

Interview with Marc LePain

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

Interviewed by Peini Feng and Elliott Jones

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Conducted over Zoom

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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

Hello. It is very nice to see you.

Elliott Jones

Thank you for joining us.

Peini Feng

Yes.

Marc LePain

Good. This is great. You can see me, and I can see you.

Peini Feng

Yes, I can see you.

Marc LePain

Good.

Peini Feng

And I have your book right here.

Marc LePain

Oh, yes.

Peini Feng

I mean, it is Father Fortin's book.

Marc LePain

It's Father Fortin's book.

Peini Feng

Yes. We actually read it in our class.

Marc LePain

I just...

Peini Feng

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

Marc LePain

Well, no. First of all, I want to acknowledge what I've already told you, Peini, in my first reply. You're doing a wonderful thing for yourselves and for so many others.

You're right. Time is passing, and there's a risk of Father Fortin's thought being put aside, not entirely forgotten, but not that well known. And so, you are keeping it alive in all the ways that you're doing it.

And for that, you are to be commended. I wish you well.

Peini Feng

Thank you very much. It is our pleasure to learn from and inherit his legacy as well.

Yes.

Marc LePain

Yes. Yes. Good.

Should we get started, Peini?

Peini Feng

Yes.

Elliott Jones

I am sure you have seen some of the interviews we have published online.

Generally, we want to introduce Father Fortin as a person and a thinker and to commemorate his legacy. We have been considering the similarities between the Perspectives Program at Boston College and the Foundations Program at Assumption College.

Could you describe Father Fortin's legacy or influence on the Foundations Program, including its origins and impact?

Marc LePain

Sure. Well, first of all, the initial course in the Foundations Program, which dates back to 1975, combined religion and philosophy. In contrast to the Perspectives Program at BC, it was team-taught.

A colleague of mine in philosophy, who still teaches at Assumption, and I teamed up to create a year-long Foundations course in religion and philosophy. It had the advantage of team teaching. Within a few short years, two other professors—Father Richard Lamoureux, who is still at Assumption, and Professor Patrick Powers, who has since died—created a more novel course on politics and art.

That became the freshman year-long course, team-taught and interdisciplinary. Students subsequently followed it with the year-long religion and philosophy class that I taught with Professor Paul Douillard. So there were two differences: one, our courses were team-taught; and two, there was the novel combination of politics and art. I should mention that all four of the people who taught in the Foundations Program were students of Father Fortin.

Or, I should say, one was not a student but knew him while he was at Assumption. We were all people formed in the same tradition.

Peini Feng

That is very good. Perhaps we can interview them as well.

Marc LePain

Well, I should say, Father Lamoureux did not have Father Fortin in school. He joined the Assumptionists after his sophomore year and did his philosophy training in Europe. So, he never had Father Fortin as an instructor.

You could still speak with him. Professor Powers has since passed away about two or three years ago. And the other you could talk to, and I would encourage you to talk to, Professor Paul Douillard.

He still teaches in retirement at Assumption. And he has the distinction, by the way, besides being a co-founder of our Foundations program, of being the only person who was a student of Father Ernest in three different institutions. So, he was a student of his as an undergraduate at Assumption.

And then he went to Laval where Father Ernest, as you know, taught a few weeks in the winter session and had him as a teacher there. And then pursued a doctorate in philosophy at BC and met up with him again there. No one else has been a student of Father Ernest in three different institutions.

Peini Feng

That is a remarkably rich experience. Father John Franck told me that Father Fortin taught at Laval for a time and traveled between Assumption College and Laval.

At Laval, he taught in French because he was fluently bilingual in French and English. Father Franck encouraged me to learn more about Fortin's teaching at Laval in comparison with his teaching at Assumption University and Boston College. It would be a great pleasure if we could interview Professor Douillard.

Marc LePain

There's a whole story there of how all this came about. I think you are familiar with the two accounts that we have of Father Ernest. One is the interview conducted by Michael Foley, which appears in the *Festschrift*.

And then there is also Father Ernest's own account from the fall of 1969.

Peini Feng

Yes. I have read them both.

