

Interview with Father Dennis Gallagher

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

Interviewed by Peini Feng and Elliott Jones

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Editorial note: This transcript has been lightly edited for punctuation, capitalization, repetition, and readability while preserving the substance and character of the speaker's remarks. The recording itself is not published; this transcript is prepared for the Ernest Fortin Society's public archive.



Peini Feng

I hope you can hear us. It should be good enough. It is very nice to meet you. To begin, how did you know Father Fortin? Were you a student at Assumption College?

Father Dennis Gallagher

Yes, I met Father Fortin on the very first day I stepped onto the campus, in September 1965, as a freshman—a first-year student. I did not know who he was at the time, of course, but he happened to be standing in the administration building you saw as you came in, called La Maison Française. For some reason, there must have been some kind of orientation program there when we arrived, and Father Fortin was there. When I looked back later, I could say that the first person I saw when I came to campus was the one who had the most profound effect on my life afterward. That was interesting.

Just as a side note, Father Barry Bercier, whom I mentioned a moment ago, tells a story of having a similar experience when he arrived on campus. I do not remember Father Fortin giving a talk at that event—he probably did; I just do not remember it—but Father Bercier remembers him saying something that Barry found head-scratching at the time. He said, “The purpose of your education is not for you to get a job.” He wanted to throw that out to the students who were coming in. Instead, he said, “The purpose of your education is to make you happy—to make you happy.” That is likely a paraphrase, but it was along those lines.

That is where I met him. Of course, I took some courses with him during my time here. Later, after completing a master's program in theology with the Jesuits in Cambridge, I was accepted into the Ph.D. program at Boston College, which at that time was a joint program with Andover Newton Theological School. I unfortunately never quite finished it, but I had Father Fortin as a teacher both as an undergraduate and as a graduate student. The courses here were largely required, whereas the Boston College courses were ones I chose to take with him. And, of course, he was a brother to us—a member of our religious community. I lived with him for many years; in one of our houses in Brookline, he actually lived right next door to me.

Elliott Jones

Could you speak more about that aspect of Father Fortin—about him as a priest and brother, someone with whom you lived and celebrated Mass—as distinct from Father Fortin as a teacher, professor, and theologian?

Father Dennis Gallagher

Yes, that question often arises because most people encountered him as a scholar and teacher. I would say this: we belong to a religious community, which is somewhat different from being a diocesan priest. As members of a religious community, we follow a daily schedule of morning prayer, evening prayer, and daily Mass. One thing I would say about Ernest is that he was quite faithful to those practices.

For anyone who might have doubts about what he believed, at least in terms of practice, one image comes to mind. In Brookline, we had two houses across the street from one another, and he lived across the street from me. A familiar sight was Ernest walking across the street while reading his breviary. I was actually a little concerned for him. But that meant he was faithful: we are supposed to say not only morning and evening prayer but the rest of the breviary as well, and I think he was faithful to all of it.

We also knew him as a preacher and homilist at Mass, and he was entirely himself there. As a teacher, I never found anyone to whom I was so attentive. It was one of those experiences in which you are unaware of anything else happening except what he is doing in the classroom.

As a homilist, he had something of the same quality. Sometimes you could tell that he had not labored over preparing a homily, but he was so familiar with Scripture and the Church Fathers that, if it was the feast of a saint, he could probably say something pertinent about the saint being celebrated that day. I always looked forward to seeing him on the schedule. Sometimes people ask, “How can he be a Straussian and a priest?” But he did it. I think he did it.¹

Peini Feng

I think that is Father Fortin’s most impressive quality, and it is how we first discovered him. I initially knew him through his essays on Augustine and Thomas Aquinas in the *History of Political Philosophy*, edited by Leo Strauss, but I did not know that he was a priest. Once I learned that he was both a priest and a Straussian—and that there had been controversy at Boston College about how one could be both—we became more interested in him and in how he embodied that possibility.

It seems to me that he embodied the problem of Athens and Jerusalem. He did not ignore the tensions between them; he was very clear about those tensions. But neither did he ignore the possibility that Athens and Jerusalem might work together in the pursuit of the good and, as you said at the beginning, in the pursuit of happiness as the aim of education.

