

Interview with Grant Kaplan

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

Interviewed by Peini Feng and Elliott R. Jones

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.



Elliott Jones

Good afternoon.

Peini Feng

Good afternoon.

Elliott Jones

Thank you so much for meeting with us.

Peini Feng

Yes. I'm Peini, and this is my friend Elliott R. Jones. And thank you very much for accepting our interview and helping us to form the Father Fortin Society.

Before we start the interview, do you have any questions for us?

Grant Kaplan

Sure. What year are you at BC?

Peini Feng

We're both seniors now, but we are both also likely to continue our study at BC in the fifth-year master's program in philosophy.

Grant Kaplan

Okay. So you're philosophy, you're not political science?

Peini Feng

Well, I am double-majoring in political science and philosophy and also minoring in ancient Greek.

Elliott Jones

And I'm just a philosophy major.

Grant Kaplan

Okay. And you had Professor Kerber?

Peini Feng

Yes, we have had Professor Hannes Kerber. We have huge support from Professor Hannes Kerber, Professor David DiPasquale, Professor Ryan Patrick Hanley in the political science department. And we have also support from the philosophy department, from Father McNellis.

Grant Kaplan

Great. I have no more questions for you.

Elliott Jones

Okay.

Peini Feng

Okay. Well, then we have some questions for you.

Elliott Jones

I'll get started. I don't think we'll be longer than 45 minutes to an hour.

If you have to run, just please let us know and we'll stop asking questions. Again, we just want to know more about Father Fortin as a person, his personality, his teaching style. We're not going to talk too much about his ideas at the moment.

So the first question is, how did you meet Father Fortin? And what was your first impression of him?

Grant Kaplan

Well, I met him in the spring of 1994 when I took a class called "Nietzsche and Christianity." That was a 500-level theology class that was mixed between undergraduate students and graduate students.

I really didn't have much of a bearing at that point in my education, but I'd heard a fair amount about Nietzsche and I was intrigued. I didn't know anything about Professor Fortin when I took the class. But that's how I met him.

Elliott Jones

And could you tell us about his teaching style?

Grant Kaplan

Sure, I would say he was old school. And at that point in his life, I would say he was older. And I wouldn't say he was at his full physical strength, but he definitely knew what he thought.

He had strong opinions about things. And I would say, like, he had a very clear worldview. We would talk about different passages and then he would lecture some.

And he very obviously had a way of looking at these great figures like Nietzsche through a lens that I wouldn't have known at the time. But it was a very Straussian lens.

Peini Feng

We have interviewed Father McNellis before, and he mentioned Father Fortin's class on Nietzsche as well. He says that Father Fortin is impressive in the way that he teaches his students about the authors such as Nietzsche that are very antagonistic about Christianity. But Father Fortin also believes that Christianity can defend itself in front of all these critiques from Nietzsche and all the other philosophies.

Can you tell us more about how Father Fortin in that Nietzsche class defended for Christianity in front of the challenge of Nietzsche?

Grant Kaplan

Well, I mean, he was pretty straightforward. And I think I learned this from him just teaching the texts. We read exclusively Nietzsche in the class.

But we read the texts and then discussed them in class. But one of the key themes in Strauss is this tension between ancients and moderns. Right.

And another between Athens and Jerusalem or faith and reason. And Fortin took that really seriously. And he was very versed in ancient philosophy.

So was Nietzsche, right?

Nietzsche has a lot to say about Plato and Greece. And then Fortin would be able to jump right in. And Nietzsche has a lot to say about the Bible as well.

And of course, Fortin was more than versed in the Bible. And Fortin was able to bring out that tension between faith and reason or Athens and Jerusalem in talking about Nietzsche.

Elliott Jones

It's interesting when we were meeting with Father McNellis, he said that Father Fortin taught a Bible class as well.

But there was sort of a controversy in the department that they heard that Father Fortin didn't defend the Bible against philosophical critiques, I guess we could say from Athens. Do you think he defended Christianity in the Nietzsche class or was he open to honest critique or maybe even more than honest critique?

Grant Kaplan

Well, I mean, I think he believed in the truth and I think he thought Christianity was true or else he wouldn't have believed in it. And so ultimately those tensions that appear to be the case are resolved. But I mean, Fortin's Bible class, I think it was offered while I was a student because I returned to BC for graduate school. But he stopped teaching maybe after my first year of graduate school. But at any rate, I always was interested and knew what class he was teaching. I was trying to figure out why I didn't take a second class with him.

