

Interview with Fr. John Franck, A.A.

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

Interviewed by Peini Feng

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. For consistency, the institution now known as Assumption University is referred to by its current name throughout.



Peini Feng

Our project now is to build an archive of Father Fortin's work that collects his course materials, the interviews we have conducted, and the syllabi we have found. You can see the courses we have identified so far. This interview will probably appear in the archive as a transcript. The recording itself will not be published; the transcript will be revised and then published on the website.

Fr. John Franck

Because he taught some courses at Assumption University that he did not teach elsewhere. He taught a course on the philosophy of art in which he covered humor.

Peini Feng

Oh, that is a topic that fits his nature.

Fr. John Franck

Yes. He taught philosophy of nature, philosophy of science, the history of Christian philosophy, and the history of political philosophy. I think he even taught a course on philosophy—or perhaps religion—and literature.

Assumption University may still have the syllabi for those courses. That is one possibility. Professor Marc A. LePain may also have some of them. And you have certainly heard of Professor J. Brian Benestad.

Peini Feng

Yes, right.

Fr. John Franck

You probably were not able to meet with Professor Benestad because he has advanced Parkinson's disease and has difficulty speaking. But his wife may be able to help. She may have some of his course syllabi, including ones you have not been able to find. He lives on the Cape now. His wife is also a professor and studied political science and political philosophy at BC.

Those would be two other sources you may want to investigate. They would shed a different light on Father Fortin and complement some of the work you are doing. Both Professor LePain and Professor Benestad were his students when he taught at Assumption University.

Peini Feng

Yes. Well, what is her name?

Fr. John Franck

Janet.

Peini Feng

Janet. To begin with, you said you first met Father Fortin when you were an undergraduate at Assumption University?

Fr. John Franck

Yes, when I was an undergraduate at Assumption University. I took five courses with him. I was a philosophy major. Assumption University had both philosophy and politics departments, but the politics department had a strong orientation toward political philosophy.

We studied Plato, Aristotle, Boethius, Augustine, Aquinas, Nietzsche, Hobbes, Locke, Hume, and Spinoza. Father Fortin introduced us to all of these great thinkers. I think that is probably where the idea for the Foundations Program came from—the program called Perspectives at BC is called Foundations at Assumption University.

Peini Feng

Okay. Oh, I see.

Fr. John Franck

Yes. Have you also heard the name Professor Guerra?

Peini Feng

Yes.

Fr. John Franck

Yes—G-u-e-r-r-a?

Peini Feng

Yes.

Fr. John Franck

Yes. He was also an admirer and student of Father Fortin, and he taught at Assumption University. He has now left Assumption University; I do not know where he is.

Peini Feng

He just left Assumption University? That is interesting. Last year I tried to contact him through the email address listed on the website, but he has not replied. That may be the reason.

Fr. John Franck

Was it his Assumption University email address?

Peini Feng

Yes.

Fr. John Franck

Let me see. Yes, that may be the address I have for him—his Assumption University address. Who else could you contact? Professor LePain may have his current contact information.

Peini Feng

I see. I also interviewed Professor B. J. Dobski.

Fr. John Franck

Okay.

Peini Feng

He was a student of Father Fortin when Fortin was at BC, and he now teaches at Assumption University. He said he could help me contact Professor Guerra.

Fr. John Franck

That is good. He probably has more current information about Professor Guerra.

I was studying for the priesthood when I had Father Fortin as a teacher, but I was still an undergraduate. I was ill-prepared to have someone of his stature and wisdom as one of my professors. He had to bring his knowledge down to an undergraduate level. But he always taught courses that crossed the boundaries among philosophy, political philosophy, and theology. In a way, he could teach in every department: literature, philosophy, politics, or theology.

Peini Feng

Was Father Fortin in the Philosophy Department at the time? He taught some philosophy courses, did he not?

Fr. John Franck

Assumption University had the distinctive practice of allowing professors to teach across departments because it valued classical education, which would include both philosophy and history. Father Fortin, for example, taught a course on the philosophy of history.

Peini Feng

Oh, yes, right.

Fr. John Franck

Then you must have the syllabus for that course.

Peini Feng

I do not.

Fr. John Franck

You do not?

Peini Feng

He did not teach it at BC. Those are all the courses for which I have syllabi.

Fr. John Franck

Are you sure he did not teach it at BC? I am pretty sure he did.

Peini Feng

Perhaps it had a different title—Natural Law and Natural Right?

Fr. John Franck

No, I think it was called “Philosophy of History.” Or perhaps it was not called philosophy of history but something like “Theology of History.” He may have given it another theological title.

Peini Feng

Among the courses I remember, it may have been something like “Medieval Political Theology.”