I have heard more than once—from Professor Marc LePain and Father John Franck—that they met Father Fortin on their first day at Assumption College and continued taking classes with him afterward. They have also described having dinner with him, his serving as a kind of spiritual adviser in the dormitory, and his playing tennis with them. The intimacy he created with students at Assumption seems distinctive and not necessarily something students experienced after he went to Boston College.

I am therefore very curious about how Father Fortin’s example illuminated his students, particularly in your own life as his undergraduate student at Assumption College.

Father Dennis Gallagher

One thing that stands out is that he really was a model for a life of study. Now that you are on campus, I can tell you where his room was—at least when I was in school. It was in the second dormitory, Desautels Hall, though in those days I do not think it had been named yet; we called it B-Dorm. He was the proctor or monitor there. Priests often lived on the floor with students.

What was striking was that you could pass the window at any time of night and see him leaning over his desk, studying. You could see into what was really his room, with a little office next to the bedroom. I thought that was a fine example.

¹ After reviewing the transcript, Father Gallagher added that Father Fortin read Romano Guardini’s *The Lord* each Lent as an annual spiritual exercise.

I was not privy to this myself—the stories came from earlier students—but he could also be a cheerleader at pep rallies. We held pep rallies only before big games. When we played Holy Cross, across town, we were heavy underdogs, but he would call the Holy Cross players “the uncircumcised Philistines.” Apparently, it was a lot of fun to be with him at pep rallies.

Those rallies had stopped by the time I arrived, so that was all passed on to me. But we saw him playing tennis and doing things outside his academic life as well. I did not have him as a spiritual adviser. I think John Franck did because he was a seminarian at the time; I was not a seminarian here, just an undergraduate.

If I may, one experience I had with him stands out. At the end of my sophomore year, I screwed up my courage to knock on the door of the room I just described. I think I had taken his history of political philosophy course, which was largely a study of Plato’s *Republic*; we may have spent almost a whole semester on it. I asked whether he could suggest some summer reading. He did. I do not remember all of it, but I remember that he recommended a book by Walter Lippmann. Does that name mean anything to you?

Peini Feng

Oh, yes. I know him—the journalist.

Father Dennis Gallagher

Walter Lippmann, the journalist. I think the book was called *The Public Philosophy*. He also recommended a book by Carl Schmitt, the German political philosopher, called, I think, *State and Society*.

Then he recommended a story by Franz Kafka—*The Metamorphosis*, as I recall. There was something else, but I cannot remember the fourth item. Anyway, I spent my summer reading those books.

Elliott Jones

That is wonderful. Do you have any other anecdotes or examples that describe Father Fortin’s relationship with his students—whether as a professor or priest? Would you describe those relationships more as mentorships or friendships? It is rare for undergraduates today to find a professor who can truly be a mentor, and I think many such relationships between professors and students have been lost.

Father Dennis Gallagher

I do think he was quite willing to mentor students. Speaking for myself as an undergraduate—and I suspect this was not so different for many others—he was held in such high regard that you felt a little intimidated by him. It was not that he imposed himself on you in any way; I think he had a deep humility. Still, it was somewhat formidable to approach him because you felt that you had to show up as your best self. That is not a bad thing.

When he went to Boston College, he had doctoral students whom he could mentor. Something else came to light at his funeral and in the events leading up to it. I think I was a regional superior when he died, and John was the provincial and gave the homily. People contacted us to ask about the funeral or express their feelings, and I was struck by the surprising diversity of those who were concerned about Ernest.

This touches on your question about his being a spiritual as well as an educational mentor. I knew some of these people but would not have associated them with Ernest, yet they had benefited greatly from some kind of counseling or spiritual counseling with him. I am speaking in the third person because I did not have that relationship with him myself, but I saw that others did. I remember realizing that I had not known how warmly some of them felt toward Ernest.

Peini Feng

It is very impressive to see Father Fortin as a spiritual adviser. That quality reveals itself both in the range of people with whom he formed deep connections and in his ability to recommend readings. To

recommend the right readings, a teacher must understand something about a student's soul—what that student needs and desires.