I think it was scheduling and other things. But to get to your question, he was interested in the critique of the Bible and that Nietzsche and Strauss and others people like Voegelin. For example, Strauss famously says the Bible doesn't say anything about nature. Fortin was willing to take seriously this critique.

I don't know how else to say it. I mean, Fortin, on the one hand, represented a certain kind of conservatism that some people in the department didn't like. But there was also an incredible intellectual openness to him and that he was willing to spend a lot of time with these figures that he ultimately did not agree with.

But he thought they were important for understanding the modern world. And even someone like his friend, Allan Bloom. I mean, they just disagreed on so many fundamental questions.

But Fortin was able to learn a lot from him and was instrumental in having Allan Bloom come in and help start the Perspectives program at BC.

Peini Feng

It's very interesting that you mentioned about Father Fortin's approach to understand the truth and to learn from different people that he thinks he can learn from without necessarily completely agreeing with them. One example you mentioned is the difference between Father Fortin and Allan Bloom. Could you say more about the difference between them?

Father McNellis also mentioned the difference between Allan Bloom and Father Fortin. He told us, Allan Bloom always had the best dress—always has the best suit. Whereas Father Fortin dressed more for comfort and he always wore his, quote on quote, ugly running shoes because it's more comfortable.

Grant Kaplan

He was not a sharp dresser. I mean, what I know about Bloom is sort of mixed up because I read the novel *Ravelstein* by Saul Bellow. And that's clearly about Allan Bloom.

I don't know how much is true and untrue. And I've heard so many anecdotes. But biographically, you know. I was at a stage in my life when I took Father Fortin's class, when I started to get really interested in ideas.

And so I asked Father Fortin what I should read over the summer. And he told me to read Allan Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind*. And I read that and it really changed the way I thought about things.

But Bloom wasn't a believer in anything. So he shared Strauss's suspicion towards revealed religion, biblical religion. And he was known as a kind of Epicurean Straussian.

And he lived a lavish life, especially after he became like a millionaire through *Closing of the American Mind*. And in *Ravelstein*, there's all these stories about him buying \$500 scarves in Paris. But I don't know what's true and untrue there.

But the story goes that they would pass each other when they were both living in Paris. And Allan Bloom would be drinking wine on the balcony and shouting to Fortin, "Why are you going to mass?" or "Why are you going to prayer? You seem really smart. Why don't you know anything about politics?" And then Fortin would say, "Why don't you want to know anything about religion?"

I think they were very opposite intellectually but they appreciated each other. And I would say, I was not super ideological as an undergraduate, but my default political orientation would have been liberal. That's how I was raised and that's how the majority of the faculty were. And some faculty who I liked a lot, when I told them that I had this experience of taking Fortin and reading Allan Bloom, they were really aghast.

And one of my professors conveyed that Allan Bloom had died because he had contracted HIV from his lifestyle choices. But they also told me, don't ever mention this to Father Fortin because it might upset him. I never really knew what to make of that.

But, in 1995 homosexuality was not as accepted as it is in 2026. And so the norms about, that, again, I had no idea. Ernest Fortin revealed nothing to me ever personally about his own life.

He didn't tell stories about himself or what he really thought about things. I mean, he really was a real teacher. And I personally, if I had to guess, I don't think he cared at all about Allan Bloom's life.

Now, if, say, Allan Bloom wanted, spiritual advice or something like that, then he would have been happy to give it to him, I suspect, because I only knew him to be a good priest. But as I knew Father Fortin, he really was an ideas person.

That's the thing I want to underscore. He cared about ideas.

Elliott Jones

I see. So you did your PhD at BC, correct?

Grant Kaplan

Yes.

Elliott Jones

You already mentioned there was largely liberal professors in the department at the time, and then there was Father Fortin who held more conservative views.

Regardless of politics, what was the general sense of Father Fortin in the department? We're trying to construct a history of Father Fortin's entry at BC and him leaving. So that would help us a lot.

Grant Kaplan

Yeah. I mean, I would say—well, he lived in the same building as my actual mentor named Philip King, who was a scripture professor. And so Phil King and Ernest Fortin were two of the most longstanding members, I would say.