Fr. John Franck

You can ask Professor LePain. I know Father Fortin taught a course on history. Perhaps it was called “Christianity and History” or “Philosophies of History.” He tried to present the Christian approach to

history in comparison with other philosophic or theological traditions. Other traditions may understand history as circular, whereas Christianity has a linear understanding of history.

Peini Feng

Yes.

Fr. John Franck

Now, you also know that he taught in Canada. He taught courses at Laval University.

Peini Feng

Oh, I did not know that.

Fr. John Franck

Yes. While he was teaching at BC, he would fly to Quebec City to teach courses in French at Laval University because he was completely bilingual.

He grew up speaking both English and French. In grammar school, half the day was taught in French and half in English. French was also sometimes spoken at home because of his French-Canadian background. Nuns taught at his school, and many of the courses were in French. That was his first sustained introduction to the language.

There were also professors at Laval associated with the Straussian tradition—Professor De Koninck especially—and he invited Father Fortin to teach there. I know that Father Fortin taught Nietzsche, though I cannot tell you what his other courses were. He might fly up on a weekend, teach a couple of classes on Monday, and then fly back to Boston, doing this over the course of an entire semester. You may want to investigate the courses he taught in French.

Peini Feng

Yes.

Fr. John Franck

Father Fortin was my spiritual advisor when I was an undergraduate. He lived in my residence hall and was very much appreciated by the students at Assumption University, including undergraduates. At BC, he did not have the same day-to-day exposure to students that he had at Assumption University.

Assumption University was much smaller than BC. At one point there may have been only about 150 students, so he taught many courses. To keep the college solvent, the faculty had to teach a great deal. I believe he also served for a time as vice president for academic affairs.

I lived with him when I was an undergraduate, and later I lived with him in religious community. When one enters religious life, one receives a different kind of formation from that of a diocesan priest. The Jesuits, for example, are a religious order. Father Fortin belonged to a religious congregation like ours: the Augustinians of the Assumption, or the Assumptionists.

Diocesan priests generally live and serve in parishes. Religious priests often live and work at universities, serve in hospitals, do missionary work, or undertake other specialized work within the Church. I was the director of novices and young religious for several years in Boston, and Father Fortin lived in the same community. Later, when I became the superior, he was still living there. I was his superior when he had his stroke.

Peini Feng

Oh, yes.

Fr. John Franck

We visited him regularly in the hospital and later in the nursing home. I remember that he once told me he had to undergo heart-valve replacement surgery. I went with him to meet the surgeon and asked, "What are the risks of this operation?" The surgeon said the success rate was between 90 and 95 percent, but there was still a small possibility that something could go wrong.

Father Fortin said to me, "The worst thing that could happen would be for me to have a stroke—to understand some things and understand that my knowledge was limited. That would be very frustrating." And that is what happened. He suffered a stroke during the operation and never recovered his full capacities.

He could remember certain courses he had taught, but he could not sustain a conversation such as the one you and I are having. He had short-term memory loss. He could remember things from long ago, but not what had happened yesterday or earlier that day. It was a tragic loss for him.

In community, he was very serious, but he also had a dry sense of humor. In his course on the philosophy of humor, he would sometimes tell jokes that only he laughed at because no one else understood them. Who did we study in that course? I am trying to remember the major philosopher he used. Perhaps the name will come back to me.

Peini Feng

It will come back.

Fr. John Franck

Yes—it has come back: Bergson. I think he was a late nineteenth- or early twentieth-century French philosopher who wrote about comedy. Assumption University may have information about the course in its archives, especially because Father Fortin's library went there.

Peini Feng

Yes.

Fr. John Franck

I did not know whether you knew that. If you contacted the archivist at Assumption University and asked to examine files relating to Father Fortin, I am sure you could learn a great deal.

Father Fortin also had many friends who visited the house in Boston. One of the most distinguished was Professor Allan Bloom, who was a very close friend of his. Although Bloom was an atheist and not a believer, they respected one another. Bloom liked to come for a cigar and Scotch with Father Fortin, and they would spend hours together. He would have meals with us, and then he and Father Fortin would go off to talk.

Father Fortin met Bloom at the University of Chicago. That was where he came to understand Strauss, and Strauss changed the whole direction of his thinking. What else can I tell you about Father Fortin?

Peini Feng

To begin with, you took five courses with Father Fortin as an undergraduate. What was your first impression of him? You have said that he was extraordinarily intelligent and had to bring his teaching down to the level of undergraduates. Do you remember anything else?