Marc LePain

Well, I think especially the 1969 account—his own autobiographical account—tells you how, as an undergraduate at Assumption, Father Ernest, who was already a young Assumptionist brother, encountered teachers who had themselves gone to Laval. He was very attracted to this fresh reading of Thomas Aquinas and Aristotle that had been the work of Charles de Koninck—in fact, the work of one man. In the summer of 1946, just after he received his bachelor's degree at Assumption, Father Ernest went to summer school at Laval and encountered de Koninck there, really for the first time as a teacher.

As he once described it, this was the first summer after the end of the war, when the GI Bill made it possible for veterans to pursue their studies. Quebec was alive with Americans who had gone to Laval to study with de Koninck. At that time, because of the war, Assumptionists being formed for America studied in Quebec and did their theology there.

This is what Father Ernest looked forward to, because he would be able to, well, rub elbows with de Koninck. But it did not happen that way. He was the first of the Americans after the war to be assigned to Rome to study theology.

He gives us an account of that experience. When he returned as a newly ordained priest in the summer of 1950, he hoped at last to go to Laval and study philosophy with de Koninck. But his provincial superior,

who had coincidentally been his philosophy teacher—and was himself a student of de Koninck—had other plans for him: he was to study French.

Peini Feng

Yes.

Marc LePain

He was to replace the aging Father Engelbert Devincq, a well-known figure at Assumption, who died tragically in the tornado that struck the school in 1953. But anyhow, as Father Ernest described it to me, when he was given this obedience to study French rather than to go to Laval to study philosophy, it was too late in the season to apply to American graduate programs. But you could get into the Sorbonne just by showing up and signing up, it seems.

And so he shipped off to Paris to study French. And, of course, you know what happened there.

Peini Feng

Yes.

Marc LePain

I do not need to say any more. But it came about in this way. He never ceased to have great respect for de Koninck.

But it was not to be that he would pursue his studies at Laval beyond the summer of 1946.

Peini Feng

Yes, I see.

Marc LePain

So when he did go to teach at Laval, at de Koninck's invitation, it was not because there were Straussians there. I think de Koninck simply had great respect for Father Ernest at that time and wanted him to come and teach at Laval. Unfortunately, de Koninck himself died in Rome in February 1965.

He was only fifty-eight years old when he died. So they never actually taught together at Laval.

Peini Feng

I see. It is also interesting that the Foundations Program combined philosophy and theology.

Marc LePain

Yeah.

Peini Feng

It also brought together literature, novels, art, and other humanities disciplines. That reminds me of Father John Franck's observation that, after Father Fortin went to Boston College, he became chair of the Theology Department and its first non-Jesuit chair. Father Franck sees this as evidence of Fortin's ability to converse with people from different disciplines.

Marc LePain

Oh, yeah.

Peini Feng

Do you know anything about the origins of Father Fortin's Bradley Lecture Series? He invited many distinguished scholars from different fields to lecture at Boston College.

Marc LePain

Am I right in thinking that this was an initiative he sort of co-sponsored or co-headed with Professor Bruell—with Christopher Bruell? Did they both have a hand in securing funds from the Bradley Foundation?

Peini Feng

Perhaps. That is my impression.

Marc LePain

I'm not sure.

Peini Feng

As I recall—I have forgotten which interview this came from—Father Fortin had contacts at the Bradley Foundation who knew him well. They were therefore willing to provide funding, which he used for the Bradley Lecture Series.

Marc LePain

I wouldn't know about that.

Peini Feng

I see. To return to the beginning: you were Father Fortin's student when he taught at Assumption College.

Marc LePain

Yes.

Peini Feng

Father John Franck told me that Assumption College was very small at the time and that Father Fortin was not only a teacher but also a priest and spiritual adviser. He ate dinner with students, and they played tennis afterward. Fortin actually lived among the students—an experience we do not necessarily have at Boston College.

How did you first meet Father Fortin? What was your first impression of him, and what was his life at Assumption College like?

Marc LePain

Father Fortin was a kind of awesome presence because of his towering intellect. But I did not really get to know him; I became acquainted with him.

I shook his hand. I said hello. He knew me.