Father Dennis Gallagher

Yes, that is true.

Peini Feng

Father John Franck mentioned that as well. As a spiritual adviser, Father Fortin was extremely good at recommending what students should read. Father Franck also said that Father Fortin was the first non-Jesuit chair of Boston College's Theology Department, partly because he could converse and cooperate with people across very different fields of scholarship. Father Fortin was also impressive as an institution builder.

He organized the famous Bradley Lecture Series at Boston College, which brought a diverse group of great scholars to campus. His ability to know people at the Bradley Foundation and persuade them to support the series was itself very impressive.

Father Dennis Gallagher

Yes, the Friday-afternoon Bradley Lectures were quite an institution at Boston College for many years.

Peini Feng

Roderick Williams, another of Father Fortin's students at Boston College, also spoke about feeling some fear in approaching him because one had to appear at one's best. He interpreted this to mean that the best teachers invite you to become your best self: you want to show up at your best when speaking with them.

In that sense, this seems to be another example of Father Fortin's influence as an educator.

Father Dennis Gallagher

No, I think that is very true. To speak about the surprising diversity of his contacts with students and the kinds of students he influenced: as you said, one reason he may have become chair of the department was that he could speak with people of very different kinds.

One striking example was his fairly close friendship with—does the name Richard McBrien mean anything to you? Father Richard McBrien taught at Boston College for some time and then went to Notre Dame. He was a diocesan priest and wrote the two-volume work *Catholicism*.

Theologically, he was quite far removed from Father Fortin. Yet they would go out to dinner together. Their friendship may have been a little like the friendship between Justice Scalia and—

Elliott Jones

Ginsburg, I think.

Father Dennis Gallagher

Ginsburg, yes.

Peini Feng

It is also impressive that Father Fortin remained accessible to students. At Boston College, where he could have taught only doctoral and other graduate courses, he insisted on also teaching undergraduates in the Perspectives Program. In that way, he kept one foot in advanced research with graduate students and another on the foundational ground where undergraduates begin.

He was therefore both humble and intelligent.

Elliott Jones

There was also the clothing he wore.

Peini Feng

Oh, the clothing.

Elliott Jones

From what we have heard, he wore tennis shoes with either a sport jacket or perhaps no sport jacket at all.

Peini Feng

Yes.

Elliott Jones

Especially at Boston College, where the Assumptionist religious habit would have been distinctive.

Father Dennis Gallagher

We actually have a kind of adapted habit, basically a half-length black habit. I am not sure when that was introduced; I do not think it was around when he was here.

He usually wore a sport jacket and did not often wear clericals, though sometimes he did. I can tell you a story about that in a moment. His dress was quite informal—nothing showy by any means—and he did not stand on any kind of authority in that respect.

Peini Feng

Father Paul McNellis at Boston College told us that Allan Bloom dressed to impress, while Father Fortin dressed for comfort.

Father Dennis Gallagher

I think that is true, yes.

Peini Feng

What is the story about the jacket—or about the collar?

Father Dennis Gallagher

It goes back to the friendship with McBrien. They were having dinner one night at a nice French restaurant in Boston. I do not know why they were both wearing their collars, but they were. Perhaps there had been an earlier event for which they had to wear them; McBrien would normally have worn his anyway.

Midway through the meal, the waitress came over and said, “There is a gentleman over there who wants to pick up your tab—to pay for your meal.” It turned out to be Ted Williams. You may not know the history of baseball in Boston, but he is the most iconic baseball player in the history of the Red Sox. He also had a reputation for being something of a curmudgeon, especially with the press, though he had been retired for some time.

After the meal, Ernest and McBrien went over to thank him for picking up a large tab at a French restaurant. Williams said, “I am not at an age when there are very many pleasures left to me in life. Please do not deprive me of the pleasure of paying for your meal.”

I do not know whether Father Fortin referred to that story in writing or perhaps in a talk or homily, but it was certainly part of the conversation at our dinner table. For him, it signified, in a way, the Bible’s approach to ethics. What matters is the good the giver is able to give, rather than beginning with the victim or recipient. The starting point is: what good can we do? He used the story as an example of that.