Fr. John Franck

One thing that amazed me was his ability to bridge the gap between the depth of his intellect and our undergraduate level. After a while, I could understand his frustration that students at Assumption University could not challenge him or provide a pool of successors equal to the depth of his knowledge.

I studied with him from 1965 to 1970. One of his courses was on early Christian thinkers. He was a very generous grader. I am sure some of the papers we wrote must have made him tear his hair out, yet he was faithful and dedicated. He wrote articles for student newspapers and publications, and he ate with students in the dining room. You know that he was also a great tennis player.

Peini Feng

I heard about that. Yeah.

Fr. John Franck

Yes. He loved tennis; that was how he kept in shape. I think he even taught tennis at Assumption University.

Peini Feng

Oh, wow.

Fr. John Franck

Yes, for a while.

Peini Feng

Do you remember any examples of how he bridged the gap between his own intellectual depth and the level of undergraduate students?

Fr. John Franck

He would often take an original text, read it, and take it apart for us in a way we could understand. He was reluctant to have us rely on secondary sources; he wanted us to study primary texts.

That method was part of the education we received at Assumption University. In our French courses, for example, the teachers would have us take a text and—do you know any French?

Peini Feng

What I know is “bonjour.”

Fr. John Franck

It was called *explication de texte*. The teacher would take a primary source and dissect it. They believed that primary sources were accessible to us and that we did not need secondary sources in order to understand Plato, Aristotle, or Augustine. But to teach us in that way, they had to show us in class how to read a text.

One of the things Father Fortin was known for—together with some of the other professors—was his ability to show us how to read.

Peini Feng

So he served as an example of how to explicate an original text in class. By watching how he read, undergraduate students learned how to read for themselves, and he encouraged them—

Fr. John Franck

—not to be afraid of primary texts, because they were accessible to us. We did not have to begin by reading secondary scholarship—not even Professor Strauss, when we were undergraduates. He would save Strauss for a graduate course.

We read Plato’s dialogues with Father Fortin, or Aristotle’s *Ethics*. Toward the end of his career, he taught mostly political theology, theology itself, and the Church Fathers. Sometimes he managed to teach a theology course that was really a politics course.

Nietzsche, for example, could be taught in history, philosophy, political science, or theology. Nietzsche spans the boundaries among the departments we have created; he would not simply say, “I am a historian,” “I am a philosopher,” or “I am a political thinker.” That is how Father Fortin approached his material.

He also approached literature in this way. We had a course with him on the philosophy of art—perhaps it was called aesthetics. Assumption University may have information about that course in its archives. I will try to find it.

Peini Feng

Do you remember how Father Fortin articulated his reading of a text in class? In my experience, a professor often introduces the author, selects key passages, and then reads them with the students. How did Father Fortin introduce students to Plato before beginning the close reading itself?

Fr. John Franck

I do not remember him giving much biographical information about the authors. I think we entered directly into the text. If some historical information would help us understand it, he might provide that, but usually we simply read the dialogue itself.

Peini Feng

Would he explain the importance of the dialogue?

Fr. John Franck

I think that would emerge through the content of the course. I mainly remember reading the texts themselves.

He also arranged a progression of texts. He would not begin with the most difficult Platonic dialogue. He might start with the *Symposium* and spend a long time helping us understand it, then move to the *Phaedo* and the *Gorgias*. He gradually advanced our understanding by moving from more accessible dialogues to more difficult ones. We may never have reached the most complicated dialogues because we were young students.

In the ancient Christian philosophy course, we read Justin Martyr and the *Didache*. What else did we read? It was many years ago.

Peini Feng

Yes.

Fr. John Franck

I am not sure I remember all the course content.

Peini Feng

No, that is fine.

Fr. John Franck

I am sure some of it later developed into his course on early Christian and medieval political theology. We may have had the same authors, though not at the same level.

Peini Feng

It seems to me that Father Fortin already embodied the beginnings of both the Perspectives Program at BC and the Foundations Program at Assumption University: the close reading of primary texts and the careful ordering of those texts so that students could progress through them.

I am also curious—because I never had dinner with Father Fortin—what did he talk about when he ate with you?

Fr. John Franck

Sports. He liked sports and was a great fan of the Boston teams. Sometimes we talked about sports, and sometimes about current events. He was an avid reader of *The New York Times*, especially the Sunday edition, and spent serious time trying to understand the trends of the day.

He was not someone who simply buried his head in the past. He tried to understand what was happening in the present. He knew that learning could not mean merely living in the past; we also had to understand current events in order to apply our knowledge to the reality before us. He was very interested in politics.

One of his central interests was modernity: when did it begin, and how did it differ from classical thought? He wanted to understand where modern movements came from and how they influenced society. He might ask how Nietzsche's will to power was being expressed in a contemporary political ideology.