And then Fortin was technically in ethics, and his project didn't really fit with the ethics faculty. And so—but I took classes with them and the big people in ethics when I was at BC. Some of them are still there. For example, Stephen Pope, Lisa Cahill, Dave Hollenbach, those were the key people in ethics. And I took class with all of them. And I suspect they all had major disagreements with Fortin about ethics and what Christian ethics should be and what moral theology should be.

But I know through subsequent conversations that Lisa Cahill always had a mutual respect for Fortin. She mentioned that to me. I don't mean to be gossipy in any way, but I just remember her expressing that, at the end of the day—and this is my opinion—what you want as an academic is a basic respect that it really comes down to ideas, not dogmas, not ideologies, but ideas, and these can always be discussed, and that serious academics should be open to the free exchange of ideas and be allowed to appreciate people who are different or think differently from them or reach different conclusions, provided the way they get there is intellectually rigorous. And so that's the framework.

And in some ways, in many ways, it was embodied in what I observed in my time as a student at BC, both as an undergraduate and a graduate student.

Peini Feng

Great.

Elliott Jones

Thank you.

Peini Feng

Thank you very much, Professor.

It's really beautifully stated. You also mentioned that you know more about Father Fortin as a good priest. Could you say more about the priest aspect of Father Fortin?

Grant Kaplan

Well, let me say this. Everybody called him Father Fortin that I knew. I mean, other professors would refer to him as Ernie, but the students always called him Father Fortin, and he was an unassuming person.

He did not use his religious title in any way to sort of try to gain an additional authority. So I would say he wore it lightly, but he seemed to take it seriously. Now, he was not a Jesuit, and so he didn't live at St. Mary's. He didn't say Mass on campus, so I never heard him say Mass anywhere. I will tell you this, though, because you're into this oral history. I myself am not a Straussian, but because I had a very close friend who was in the School of Social Thought at the University of Chicago, and I was always curious about Straussian stuff, so I was a curious observer on the outside.

But, you know, when I told people I studied with Ernest Fortin, everyone in the Straussian world always knew who he was, so he carried a certain authority. But on more than one occasion, people would say to me, I heard he actually did not believe in God. I was very surprised by this, and I wondered how they got this impression. But this was part of the Straussian circle, that, there's always this text, you know, the subtext, you need to read between the lines, and this suspicion that maybe Strauss was a total nihilist.

I always thought it was just an indication of the part about Strauss that I liked least, that they would say this, because it seemed to have no basis whatsoever. But, anyway, that's not a very helpful anecdote for you, but it's just what I remember.

Elliott Jones

No, that's perfect. Peini has experiences like this. But anyway.

Peini Feng

Yeah, well, you know, I'm also a student in political science, and I'm educated by Straussians—regardless of what people say about them, I think they're very good at reading and understanding text. I've greatly benefited from them, and I think they're very good at teaching as well. But whenever I say something that makes anyone think I'm a Straussian, they would say—they would not say of me that I am a Straussian, but they would add Peini is a Straussian–nihilist.

But I'm not a nihilist at all. So it's one good example. The reason I started to pay more attention to not only the *thought* of Father Fortin, but also the *example* of Father Fortin, is I realized that the best example I use to refuse this nihilism, Straussian thing, is to say that Father Fortin is also a student of Strauss, and he also reads text in the way that I'm educated to read. And people will then realize that they know Father Fortin because he's one of the founders of perspective programs here.

And then people will realize that, well, there can be faithful people in this group, and there can be something even for the faithful people to learn about how to read texts and to benefit from this approach. So I'm very sympathetic to his situation. And one thing you mentioned also fascinated me which Professor Mansfield mentioned in his interview as well.

He said that when he asked—him whether one should call Father Fortin as “Father Fortin,” Father Fortin said to him, Professor Mansfield, as if professor and father are the same thing. But Professor Mansfield also emphasized on the point that Father Fortin does not dress in a cassock as a priest, and he does not use his priestly authority to put pressure or put authority on other people. He convinces others with ideas.

And I think it's also very impressive what you said about Father Fortin's pursuit of truth. He pursues truth and he opens himself to the great challenges, even though he has his faith and even though he recognizes the importance of his faith. And that leads to another question of mine.