Peini Feng

It seems to me that the same principle applied to Father Fortin himself. He was certainly a giver of the good.

Father Dennis Gallagher

Yes, yes, yes.

Peini Feng

That also seems to have been his way of pursuing the good life and happiness: giving the good through education and teaching others how to pursue it.

Father Dennis Gallagher

Have you seen the piece I wrote about Ernest? It is in a little blue volume; I will get it for you. At the end, I quoted Thomas Aquinas, who says that there is no way to compensate a great teacher fully because what the teacher gives is beyond all capacity—we would call it priceless now.

I think that is true. It describes the gratitude we have for what Father Fortin gave us.

Peini Feng

I see.

Father Dennis Gallagher

Yes.

Peini Feng

Father Fortin was a giver of the good not only because he was a good teacher himself, but also because he brought many other good teachers to Boston College through the Bradley Foundation and the Bradley Lecture Series. What do you remember about the Bradley Lectures and what they were like at the time?

Father Dennis Gallagher

I would say a couple of things. One, which I think others have noted, is that he had a gift for introducing speakers.

Elliott Jones

Oh, yes.

Father Dennis Gallagher

I think Harvey Mansfield mentioned that gift and spoke about a time when Ernest introduced him. I suppose it must have been a Bradley Lecture, though perhaps he also saw him at another Bradley event.

I saw it myself. Father Fortin was humorous, but also, in his own way, very deep. His introductions showed a deep knowledge of the person and scholar he was presenting. Another curious thing was that he sometimes gave the appearance of falling asleep during the lectures.

Peini Feng

I have heard about that as well.

Father Dennis Gallagher

But then he gave the lie to that appearance because, after the lecture, he would ask the speaker the most penetrating question. So, if he was sleeping, it was fruitful sleep.

Peini Feng

Another person mentioned that Father Fortin would receive the paper beforehand so that he could prepare a response.

Father Dennis Gallagher

Maybe that was it. Yes, that makes sense.

Peini Feng

So perhaps he did fall asleep—but it was fruitful sleep. Do you remember the atmosphere of the Bradley Lectures?

I have heard that students from across departments would attend.

Father Dennis Gallagher

I am sorry; I missed the beginning of that.

Peini Feng

The atmosphere of the Bradley Lectures.

Father Dennis Gallagher

My sense is that people gave the lectures very close attention. The clearest proof of their attractiveness was the number of people who came; the Bradley Lectures drew a significant audience.

There was always a reception and dinner afterward. The reception was fairly leisurely—about an hour—and people would mingle over drinks before going to dinner. It was all organized by—now I am going to forget her name. Maybe she is still there. Shirley Gee?

Peini Feng

Shirley Gee.

Father Dennis Gallagher

Shirley Gee, my gosh. She was such a—

Peini Feng

A legendary figure, yes.

Father Dennis Gallagher

Such a figure. Is she still there?

Peini Feng

She is still here.

Father Dennis Gallagher

Oh, my gosh. She organized all of the logistics.

Elliott Jones

Yes, yes.

Father Dennis Gallagher

My memory is failing me about specific speakers. I think Bloom came, and there were people who came from different standpoints.

Elliott Jones

In earlier interviews, we have explored Father Fortin's role in forming the Perspectives Program at Boston College. Could you say more about how he directly or indirectly influenced what became the Core Texts and Enduring Questions Program here? We also saw it referred to at one point—correct me if I am wrong—as the Fortin and Gonthier Program.

Father Dennis Gallagher

Here, yes. It was actually called the Foundations Program—the Fortin and Gonthier Foundations Program. That was clearly a testimony to the effect both teachers, Father Fortin and Father Denys Gonthier, had on students, some of whom later returned as professors.

For the most part, the founders and first teachers in that Foundations Program had studied under both Father Fortin and Father Gonthier.

The Foundations Program—yes, that is right. The name was later changed to Core Texts and Enduring Questions, and there is now a minor in the program, I think.