He would also compare thinkers. He could compare Rousseau's *Confessions* with Augustine's *Confessions*, for example. When he taught modern philosophy, he traced the way modern philosophers developed into modern ideas. He wanted to trace post-Christian ideology back to its origins and ask, "How did we arrive where we are?"

He could take an article from *The New York Times* or *The New York Times Magazine* and explain how philosophy had influenced the contemporary trend it described.

He was also very balanced. He would not simply dismiss someone with whom he disagreed. I remember going with him to hear Harvey Cox, a Harvard professor who wrote *The Secular City*. Cox was trying to explain how Christianity could exist in a secular society and what radical changes theology would have to undergo in order to address the secular world.

Father Fortin did not agree with Professor Cox, but he was willing to enter into conversation with him, find what was good in his presentation, and underline it. I also remember Father Fortin speaking to a group of homosexual students. He did not agree with their way of life, but he wanted to understand them better and to explain how Christianity might understand same-sex attraction.

He was not afraid to enter almost any serious debate, listen to people, try to understand them, and present a complementary point of view. He would decline an invitation only if he thought it frivolous. If he believed the inviting group was serious, he would engage them in conversation.

Peini Feng

That is very good, because Father Fortin said in his intellectual biography that one of his aims was to understand modernity and the differences among the classical, Christian, and modern traditions. Students living within the modern tradition cannot simply pick up Aristotle and Aquinas and read them as medieval people did; there must be a bridge from classical and Christian education to modern people. It seems that one of his great passions was understanding the modern tradition and current trends so that he could build that bridge.

Fr. John Franck

That is exactly his way of doing things. He appreciated the classics and was a classical person, but he understood that there had been a history and a development of thought. To understand the classics requires an education—a philosophy of education, which I think was another course he taught at Assumption University.

By the way he taught, he embodied how to approach a text. Without even realizing it, we were being educated to become a certain kind of student. When we studied the moderns, he always contrasted them with the ancients. Only later, when my mind was more mature, did I understand how he had been teaching us.

Peini Feng

Yes. It seems to me that learning how to read a classical text is already part of an introduction to classical thought. Father Fortin observed that at a Catholic university people may pay lip service to the classical and Christian traditions without actually believing them; they may already live according to a more modern way of life.

There therefore needs to be a serious introduction to classical and Christian education from within the modern world. Father Fortin seems to have embodied such an introduction in the way he taught students to read ancient and Christian texts.

Another topic interests me. You mentioned that Father Fortin lived with students in the residence hall, served as their spiritual advisor, and was well liked by them. What is the role of a spiritual advisor? A teacher who imparts knowledge seems different from a spiritual advisor who lives with students and guides them personally. What did Father Fortin discuss with you when he was your spiritual advisor?

Fr. John Franck

The task of a spiritual advisor, Peini, is to help a person understand how God acts in history and in one's life. As Christians, we believe that a vocation to the priesthood is first of all a call from God. So how do you read the signs of God working in your life? How do you appreciate the spiritual dimensions of your life? How do you live the Christian life in practice—loving your neighbor, living according to the Bible and the Ten Commandments, and loving one another?

We would talk for about an hour at a time, and he would help me read the signs of God's presence in my life. A spiritual director listens as someone speaks about his experiences and then offers suggestions about how he might attune himself to those signs. I do not know whether that is any help.

Peini Feng

It is very interesting, because Father Fortin was not only an interpreter of texts but also an interpreter of your life—the signs within your life. As a teacher, he directed students toward texts; as a spiritual advisor, he directed them toward a way of life.

Each student has unique signs and gifts. Although the principles of a good Christian life remain the same, a spiritual advisor must recognize the uniqueness of each person's life and how that life can be incorporated into the whole body of Christ.

That seems fascinating. When Father Fortin helped establish the Perspectives Program at BC, it was with Father Flanagan—

Fr. John Franck

Yes, and Professor Fred Lawrence as well.

Peini Feng

Yes, Professor Fred Lawrence. He invited Father Fortin to BC. Initially, they were trying to build the Perspectives Program around epistemology.

But Father Fortin reoriented it from the question "How do we know?" to the question "How should we live?" There seems to be a beautiful connection between the Perspectives Program, which integrates primary texts around the question of the good life, and Father Fortin's work as a spiritual advisor, interpreting the signs in each student's life and directing that student toward his own vocation according to common principles. I see a connection between Father Fortin interpreting texts and Father Fortin interpreting life.

Fr. John Franck

The other thing, Peini, is that a community of priests lived with us on campus. We saw how they prayed and how they interacted with one another. That community was an example for us; we did not see them only in the classroom.

