers.

On that view, the question always remains open to further inquiry, producing continuous disruption.

Father Barry Bercier

I do not see it that way.

The questions that he raised concern things like the crisis of modernity—real crises with real consequences. For me, I could see it in religious life. I could see it in the classroom.

I taught for many years, and I could see the decline in the quality of the majority of the students who were coming to school, people who were not interested in asking any questions at all. And you could see if this is what universities are turning out, democracy cannot survive. The crisis becomes something you feel when you just walk down the street.

You know that this is real, and you know that it requires people to think about it clearly. My situation now, living in the Arctic with the Inuit people: they had a way of life that was completely demolished by the advent of Canada into their world. They are in a terribly degenerate condition.

And I say to myself, this too is an example of the crisis of modernity. We don't know how to deal with people. Canada has no clue on how it could respond to the problems of the Inuit.

The Canadian government is a zero when it comes to raising these kinds of questions. There is nothing there. All they have is sociology, psychology, and economics, and it just does not do the trick at all.

So it is not as though Ernest's questions are fruitless questions. They are the most urgent questions.

Peini Feng

Yes, that is a very good answer. I think that point is borne out by Father Fortin's legacy.

It is precisely because these questions are real and urgent that people like me continue to see them as genuine questions and Father Fortin's contributions as genuine contributions.

As you know, Father Fortin was one of the founders of the Perspectives Program at Boston College, a Great Books program.

Father Barry Bercier

Yeah.

Peini Feng

At Assumption College, he also helped establish the Foundations Program, later known as the Fortin and Gonthier Foundations of Western Civilization Program. At Boston College, too, we remain drawn to his legacy. These programs help us see the value of asking the right, urgent questions.

Even if Father Fortin's questions were not appreciated immediately, a real question can be recognized when the crisis it concerns becomes more visible. That reminds me of something you wrote when reflecting on Father Fortin.

You wrote that Father Fortin's questions draw us inward to our own souls and to our call to live well as human beings, as members of the People of God, and as men and women humble enough to recognize their limits—and therefore to know, as Fortin did so well, how to laugh. Thank you for that article; I especially appreciate the part about Father Fortin's laughter.

You were also a teacher and have reflected on university education. As a teacher and a student of the university, how do you understand Father Fortin as a teacher?

Father Barry Bercier

Well, he was a really good teacher.

And he was deeply concerned about education at Assumption College. I know that he did a lot at BC, but my connection with BC was not as intimate or strong as my connection with Assumption College. Ernest was concerned about what was happening there.

He knew that there was something extremely valuable about the classical kind of education that Assumption used to give, and he could see that it was just dissolving. I remember one day, it's kind of a useless story, but I remember one day Assumption was having a beer party. Back in the old days, they had official drinking occasions.

The idea was to teach us how to drink. And I went to the party, and it was really kind of gross. People were drunk, and Ernest was there looking at this bad behavior.

And I came up to him, and I do not know what I said, but he said to me, "This place is going to the dogs." And I went back to my room, put my head down on the desk, and wept. Because it was so true.

Here was something that was so beautiful. And it was just going down the drain. And what can you do?

I mean, it is a civilizational process. And the institutions that control or direct the civilization are not helpful. So if you get something like the Foundations Program or the Great Books Program, it's wonderful, but it's very small.

It is not recognized by the public world, so to speak. So you end up feeling like the civilization is going to be going where it's going. You can't stop it.

But you can stay alive in the midst of it, and maybe plant a few seeds and a few people in the midst of it to come out on the other side. But you don't feel like you can reverse the flood. I don't feel like I can reverse the flood.

There is a little flood up in the Arctic where I am living, and the life of the Inuit is demolished. So I am the pastor of the church up there. There is a little bit of good that you can do.

You can be a light on in a place where the lights are all off. But it's very little. But this is another place where the situation of Israel is unique.

Because the Israelis know that they stand for something that has a kind of enduring truth. And they are willing to put their lives on the line to defend it. And they aren't just a private person here or there, but they are a nation, visible, enduring and significant before the whole world.

And there's this one little fact...maybe not so little...: All the Western nations are failing to reproduce themselves. They don't have enough kids. But Israel does. Israel is the only Western nation that does not have that problem. I just find that to be a striking fact. It says, here, they're alive. They choose life.

Peini Feng

That makes me think of Strauss's claim that the tension between Athens and Jerusalem is one reason Western civilization flourished. Father Fortin seems to have taken that account seriously.

Father Barry Bercier

I think this is just the truth. But the Athens part has become modern science—and what the humanities have become in universities these days.

So the reasonable part has gone away. And the Jerusalem part has gone away because the Church has not been able to maintain itself. I experienced that when I was in—

I spent a couple of years... I mentioned I went up to Quebec. And I worked in this little parish that hadn't had a priest for 11 years.

A little Canuck, French-Canadian parish in the middle of an endless forest. And the people there were good, old-fashioned French-Canadians.