It is really the best of what we can offer here. Students continue to benefit greatly from their exposure to it. I am not quite up to date on this, but I think students could earn a certificate before it became a minor, and there has been some movement to make it a major. They do really great work.

Peini Feng

Could you say a little more about how the Core Texts program has helped students?

Father Dennis Gallagher

One always tends to project onto others what one has experienced oneself, but I expect students today experience something like the effect this education had on me. It raises so many fundamental questions that one may not previously have had an opportunity to consider thoughtfully, and it asks one to consider alternatives.

When I think back on my education here and ask whether there is one idea that has shaped my thinking and my life since then, I would say the notion of the regime. Each regime offers an answer to the question of the good life; somehow, it expresses what the good life is. That was a mind-blowing idea for me: that one could step back from all the forces influencing one's particular culture and see that there are alternative answers to the question of the good life.

That is one example of how I think the program helps students. The distinction between the ancients and the moderns was another fundamental and helpful way for me to think about many things. It was especially helpful as a person of faith: it allowed me to see the tensions, or even oppositions, between the practice of one's faith and life in a regime that often proposes a very different way of living.

Peini Feng

Speaking of the regime, you mentioned taking Father Fortin's history of political philosophy course and reading Plato's *Republic*, which concerns the regime and the good. Could you tell us more about that class?

Father Dennis Gallagher

It is hard for me to remember; that was 1966, a long time ago. What stands out is that Father Fortin helped us understand that the *Republic* was really about education. It was not directly about the soul in the way some of Plato's works are, but it nevertheless gave a great deal of attention to the soul—to its tripartite dimensions and their relation to education. That is how I remember it.

Peini Feng

I see.

Elliott Jones

You had the distinctive privilege of studying with Father Fortin both as an undergraduate here at Assumption and as a graduate student at Boston College. Do you remember how the classroom differed between the two institutions—the students, the ideas, or the way Father Fortin taught?

Father Dennis Gallagher

I really think the similarities were more striking than the differences. I do not remember much difference, which is probably a testament to his capacity as a teacher. It is fair to say that the students here may have been somewhat less gifted or less inclined to study than some—though not all—of the students at Boston College, where he taught more graduate courses.

The clientele, so to speak, was different in that respect. But his ability as a teacher meant that he could bring a clarity accessible even to less gifted students.

Peini Feng

Yes.

Father Dennis Gallagher

I know there were even alumni here who did not quite warm to Ernest; that will always be the case. He was fairly demanding and expected the most from you. But there was no one I ever had who was as good a teacher as he was.

Peini Feng

In our interview with Mary Ann Glendon, she also mentioned Father Fortin's gift for bringing ideas down to earth. She said that he was very good at explaining theories through detective and mystery novels.

Elliott Jones

Yes, yes.

Peini Feng

Professor Michael Foley also spoke at length about Father Fortin's use of detectives in his course *Natural Law and Natural Right*. Do you remember any anecdotes about that?

Father Dennis Gallagher

I do not remember many specifics, but you are right. To put some flesh on my previous answer, that is how he bridged the gap between the immensity of his learning and the students before him. He had a popular touch, including the mysteries.

I do not know whether anyone has mentioned the course we had on aesthetics. One section was on comedy, and it was memorable because he would occasionally try to tell a joke. He found the joke so funny himself that he could not quite reach the end; he was laughing too much. We were probably laughing harder at his laughter than we would have at the joke itself.

Peini Feng

That shows a wonderful nature. Professor Marc LePain told us that, when he was a student at Assumption College, the students' aim was to make Father Fortin laugh—and that Father Fortin would sometimes laugh uncontrollably.

Father Dennis Gallagher

Yes, that is true. He laughed so much and so hard that he could not finish the joke.

Peini Feng

You also mentioned that, at Boston College, people wondered how Father Fortin could be a Straussian—or so intelligent—while remaining a priest, whereas students at Assumption College never questioned his faith. In an article, Professor Frederick Lawrence wrote that Father Fortin wanted to teach the Great Books with such integrity that people would wonder why he remained a priest; he considered that an important Christian witness in an age of diaspora.