We saw how they lived, and they became living examples of the kind of life to which we ourselves were attracted. We were immersed not only in studies but in a way of life. It was something like a Buddhist monk living with other monks and learning from their example and from their masters.

We learned how to pray from them and listened to their sermons. We heard them not only in the classroom but also in the chapel. In the chapel, they were entirely Catholic and Christian in the way they presented the Gospel and the readings of the day. That was an aspect of Father Fortin that one would not encounter in the classroom alone.

Peini Feng

What did you learn from Father Fortin as a Catholic priest, apart from his role as a classroom teacher?

Fr. John Franck

One thing was to be attuned to the way God touches each individual. What enables a person who chooses to be a Christian to lead the good life? That was a major theme of his preaching: what does it mean for a Christian to live according to the principles Jesus taught?

He presented saints who embodied Christian ideals—Augustine, Aquinas, and Thomas More. Thomas More was one of his great heroes. Like any good preacher, he also drew examples from contemporary life. He might preach on a particular virtue such as honesty, temperance, or justice. Virtue was certainly one of his themes.

Professor LePain could also tell you about this. He studied with Father Fortin as a full-time student, as I did, and later became a philosophy professor. He still teaches in the Foundations Program at Assumption University.

Peini Feng

In an article in *First Things* about Father Fortin's funeral, I read that you gave the homily.

Fr. John Franck

I gave a homily—a sermon, yes.

Peini Feng

In it, you said that for Father Fortin the first Christian virtue was not faith, hope, or charity, but humility.

Fr. John Franck

Yes, that is true. For someone with such a prodigious and profoundly learned mind—perhaps one of the richest minds in the country—to sit down at breakfast and talk with us, and to be willing to listen to anyone and present himself simply as a fellow human being, was remarkable.

You may not want to include this, but if you compared Father Fortin with Professor Allan Bloom, Bloom possessed a certain status and prestige. That was not important to Father Fortin. He was humble. He did not deny his intelligence, but he was willing to share his knowledge with anyone.

Humility was one of his great virtues—not because the others were unimportant, but because of the way he treated people. I think he believed he could learn something from everyone.

Peini Feng

It is interesting that you mention the contrast between Bloom and Father Fortin, because I have heard similar comparisons from other interviewees. Father Paul McNellis, S.J., said that Bloom dressed to impress, whereas Father Fortin dressed for comfort.

Fr. John Franck

That is interesting. Yes, that is true.

Peini Feng

According to Father McNellis, Father Fortin always wore “ugly running shoes,” even with a suit. That is why I have adopted the tradition of wearing ugly running shoes myself.

Professor Grant Kaplan also told me an anecdote about Bloom and Father Fortin in Paris. Bloom supposedly asked Father Fortin, “Why do you know so little about politics? Why would someone as intelligent as you go to Mass?” Father Fortin replied, “Bloom, you are such an intelligent man. Why do you know so little about religion?”—or something to that effect.

Professor Fred Lawrence also told Professor Cronin—and Professor Cronin told me—that Bloom once said, “Although I am an atheist, Ernie is my way to God.”

I can see many interesting contrasts, but also a deep mutual appreciation, in this friendship. People seem to enjoy comparing Bloom and Father Fortin in different ways. I believe both of them would have appreciated those comparisons.

Fr. John Franck

They might laugh. It is a paradox, is it not? One was an avowed atheist, while the other gave his life to Christ, yet they shared a deep friendship. They found common ground that allowed them to share things at a very deep level, and they could joke about the rest.

Professor Bloom loved his cigars and Scotch. Father Fortin did not smoke cigars, but he did drink Scotch.

Father Fortin had other friends who were not Christians as well. Professor Harvey Mansfield at Harvard, for example.

Peini Feng

Ah, yes.

Fr. John Franck

Yes, although he may have been a Christian. I am not sure.

Peini Feng

It is a little complicated.

Fr. John Franck

Yes, I am not sure what his position was. Was he Jewish?

Peini Feng

No, I do not think he was Jewish. Professor Mansfield grew up in a Protestant family, but he has said that he was dissatisfied both with the atheistic tendency of the time and with his family’s Protestant tradition. Then he read Leo Strauss’s *Natural Right and History*, which shocked him and helped him find a middle path.

It would be difficult to describe his religious position precisely. He might call himself a Straussian, perhaps, and leave us to understand what that means: a path he found preferable to both the Protestant approach and the atheistic one.

Fr. John Franck

A number of people questioned Father Ernest's commitment to Christianity, but I saw it every day. It was difficult to deny the rigor with which he lived his Christian life. His commitment was deep.