In an interview between Father Fortin and Michael Foley in the book, *Gladly to Learn and Gladly to Teach, Essays in Honor to Ernest Fortin*, there was an interview in which Michael Foley asked him if Father Fortin has two hats, one hat for Athens and the other hat for Jerusalem. And when he was doing his writing, whether he's wearing this hat or the other hat. And Father Fortin answered to Professor Foley by saying that, no, I don't have two hats. When I'm writing, I'm trying to bring Athens and Jerusalem together.

So Father Fortin, while admitting that there is a tension and even conflict between Athens and Jerusalem, or reason and faith, he himself is trying to bring them together.

As a student of Father Fortin, who knows him as a priest and who knows him as a teacher, do you have any observations and reflections or thoughts about Father Fortin's effort in trying to bring Athens and Jerusalem together?

Grant Kaplan

Well, I became curious about his ideas after having him as a professor. And I would frequently go to the library and find articles that he wrote. And, I would ask him sometimes in the hall, “What are you working on?”

He said, “Oh, this collection of essays.” And, I think that came out maybe right after I finished undergrad or shortly thereafter. I forget whether they were all released together or not.

But reading him was definitely the case. You could see how he was doing this. And he did the work on Dante, obviously, which was very important.

And I remember, he also wrote on the social encyclicals which was interesting. And he had a lot to say about Augustine, obviously. And in a way, that is what we all do if we're theologians.

So I shouldn't say we. But that's what you're trying to do. Because if Christ is the logos, then the reason and faith can't be incompatible because you're taught to believe in the logos.

Right. That is what the Christian theological process is, is to take the faith experience, the encounter of Christ that is recorded in the New Testament and prefigured in the Old Testament, and then bring intelligibility to that and see how it makes sense.

And so I definitely think that now. There are certain strands of Protestantism however, that are not interested in this project. Luther says things about reason that is not necessarily complimentary. And there's a suspicion of reason in some pockets.

And within certain kinds of Catholic fundamentalism, you find that suspicion as well. And it becomes not so much Athens and Jerusalem, but Athens and Rome, where Rome represents the appeal to magisterial authority.

And then you don't need to think about things anymore, because the magisterium has thought for you, which is not how it's supposed to be. But, yeah, I think there's different ways, obviously, to embody this. But Fortin certainly embodied it and was a model for me in this regard.

Elliott Jones

Great. You mentioned his commentary on social encyclicals. Do you have any reflections, from your theological background and from conversations you had about what his thoughts were on Vatican II and the developments in the Church, or his thoughts on the Church in general.

Grant Kaplan

I don't. I mean, he talks about *Rerum Novarum*. And I think he had a critique that the understanding of property was more connected to John Locke than it was to Aquinas.

And that was a point. Now, you guys know Professor Fred Lawrence, I assume, right?

Elliott Jones

Yes. I haven't taken a class with him. He's quite old now. He's retired.

Grant Kaplan

And, yes, he's quite frail, but he really appreciated Fortin's thought. In this book, which is called *Faith, Reason and the Common Good*.

He has a chapter called "The Recovery of Theology in a Political Mode. The Example of Ernest Fortin."

Peini Feng

Oh, wow. Okay, thank you so much. Wow.

Grant Kaplan

That's page 278. Fred Lawrence really appreciated Fortin and a lot of what I have come to think about Fortin as a figure I learned from Fred Lawrence, who was not only, one of my dissertation readers, but was someone I kept in touch with a long time and had written about.

I wrote a book on Faith and Reason in 2022, and I wouldn't have been able to write that book if I had not been impacted by Fortin and also Fred Lawrence. I actually dedicated that book to Fred Lawrence.

Elliott Jones

Oh, that's excellent. I have a personal question. Since, you know, Fred Lawrence, did you study any Lonergan?

And off of that, do you know if there was any connection between Lonergan and Fortin? Because I believe they might have been. Well, anyway, I'm not sure if they were there at the same time.

Grant Kaplan

Well, I imagine they would have met. And I Fortin forgot what time he came to the BC, but I think it was in the 70s.

Peini Feng

Yes. 1971 is the time he came to BC.

Grant Kaplan

So they definitely would have met. And you know, this is tangential, but there's a YouTube with Fred Lawrence and Gadamer and Voegelin and Allan Bloom at the University of Toronto. And it's actually quite a good recording. It's just interesting to see them there, with Allan Bloom smoking a cigar.
[<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fjsLditCFME&t=54s>]

But I don't think Lonergan had much to say about politics at all.

Elliott Jones

Yeah, that's true.