What was the atmosphere at Boston College at that time? Did people actually doubt Father Fortin's priesthood or faith? We have also heard that there were disagreements within the Theology Department about reform in the Church and about different interpretations of Vatican II, including Father Fortin's own understanding.

Father Dennis Gallagher

Those differences were very real and quite evident. They usually manifested themselves most broadly in an attitude toward modernity—what Ernest would call an uncritical absorption of modernity.

Father Fortin did not make too many friends with the pieces he wrote on the American bishops' pastoral letters—one on war and peace, and what was the other one? He gently took the bishops to task for accepting modern terminology about rights and for not fully understanding the just-war tradition. At the time, many at Boston College and in the Church at large held those documents up as prophetic statements addressing real issues. He was more concerned that they were not truly faithful to the tradition.

That is one example of how he was both humble and courageous. He was going to say what he understood.

Peini Feng

Sometimes one must be courageous to be a giver of the good.

Father Dennis Gallagher

Yes.

Peini Feng

That also reminds me of our interview with Father John Franck. He said that one reason Father Fortin wanted to move to Boston College was to be challenged by colleagues and students so that he could test his understanding.

In that sense, Father Fortin sought out those disagreements.

Father Dennis Gallagher

Yes, I think so. To put it colloquially, I think he wanted to be a little more big-time: to be in the presence of a larger number of scholars with whom he could interact, and to accompany doctoral students, which he could not do here. After a while, Assumption became a little too small for him.

As for the difference between Boston College and here, it was not simply that Assumption students did not think about whether he could be both a priest and a teacher. They saw him as a priest here. They saw him walking to the dining hall with the other priests, and they saw him in the dining hall.

I think I read in one of the interviews a story about a food fight that had broken out in the dining hall and was getting out of hand—as food fights can. They asked the priest in charge of discipline to come in and say something, but it had no effect. Ernest was, I think, the third person they asked to bring out.

When they brought him out, he did not even have to say anything. The students simply stopped in their tracks. He certainly had a particular stature here.

Peini Feng

There was power in his mere presence.

Father Dennis Gallagher

You would see him at church and hear him preach. You would see him walking to the dining hall with the community. You would see him praying.

Boston College students would not have seen those things; they saw only what he taught in the classroom. That might account for some of the difference.

Peini Feng

I also have a question about what happened after Father Fortin's death: the Ernest Fortin Memorial Foundation. Father John Franck was its first president.

I believe you were the second?

Father Dennis Gallagher

Yes, I was the second president. As long as the foundation lasted, it was very helpful, mostly to graduate students. The majority were involved in language-study programs required for their doctoral work. It was a fairly modest sum—perhaps \$1,500 for each of about twenty students per summer, as I remember—to help with language study, though sometimes it supported something else.

Over time, we developed two other things. One was an annual lecture funded by the foundation, alternating between Assumption and Boston College.

There were also occasional projects connected to the kind of work Ernest was doing that received somewhat larger sums. I think Michael Foley benefited from such funding at one point—not huge amounts, but more substantial support.

The foundation's board would meet twice a year, I think. Toward the end, it met only once a year, principally to approve student stipends and arrange the lecture. It was a great way to continue his legacy. Daniel J. Mahoney was on the foundation toward the end.

We also had friends and colleagues of Ernest from Boston College. Ed Lev had left the board before I joined; he was Mary Ann Glendon's husband. Robert Faulkner, a Boston College political science professor, was there, as was Paul McNellis.

Peini Feng

You mentioned that there was an annual lecture.

Martha Martini told us that the last lecture was held at Assumption University and featured Professor Timothy Burns.

Father Dennis Gallagher

Professor Burns, by the way, would also be someone you might want to interview.

Peini Feng

I have already interviewed him.

Father Dennis Gallagher

You have already spoken with him?

Peini Feng

Yes. The annual lecture alternated between Assumption University and Boston College. How did you choose the topic and the invited lecturers? What considerations guided those decisions?

Father Dennis Gallagher

I am not sure I have a clear recollection of that process. Martha Martini was very much in the mix. The Assumptionist presence had to be at the top.