Catholics. They had built this church. They invested money in two gigantic brass bells in the church tower.

They were the salt of the earth sort of people. After a couple of years there, I decided to return to civilization. And after 5 or 10 years, I decided to go back and see this village because it really had become like a dream in my mind. I had to see if it really was as I had remembered it.

So I went back. And what? The church had been "suppressed," closed by the diocese, which could no longer afford to keep the church up. The Catholic people in the town still took care of the interior of the church. But it had some structural problems, such that they had to remove the brass bells,

bells which bore the names of all the people who had donated to have them made. The bells were sitting in the mud in front of the church.

The parish that had been able to build this thing and make those bells, one generation later could no longer keep them out of the mud. The tone of the town had changed really seriously. Many of the former Catholics had died out. New people in town were just mill workers interested in money and booze and going home.

For me it was a little experience of the Church's incapacity to deal with things—to deal with the crisis. From the point of view of science and from the point of view of religion, theology, or Jerusalem, the West is not defending itself on either side.

Peini Feng

It seems to me that this is true. In the Perspectives Program today, we read the great books of Athens and Jerusalem. At an earlier time, students might have preferred Athens or Jerusalem, but reading these books together can build a bridge and foster a healthy conversation between the two traditions.

The problem at Boston College today seems different. Students often do not care enough about reason to appreciate its works, and they do not care enough about faith to appreciate the writings of theologians.

That problem arises even before students can appreciate the tension between Athens and Jerusalem. One mission of the Ernest Fortin Society is to reintroduce students to reason and revelation so that they can appreciate the conversation between them. We invite professors to explain why particular books and fields of research have fascinated them throughout their lives.

There is real passion, fire, and spirit in those choices. Students encounter professors in the classroom, so hearing someone explain how a life has been shaped by these questions and traditions can revive an awareness of their goodness. It introduces students to the persons before it introduces them to the books.

From our conversation and your experience, I see the power of personhood. You had something like a lightning experience when you were invited into the synagogue at the Western Wall and prayed there. That experience led you to discover Jerusalem's tradition and its concern for personhood and human dignity. From there, you recognized our world's neglect of personhood.

In my reading of the tension between Athens and Jerusalem, personhood is also where the two traditions meet. We have said why Jerusalem emphasizes personhood, but Athens does as well.

Plato's *Republic* is not about modern technology; it concerns the education of the soul. One cannot recognize the good without understanding personhood and human nature. The city or regime becomes a way of understanding human nature in larger letters, while the soul presents it in smaller letters.

Likewise, in the *Phaedrus*, the human soul is at the center of philosophy: a certain love in the soul makes the philosopher who he is. In the *Laws*, too, legislation is an art of recognizing the kinds of souls in a city and making laws appropriate to them.

The art of legislation is therefore also an art concerning the soul and personhood. In my reading, Father Fortin devoted his life to the question of the human soul, which was also the topic of his dissertation. His emphasis on the soul seems to be ground he shared with Allan Bloom.

The same is true of Leo Strauss. His doubts about messianism, and about what kind of salvation humanity or the human soul needs, raise the possibility that different kinds of souls may need different kinds of salvation and therefore may not be saved by a single Messiah. These questions center on the human soul, human dignity, and personhood. In your life, writing, and thought, the question of personhood continually reveals itself.

Father Fortin's questions seem to have been among the starting points from which you continued to explore personhood. That is my reflection on our conversation. Although we have wandered among many subjects, I believe the soul connects them and helps us appreciate Father Fortin's legacy.

Father Barry Bercier

I do not want to exaggerate too much my turning away from the Greek thinkers, because the capacity to think clearly depends so much on what they have done—on Socrates's attempt to purify the language of the Athenians. Ernest's questions are asked in a sort of Greek way.

And the thing about Greek thought, or Athens, is that it prevents the Jerusalem side from becoming merely fideistic. It is a defect of religious people to become so certain and resolved in their assessment of things. It kills faith.

What I am saying is that preserving the Athens part is completely necessary, along with the Jerusalem part. The two together make for a kind of vitality that is the best of Western civilization.

Peini Feng

It seems to me that clear questions help us set aside accidental questions and discover essential ones.

Those essential questions allow us to perceive personhood and its mystery and wonder. Clear questions can help us reach that wonder. Those are all the questions I have for today.

Is there anything more you would like to add?

Father Barry Bercier

No, just to make a quick remark on Ernest's writing. His writing is just so clear and easy.

I wish I could write like he writes. I fall into convoluted sentences. It's a real struggle.

But Ernest wrote with a kind of lucidity and grace that was just remarkable.

Peini Feng

That is my experience of reading his books. I feel as though I can hear him speaking, even though I never met him.

His writing seems to convey his personality. Thank you very much for your time.

Father Barry Bercier

Well, thank you.

I think you are doing a good thing here by trying to keep his spirit active at BC.

Peini Feng

"The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life." I will end the recording here.