Grant Kaplan

And I don't think he would have been interesting to Fortin in that regard. I think they thought very differently. They would have shared some things in common, primarily a critique of certain kind of neo-scholasticism.

But Lonergan defends historicism. And this is a big critique by Strauss for Strauss is very critical of historicism. And so I think that would have been something that they would have been a little separated about.

Although I imagine they could have come to a kind of common understanding, because what Lonergan means is quite sensible when he defends historicism. And it's not pure relativism. But Lonergan said, "part of my whole project is to get history into theology."

And I think that was not a driving force for Fortin. Yeah, fair enough. He was he was differently motivated.

But Fred Lawrence, he's really one of the great geniuses I've ever known. He learned a lot from Fortin and he taught Perspectives and learned from Bloom when Bloom came to design Perspectives at Boston College. And it changed the way he thought.

And so he is the Lonergan person who is most in a political mode. And a lot of graduate students when I was at BC worked with Lawrence and Fortin.

Elliott Jones

Okay.

Grant Kaplan

Between Lawrence, Stephen Brown and Fortin, there was a lot of convergence, but especially Lawrence and Fortin.

Elliott Jones

Wow.

Peini Feng

Okay, that's very beautiful.

Elliott Jones

Thank you.

Peini Feng

Yes. I want to add one anecdote at the end of our interview to illustrate another example of Father Fortin's continuous pursuit of the truth. In an interview we had with Father McNellis. He told us that initially Father Fortin was not so interested at the method of Lonergan.

But at the end of his life, he told Father McNellis that, "I wish I could have read more Lonergan." So I think it's a beautiful example, as you said, about the atmosphere, about academia, that people, scholars can have different opinions and even sometimes seem to seem to be antagonistic toward each other. But eventually, I believe there is also a deep respect between them.

Like the Bible said, open dispute is better than hidden love. I believe between Father Fortin and all these other scholars, there might be an open dispute and a hidden love. So I think it's very beautiful you shared with us.

Yes. Thank you very much, Professor.

Grant Kaplan

Oh, yeah, certainly. And I studied a fair amount of Lonergan with Charles Hefling and also Fred Lawrence, obviously. So I had a great appreciation for Lonergan.

But the people who were into Lonergan were so into Lonergan. And it's such a high mountain to climb that it was almost like, if I've got to figure out Lonergan in graduate school, I'm not going to have time to do anything else.

And so ultimately the way I think about my own career as an academic is that there's sort of filial piety. And I've tried to pay debts to my teachers in all these different ways by, going back and reading some of their work and writing about some of their ideas or other ways of paying this kind of tribute. So, yeah, and Fortin was someone I was very glad to learn a lot from.

And he was really someone who had a worldview, a comprehensive way of looking at things. And that was compelling to me. And then when I read *Closing of the American Mind*, it really, really made me want to be an academic, because I'd never really had the feeling of before.

And so, I owe him a lot. And I was sad that Father Fortin, you know, fell ill so quickly. And I don't know the exact age he was when he died, but you probably know, right?

Peini Feng

He died in 2002. And I remember he died relatively young, not compared to other scholars who died at 94, 95.

So, yes.

Grant Kaplan

Yeah, yeah. So I imagine he was in his 70s when he died. But, yeah, it was interesting to learn about this world.

And he was involved with the Bradley Speaker Series. And so I remember hearing Harvey Mansfield talk and other Straussians as well. And there was a Fortin Fellowship that was established for graduate students to go and learn foreign languages.

So I would say that there is a legacy also among the Augustinian Assumptionists who run Assumption College. That was Fortin's order. And so that's where he had taught before he had gone to B.C. When I've met people from there in philosophy or theology, they usually know who he is.

Elliott Jones

Well, great. Thank you so much for everything, Professor.

Grant Kaplan

Sure. Yeah. Good luck with everything.

I think it's really cool that you're doing this. It seems like it's something that's taking you a lot of time, but also that you are like very devoted to. So please keep me abreast of your activities and good luck with it all.

Elliott Jones

Thank you again, Professor.

Peini Feng

Well, thanks so much, Professor. We'll definitely update with all the activities we have in the future. And we were looking forward to maybe collaborate with you further if the opportunity arises.

So thank you very much.

Grant Kaplan

Sure. Sure. Take care.

Peini Feng

All right.

Grant Kaplan

Take care.

Peini Feng

Take care. Have a good afternoon.