Peini Feng

I see.

Father Dennis Gallagher

But Martha was really the one who ran it, perhaps consulting with one or another of us over the years. There was no formal process that I know of, at least.

Peini Feng

I see.

Father Dennis Gallagher

May I mention one other anecdote?

Peini Feng

Please—more.

Father Dennis Gallagher

There was one night—Ernest very rarely spoke about himself, about things he was dealing with or suffering from. Whenever he said something like that, you stood up and took notice.

A couple of us had returned late from class, I think, and were eating separately from the larger community in a little kitchenette in the Brookline house. In the middle of the meal, Ernest said, “You know, it is really, really difficult to find balance in your life.” He was probably in his early sixties.

When you hold someone in such high esteem and he makes an admission like that—without detail, simply saying that it is not easy to find balance in one’s life—it stays with you. He was speaking about himself without saying anything more. I found it quite comforting in a way. I think it was part of his humility that he could simply say that.

Peini Feng

That quality reveals itself even in the examples you mentioned, such as his reading the breviary while crossing the street. I have heard similar stories from other interviewees. Martha Martini recalled that she and Father Fortin were walking together when he simply stopped to think.

Elliott Jones

He stopped in the middle of the road.

Peini Feng

Martha Martini was concerned because standing in the middle of the road was dangerous, so she nudged him to keep walking.

Father Paul McNellis described a similar incident. Late one night in Chicago, after they had eaten together, Father Fortin suddenly stood still and told Father McNellis that he had understood how Augustine retained a deep respect for Rome.

Father Dennis Gallagher

Respect for what? I am sorry?

Peini Feng

For Rome.

Father Dennis Gallagher

Oh, yes.

Peini Feng

Father McNellis was concerned because it was late at night on a Chicago street, which implied some danger if they stood still too long. But there is a balance between safety and pure contemplation.

Father Dennis Gallagher

Yes, yes.

Peini Feng

It is very hard to maintain that balance.

Father Dennis Gallagher

May I mention a couple of liturgical things?

Peini Feng

Oh, yes.

Father Dennis Gallagher

He did not stand much on formality. Three things come to mind. First, sometimes he would come out of the sacristy to say Mass looking all askew. His stole would be halfway down; he needed someone to take care of him in that regard. Again, he was not too concerned about the presentation he was making.

Second, in the community we would be together for Mass. Some of us had just been ordained and were giving our first homilies, and having him listen was intimidating. One day, I think I was giving the homily, when he reached into his sport jacket, pulled out a little pad of paper, and began writing something down while I preached.

It turned out that he left the note behind by mistake in the sacristy. What he had written was, "Pick up dry cleaning at such-and-such a time."

Elliott Jones

Oh, gosh.

Peini Feng

That was clearly relevant to your preaching.

Father Dennis Gallagher

Then there were other moments. I remember a Holy Thursday when he was assigned to give the homily at Mass. We often talked about Saint Augustine, but this time—on Holy Thursday, and I had no idea what the connection was—he reminded us that Saint Augustine had hemorrhoids.

Elliott Jones

I had no idea.

Father Dennis Gallagher

Yes—where did that come from?

Peini Feng

Speaking of Augustine, Marc LePain also said that, when he was a student at Assumption College, Father Fortin did not teach the original texts of Augustine or Aquinas. They had textbooks on Thomistic theology, of course, but did not read Thomas Aquinas in the original.

At Boston College, by contrast, the first class Father Fortin taught concerned Augustine, Aquinas, and medieval theology.

Father Dennis Gallagher

Yes, that is true. At Assumption, he did not teach those texts. I ask myself whether he even taught a course on the Church Fathers here. I do not think he did. He did at Boston College.

Peini Feng

That is a curious question for me as well: why did he begin teaching the medieval thinkers immediately after moving to Boston College when he seems not to have taught them at Assumption College?

Father Dennis Gallagher

There was another priest in the department at the time who taught Aquinas. I am not sure that explains it. Father Fortin also taught a team-taught course—have I mentioned that? I was a senior here, and it was a course in contemporary philosophy.