Sometimes Father Fortin would question a person because he wanted that person to reach a deeper level of understanding. He would not accept a superficial position. He was subtle and understood that there are arguments on both sides of a question. Matters are rarely simply cut and dried; there are degrees and distinctions.

One must always search for the truth in another person's position. Through conversation, we can come together toward an understanding of the truth. That was another aspect of his humility: he believed he could learn from people. There was hardly anyone who could not teach him something.

Peini Feng

He once said that he did not write a magnum opus because he had observed that, after producing such a work, a scholar often spends the rest of his life defending it rather than continuing to learn. Father Fortin wanted to avoid that. He wrote shorter essays so that he could always pursue further knowledge.

Fr. John Franck

I think there was another reason, Peini: he loved his students and loved living with them. He valued the friendships he developed with them.

His focus was on sharing with young men and women the knowledge he had gained, so that what he had learned would be passed on to others. Perhaps that is another aspect of humility: the desire to share what one has learned while remaining open to learning from one's students. That was characteristic of Father Fortin.

Peini Feng

I believe that is very true. Father Fortin once described the college or university in this way: "Assumption University came close to being what an institution of higher learning is supposed to be—not a place where one does one's thing more freely than one could do it at home, but a place where one listens in on conversations between learned men in the hope of learning something from them."

His understanding of higher education therefore seems to have centered on a place where people listen to and learn from one another. Professor Fred Lawrence once asked Father Fortin what defines Catholic education or a Catholic university. Father Fortin replied, "Isn't it charity?"—charity together with community. Charity and community seem central both to education and to Father Fortin's own way of life.

I would also like to hear more about his move from Assumption University to Boston College. From what I have learned, Professor Fred Lawrence initially invited Father Fortin to BC to help design the Perspectives courses. Father Fortin later moved from Assumption University to BC as a professor of theology.

You mentioned that one reason for the move may have been his desire to teach more capable students who could challenge him and inherit the depth of his thought. Do you know more about how he made that decision? Was he already close to people at BC while you were his undergraduate student, before he moved there? You knew him during precisely that period.

Fr. John Franck

When I was with him at Assumption University, he never spoke about other universities, at least not in my presence. He was involved in theological groups that met with one another. Another important point is that he was very involved in the ecumenical movement after Vatican II, which opened the doors to discussions with Protestant churches. He was deeply involved in that post-Vatican II reality.

As he continued teaching at Assumption University and became involved with university professors who shared his interests, he gradually came to see other possibilities for his future. I think he felt called to share his understanding of philosophy and theology more widely, while also being challenged by professors in a way that his colleagues at Assumption University could no longer challenge him.

Boston College offered him two things: the opportunity to be challenged by other professors and to share friendship with them, and the opportunity to teach doctoral students whom he could influence, develop, train, and form so that they could become teachers and transmitters of knowledge themselves.

Those were probably two reasons he decided to teach at Boston College. It gave him greater exposure both to established minds and to promising young minds.

Peini Feng

That is very interesting. Based on my other interviews, Father Fortin was also deeply involved in debates surrounding Vatican II. He criticized aspects of the Council's reception because he believed that Vatican II was a Catholic response to modernity without an adequate understanding of modernity's philosophical foundations. He therefore urged serious attention both to modern philosophy and to the documents of Vatican II.

As a result, some at BC welcomed him and others strongly disagreed with him. Yet this seems consistent with his desire to be challenged by professors at a high level, so that he could learn from them and reconsider his own positions.

At BC he received friendship from those who agreed with him, but also serious opposition from those who did not. A doctoral student in Theology told me that, despite profound disagreements between Father Fortin and some members of the department, there was also deep mutual respect. That seems another example of his commitment to charity and community in a Catholic university—a commitment that valued not only friendship but also challenge and opposition within liberal education.

Fr. John Franck

I think, Peini, if I am not mistaken, that Father Fortin became the first non-Jesuit chair of the Theology Department.

Peini Feng

Father Fortin was chair of Theology? How do you know he was a chair?

Fr. John Franck

I think he was chair, but you should verify that before quoting me. He was able to speak to all the factions in the Theology Department, and they respected him.

He also insisted on teaching in the Perspectives Program even while teaching the most advanced doctoral students. He wanted to retain that contact with undergraduates.

Peini Feng

That is remarkable. I saw in the syllabi that he taught "Philosophy of the Human Person" and courses in the Perspectives Program while also teaching advanced graduate seminars. That is a beautiful combination.

Fr. John Franck

At one time, there was a group of professors at BC—in philosophy, theology, political science, and history—who shared an understanding of education. They formed a core group, recommended one another's courses to students, and guided students toward particular teachers.