I knew him from the time I was a freshman at the school. But I did not really get to know him as a teacher until I had him in class, which was every semester of my last two years—my junior and senior years.

Each semester I had a course with him. Before I get into those courses, which is interesting too, I should also say that he was the assistant dean of men, because we were not yet coeducational. He was also the tennis coach.

He was also, for a short time, the superior of the community. So he wore many hats in those years. But it was a small school, as you know.

He also lived on one of the residence-hall floors. From the time I first met him, I think I met him in his room, which was on the top floor of our oldest residence hall.

By the time I was a senior, he lived down the hall from me. In the evenings I would drop in on him, and we would chat and so on. It was a very close-knit community in that way.

You had access to your teachers, especially the priests, because they lived on campus. In my junior year, I had him for a year-long course in political philosophy, which I believe was the second time he offered the course. That was after he had returned from his 1962 sabbatical in Chicago with Strauss.

He developed this year-long course in political philosophy: ancients in the fall, moderns in the spring. We were perhaps twelve or fourteen students in that class that year, juniors and seniors. It was a great course.

I do not have a syllabus for you. I know you are trying to collect syllabi from the archives. I must say, you are going to be hard-pressed.

It is not because the syllabus was lost—not at all. It was simply not the practice at that time, at Assumption at any rate, to hand out syllabi. You were told what books you needed to buy.

You bought them, and you were given reading assignments from class to class, along with the writing assignments you had to do. University syllabi have now become federal documents—with the Americans with Disabilities Act and everything else.

You have to use the proper language and everything like that. It was nothing of the sort then. But having said that, and although I cannot supply you with a syllabus, I remember distinctly practically every book we read.

I also think I remember all the writing assignments we did in the course of that year-long introduction to political philosophy. I can tell you what they were, if you would like.

Peini Feng

I would love to hear them. That is fantastic.

Elliott Jones

Please—absolutely.

Marc LePain

At the beginning of the year, we read—and I do recall writing three essays early on. One was on *The Assembly of Women*, the comedy by Aristophanes.

Another was on the Melian Dialogue in Thucydides. A third was on Plato's *Ion*, that short dialogue. Then we launched into the *Republic*, and I think we spent several weeks reading it.

He had us give individual oral presentations on various books or parts of books of the *Republic*. I think I gave a presentation on Book V. We capped the fall semester with Aristotle's *Politics* and were assigned to write an essay on Aristotle's critique of Plato in, I think, Book II of the *Politics*—that critique of the Platonic best regime, it would have been.

It was very eye-opening to be reading these books and writing these essays. I should also add that, throughout the year, the secondary source we had to acquire and read was *Natural Right and History*, Strauss's great work that covers the whole scope of political philosophy. It was a background book that we were all reading along with the primary sources.

Spring was Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Hegel's *Philosophy of History*, and Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*. I do remember two of the essays—I am sure we wrote more—but he assigned us essays that were not always on books we were actually reading together in class. We did an essay on Part IV of *Gulliver's Travels*, "*The Houyhnhnms*." Again, these were eye-opening things that you did on the side, independently of what was going on in class as we read these books.

The other was on a novel by Flaubert, not very well known or widely read these days, *Bouvard et Pécuchet*. That was a sort of favorite of his, about the discombobulation of modern learning. If you have not read it and are looking for some laughs—

Those are two essays that I recall from the spring semester. I also recall that, at the end of the year, because I had an off-campus commitment, I was not able to be present for the final exam. So he gave me an oral exam instead.

For an oral exam, he gave you a topic; you had ten minutes to go think about it, and then you made a presentation and he drilled you. The topic he gave me was happiness in modern political philosophy. It is a great topic to develop on the spur of the moment after reading Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Locke.

Elliott Jones

That is wonderful. Thank you. Do you have any—

Marc LePain

Yes, well, that is just a quick summary. In the fall of my senior year, all students were required to take a course in ethics, which Father Fortin taught. We had requirements in philosophy and theology that were far more numerous than those in the present curricula at most Catholic institutions.

So we read the *Nicomachean Ethics*. We read some Kant and some Nietzsche. I do not remember what else.