We read the pragmatists, perhaps did something with phenomenology—I do not remember—and then read the existentialists. Three people taught the course. One was a Protestant minister who later became an academic dean here for a couple of years: Oscar Remick. He was a friend of Ernest's, and they worked closely together. Ernest was involved in ecumenical things in those days too, in the late 1960s.

Another was a German-born American professor named Joe Meier—M-E-I-E-R. I have tried to find him but cannot; he is probably deceased. He taught courses at Assumption on the philosophy of education. Father Fortin was the third. It was interesting to have the three of them teaching together.

I remember feeling that I had somehow earned my chops by succeeding in that course.

Peini Feng

Father Fortin also team-taught several courses at Boston College—for example, with Christopher Bruell on Maimonides and Spinoza.

Father Dennis Gallagher

Oh, yes.

Peini Feng

And on *Bible and Politics*. We have published some of their syllabi on our website.

Father Dennis Gallagher

I suppose those are the two chapters on Aquinas in the Strauss and Cropsey volume, right?

Peini Feng

Exactly. Do you also happen to know what Father Fortin's relationship with Muhsin Mahdi was at that time?

Father Dennis Gallagher

I do not know about that, no.

Peini Feng

I see. I think those are all the questions we have for you at the moment.

Father Dennis Gallagher

Thank you.

Peini Feng

Is there anything more you would like to share?

Father Dennis Gallagher

I am really, really pleased that you are doing this. It is a wonderful effort on your part. Thank you so much.

Peini Feng

I am glad that we can carry on this legacy, which is worth preserving.

Father Dennis Gallagher

Did the name Geoffrey Vaughan come up at all?

Peini Feng

Geoffrey Vaughan? No.

Father Dennis Gallagher

Geoffrey—G-E-O-F-F-R-E-Y—Vaughan, V-A-U-G-H-A-N. He lives right across the street from here, actually.

Peini Feng

Oh, wow.

Father Dennis Gallagher

He teaches political thought in the Political Science Department here.

Peini Feng

Was he also a student of Father Fortin?

Father Dennis Gallagher

I am trying to remember whether Geoffrey actually had Father Fortin in class. I think his father studied under Strauss around the same time Ernest went to Chicago. Geoffrey is very, very knowledgeable about Father Fortin.

He would certainly be someone you might want to speak with. Geoffrey Vaughan. Do you need help with contact information?

Peini Feng

Of course. That would be wonderful.

Elliott Jones

Okay.

Father Dennis Gallagher

I will get you contact information for Kieselbach and Vaughan, and I will try to get Daniel Mahoney's most recent contact information. Did we mention anyone else?

Elliott Jones

You said Michael Kieselbach.

Father Dennis Gallagher

Michael Kieselbach.

Elliott Jones

Michael Kieselbach and Father Barry Bercier.

Father Dennis Gallagher

Father Bercier, yes.

Elliott Jones

And Geoffrey Vaughan and Daniel Mahoney.

Father Dennis Gallagher

Bercier might be the one to contact right away because he is leaving on August 13.

Peini Feng

Yes.

[The interview formally concluded, after which the participants briefly discussed possible additional interviewees. Father Gallagher then recalled one further point about Father Fortin's late work on rights. The recording was restarted, and the additional recorded conversation follows.]

Peini Feng

Please.

Father Dennis Gallagher

I am not sure everybody knew this. I was living right next to Ernest before he had his stroke. He was working on an understanding of rights that was not simply the modern understanding.

He was trying to use the language of rights—though perhaps he could not quite do it with that language—to ask how we might think of rights in terms of what we owe to others, rather than what is owed to us. I think he was looking to see whether Joseph Pieper might be of some help. That was his research.

Elliott Jones

I do think Pieper—and Francisco Suárez as well—offer useful ways to think about rights from that perspective.

Father Dennis Gallagher

Yes. I simply wanted to add my recollection that this was one of the last things he was really thinking about.

Peini Feng

Wow.

Father Dennis Gallagher

This was before his stroke as well.

Elliott Jones

Interesting.