There were also programs through which they brought outside speakers to campus.

Peini Feng

The Bradley Lectures.

Fr. John Franck

Yes, the Bradley Lectures were one example. There was another program as well—

Peini Feng

Religion and Public Life?

Fr. John Franck

Perhaps. I wonder whether it was sponsored by someone else.

Peini Feng

Then I do not know.

Fr. John Franck

The Olin Foundation—Olin.

Peini Feng

Oh, I don't know that.

Fr. John Franck

I think the John M. Olin Foundation supported some of those lectures and other programs at BC. Later, it became more focused on business and related fields, and it no longer had the same interest. I do not know why that change took place.

But I believe the Olin Foundation supported certain BC programs that enabled the university to invite a number of Straussians to speak on campus.

I remember Father Fortin speaking about the two wings of the Straussian movement. He was able to maintain relationships with people from different wings of that movement. I regarded that as one of his great virtues.

Peini Feng

I have heard from several other professors that they participated in reading groups with Father Fortin.

Fr. John Franck

Oh, okay.

Peini Feng

Yes, in his apartment. I have also heard from many students who were not initially Father Fortin's students but were directed to his courses by professors in the Political Science Department.

If you read his course descriptions, he often noted that a course would also be of interest to political science students. I can see the connections among these departments. But this is the first time I have heard that Father Fortin may have chaired the Theology Department.

Fr. John Franck

Don't quote me but try to find out if that was true.

Peini Feng

Yes. I will do my best to verify it.

Fr. John Franck

Yes. I have it somewhere in the back of my head that he was chair of the department for some time. It would be interesting to see what kind of mark he left on Theology. Well, I have to think about leaving by five o'clock. Are there other questions? Normally I would have prayer at this hour.

Peini Feng

Oh, I am so sorry.

Fr. John Franck

That is okay. I could go on for another half hour if you wanted to.

Peini Feng

Let me turn to what will probably be my final two subjects: Father Fortin's life after his stroke, and the establishment of the Ernest Fortin Foundation.

After the stroke, you said that he was not able to function as he would have hoped. Who visited him during that period?

Fr. John Franck

Professor Matt Lamb went there, and Professor Glendon—especially her husband.

Peini Feng

I have heard a story about Professor Glendon's husband.

Fr. John Franck

He was wonderful.

Peini Feng

He would bring Father Fortin some liquor when he visited.

Fr. John Franck

That is right. He would bring Father Fortin things he liked. The nuns were not pleased to see him drinking, so Professor Glendon's husband would sometimes sneak it in.

As I said, Father Fortin confused certain things in the present. It was difficult for him to count from one to ten, but he could speak about events in the distant past as though they had just occurred. People who spent a long time with him often spoke about the past because they were concerned that he could not fully understand what was happening in the present.

Peini Feng

I have also heard that Father Fortin's last words were, "But I see something beautiful." What were his final hours like? I have heard that nuns were praying the Rosary around him. Do you remember?

Fr. John Franck

I remember someone saying that his last words were, "I see something beautiful." That does not surprise me, because I think he had a deep contemplative life as well as a practical one. He was a man of prayer.

When he said that he saw something beautiful, perhaps it was like the experiences described by people who come close to death: they see a light or something they experience as beautiful. I suspect that is what Father Fortin saw, though that is only my interpretation.

Peini Feng

I see. After Father Fortin's death, his funeral was held the following January. What was the funeral like, and who spoke?

Fr. John Franck

I think I was the only person who spoke at the funeral. Later there was a celebration of his life at which other people spoke.

There were also a number of memorial lectures. Someone would speak about Father Fortin before the invited lecturer began. I do not remember all of them, but I remember that such memorial lectures were held, and the Fortin Foundation sometimes sponsored a Fortin Lecture.

Peini Feng

I think they were called the Fortin Lectures. Do you still have your homily archived or recorded anywhere?

Fr. John Franck

I do not think I have it. I do not even remember everything I said, and I do not believe I kept a copy.

Peini Feng

Before Father Fortin's death—or perhaps after it—the idea arose of establishing the Ernest Fortin Foundation because he had inherited money from his family. How did he first conceive of the foundation, and how was it established?

Fr. John Franck

There are a couple of things to say. His father, who was in the insurance business, left the family a sum of money. Father Fortin and his brother each received a portion, and Father Fortin wanted to create a foundation.

That is not surprising. He wanted a foundation that would help students, especially graduate students. The idea was to build the endowment to the point where it could generate enough money to make a difference.

The foundation offered small grants to graduate students and high-performing undergraduates for summer projects, language study, research on a proposed topic, or support for doctoral dissertations. It was directed primarily toward advanced students and intended to help them deepen their studies.