And the oddity of oddities was that, in the spring of my senior year, he offered a course in world religions for the only time. It was an elective in theology that he developed and taught once; I do not think he ever taught it again.

Peini Feng

I see.

Marc LePain

Okay, that's my account of my experience of him as a teacher.

Elliott Jones

Do you remember any particular moments from the classroom? What was his teaching style like? Are there any anecdotes, insights, or jokes that stand out?

Another question concerns the relationship between his roles as professor and priest. How did you see him in both roles?

Marc LePain

Well, you knew very well that he was a priest. At Boston College, I know, he always taught in a jacket and tie. You have comments made by Father McNellis on his sartorial choices. I have read that.

But at Assumption he wore the full habit, the full Augustinian habit, which all the priests and brothers wore all the time. It was very rare to see him in a Roman collar and black suit. He was always in the habit, and he would offer Mass and preach and give direction and such.

So he was very much a priest all the time, though he could teach Nietzsche in the habit—and that was it. You took that for granted because he was not the only priest teaching. We had priests teaching chemistry, history, and whatnot.

So that was not unusual. He would try to elicit students' comments, questions, and answers. Sometimes I felt embarrassed when he would look at me, expecting me to ask a question or make some bright comment, which I was not in any way prepared to do. It put me on the spot, but he was very interactive in that way.

And yes, there were jokes. I remember one. When he was teaching world religions, it was at a time when this had become rather popular in the United States: the attraction to Buddhism, India, and whatnot.

He had assigned us—or was assigning us—to read a classic Buddhist text called the *Dhammapada*, which is a synthesis of Buddhist teaching, a very handy little text. But he would make a spoof of it and say, “What? You have not read the *Dhammapada*?”

As though everybody was reading it—where had you been? This was a spoof, of course, because he was saying, “This is not an important book in your formation, but we are reading it to be informed.”

Then there was another trait of his that sometimes came across in the classroom and sometimes elsewhere. He had a quirk of falling into what the French call a *fou rire*, a spasm of laughter that he could not control. Somebody would say something, or he would say something, and it would get him laughing uncontrollably.

Of course, the thing was to try to get him to laugh uncontrollably, just to have fun in class. But we did not have to try very hard, because it happened every now and again. At the same time, there was the utmost seriousness in tackling these books.

So those are things that I remember. Because he was such an authoritative figure, you took what he said quite seriously—at least most of us did—because we knew he had a mastery of whatever he was teaching.

Peini Feng

That is a lovely story, especially the way he laughed so intensely.

Marc LePain

Well, it was uncontrollable sometimes.

Peini Feng

Yes.

Marc LePain

It is a phenomenon. I may be wrong in thinking that it was a sort of byproduct of his demanding intellectual commitment—that you needed relief from it. Tennis was not enough, and a *fou rire* would help clear the air.

Peini Feng

That is an interesting phenomenon. I heard a similar story in an interview with students of Leo Strauss. During a class on Machiavelli, a student was reading Strauss a letter from Machiavelli’s wife that said something like, “Dear Machiavelli, I was happy when you were not here.” Strauss laughed uncontrollably, fell from his chair, and the students had to help him out of the room so that he could continue laughing.

Perhaps Father Fortin learned that from Strauss as well. I do not know; it may simply be a coincidence.

Marc LePain

I know it preceded his encounter with Strauss.

Peini Feng

Yes.

Marc LePain

I have heard from students who were there before I was, because he started teaching at Assumption in 1955, when he returned from Paris. In that first year, there was a group of students who caught on to his *fou rire* and would sort of trigger it.

Peini Feng

Speaking of Father Fortin as both priest and teacher: the courses you mentioned focused on ancient and modern thought. As a priest, where did he place the medieval thinkers—especially Dante, the Latin Averroists, al-Farabi, and Averroes?

Marc LePain

They were not. This is what is so interesting. I went to Assumption at a time when it was—well, is it more Catholic now? Is it less Catholic now?