Peini Feng

I see.

Fr. John Franck

Only at the end, when we dissolved the foundation, did we hold a large Fortin Lecture. I cannot remember who the speaker was.

Peini Feng

Timothy Burns.

Fr. John Franck

Timothy Burns, at Assumption University?

Peini Feng

At Assumption University. Yes, that is right. Professor Martha Martini told me.

Fr. John Franck

Did she? Yes, I remember now. Did you obtain a copy of his lecture?

Peini Feng

No. I did not know about it.

Fr. John Franck

Okay.

Peini Feng

I had not heard about it.

Fr. John Franck

He probably still has a copy.

Peini Feng

Yes, I will ask him for it. Also, how were the initial board members of the Fortin Foundation selected?

Fr. John Franck

I think I was the first chair of the foundation. I knew some of Father Fortin's friends at BC, so I spoke with a few of them and they made suggestions.

We did not want the board to be too large, because it would become unwieldy. I think we kept it to five or six members. Was Professor Martini Rice there at the beginning, or did she join later?

Peini Feng

She came later.

Fr. John Franck

Yes, she came later. I thought Professor Lamb was there.

Peini Feng

Yes, and Professor Robert Faulkner.

Fr. John Franck

Oh, that is Faulkner—yes. Maybe that was it.

Peini Feng

And Mary Ann Glendon; she was on it too.

Fr. John Franck

Yes, and Mr. Lev, her husband, was the treasurer-secretary, if I am not mistaken.

Peini Feng

I am sure that can be verified.

Another question: you were initially Father Fortin's student, and later you became his religious superior.

Fr. John Franck

Yes, his superior.

Peini Feng

How did the relationship shift after you became a priest?

Fr. John Franck

The way it happened, Peini, is that I was already on the path toward the priesthood when I studied with Father Fortin as an undergraduate. I then continued my formation to become an Assumptionist priest.

Eventually I became a priest and was given increasing responsibility, until I was responsible for all the Assumptionists living in the United States, Canada, and Mexico—perhaps seventy-five or one hundred people. Father Fortin eventually came under my authority.

I was very respectful of his decisions concerning the university, but I also met with him regularly to see how he was doing physically, spiritually, and as a human being. Occasionally we would have a meal together.

At one point I was appointed provincial, which is roughly comparable to a district manager in the business world. That is how I became his superior; there was nothing more complicated about it.

Peini Feng

How was Father Fortin's spiritual life?

Fr. John Franck

Pardon?

Peini Feng

How was the spiritual life of Father Fortin?

Fr. John Franck

He was very devoted to his prayer life. He tried not to miss the services we held regularly, and he also tried not to miss meals unless he had something important to do. He did not merely talk about community; he tried to live community.

Peini Feng

How did he understand prayer? Did he ever talk about his understanding of prayer?

Fr. John Franck

That would have been part of the sermons he gave—talking about prayer.

Peini Feng

Do you remember what he said?

Fr. John Franck

I really could not tell you, Peini. I remember listening to him talk about it, but in some ways he was very humble. He went about his business, praying individually and during common hours. He did not present himself as someone who displayed his prayer life. You know the parable of the Pharisee and the publican: Ernest would stay in the background. That was part of his humility.

Peini Feng

Yes, because prayer is a conversation between him and God, not a way of displaying his faith before others. That is very beautiful.

You also mentioned that he used Saint Thomas More as an example in his sermons. I know of his interest in Saint Augustine and Saint Thomas Aquinas, but I have never read anything he wrote about Thomas More.

Fr. John Franck

No, I do not think he wrote anything. I think he was simply interested in Thomas More.

Peini Feng

Why was he interested in Thomas More?

Fr. John Franck

I think Thomas More interested him because More was the consummate statesman: a devoted Catholic, a courageous man, and a politician who bridged the worlds of faith and politics and ultimately paid the price of martyrdom for his beliefs.

Father Fortin admired someone like that. I do not remember him writing anything about Thomas More. He may have addressed a lawyers' group and given a lecture on him, but Thomas More was not a central focus of his scholarship. I think Father Fortin simply admired him.

Peini Feng

Is there a question about Father Fortin that you think ought to be asked but that I have not asked yet?

Fr. John Franck

The one thing I wanted you to hear was the importance of speaking with Professor LePain and perhaps Mrs. Benestad.

Peini Feng

Benestad—yes, I will definitely do that. And I do not want to keep you from your other responsibilities.

Fr. John Franck

No, I am okay.

Peini Feng

Yes. Those are all the questions that have come to mind for now.

Fr. John Franck

I'm more than happy to answer any other questions that may come up in the future.