Let us leave that aside. But we would have to say that, given the presence of the religious community, of priests in the classroom, and so on—and the students being almost all Catholic; we had one Jewish student in the school, and he was in charge of parties, which was great—the fact is that, in my four years at Assumption, I was never assigned to read a line of either Augustine or Thomas Aquinas. In the theology classes, we had textbooks that, like textbooks in any other field, would digest Thomas Aquinas.

They were Thomistic, but they were textbooks. They were not the writings of Thomas himself. And you are right: there was a big omission.

I remember Father Ernest once saying, “Gee, maybe we should have the *City of God* in political philosophy,” but it was not in that course. Maybe it was because he was having us read *Natural Right and History*; I do not know. Certainly, he was working on those authors.

He had already published the first edition of *Medieval Political Philosophy: A Sourcebook*.

Peini Feng

Oh, wow.

Marc LePain

Yes, that came out in 1963, just before my course—my first year with him. So he had a very good knowledge of Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Dante, Marsilius, and the others. But they never figured in that political philosophy course.

Peini Feng

That is extremely interesting, because the first course Father Fortin taught at Boston College was on medieval philosophy.

Marc LePain

Yes.

Peini Feng

Aquinas and Augustine.

Marc LePain

I have to say, he also offered a course in patristics—the Church Fathers—from the 1950s right through his years at Assumption. That course was not offered formally while I was there, but I had a good friend and classmate who did an independent study with him.

That is where he read Augustine and so many other Church Fathers whom Father Ernest knew very well. So he did teach patristics. He had also taught the senior-year course in Christology for a number of years. By the time I came along, he had ceased to teach that course.

Somebody else had picked it up.

Peini Feng

That is a very interesting detail. At Boston College, his focus was clearly on medieval thinkers, especially Dante.

Marc LePain

As for Dante, I remember just one brief conversation with him about the Ulysses canto during my senior year. We were returning from a basketball game and chatted about it on our way back to the dorm. But there was nothing else.

This was still 1965. His first venture into Dante scholarship did not bear fruit until several years later.

Peini Feng

I see.

Marc LePain

So Dante was a big item on his agenda by the time he got to Boston College, but not when I knew him at Assumption in the early 1960s.

Peini Feng

If he did not teach these authors directly in class, did he mention them in his preaching? Father John Franck told me that Fortin preached about saints and thinkers such as Augustine, Aquinas, and Saint Thomas More.

Marc LePain

Yes. He would make these references in his sermons, because he knew them very well.

Peini Feng

When we interviewed Professor Michael Foley, he said that Father Fortin's comments on Vatican II were, in one respect, very respectful because Fortin respected the authority of the Church.

At the same time, Fortin was very candid. He thought Vatican II might not have understood the foundations of modern philosophy sufficiently to offer a proper Catholic response. He also noted that Vatican II was pastoral rather than doctrinal, which left room for argument.

Some people may not have welcomed Fortin's critique of Vatican II. Do you remember how people reacted to his comments at the time?

Marc LePain

I think a lot of it is that people did not understand and may not yet understand. I remember a comment in class as early as 1963, in that first semester of political philosophy. This was before Vatican II had convened—or it had just begun, I should say. He commented on Pope John XXIII's last encyclical: "You know, even the Church now talks about rights."

This was at a time when he was beginning to explore the roots of the doctrine of rights more thoroughly than, I think, he could find them in Vatican II. So I think you are quite right about what Professor Foley told you; I would agree. Father Fortin was trying to get at the roots of the rights doctrine, which ultimately conflicts with the preeminence of duties.

I think it was Leo Strauss who said, "God did not give a Bill of Rights on Mount Sinai. The Ten Commandments are duties." I think Strauss said something like that about the Ten Commandments.

The emphasis on rights was problematic because of the foundations of the rights doctrine. A lot of scholars—not only Catholic scholars, but others too—who investigate these questions find a Christian or medieval origin of rights that Father Ernest questioned. And that did not always register.

Peini Feng

Professor Timothy Burns told us another anecdote. In Father Fortin's living room, there was a crucifix and photographs of Leo Strauss and Allan Bloom. When Bloom saw the crucifix and the two photographs, he said, "Ah, Jesus and the two thieves."

Is it true that Father Fortin kept photographs of Leo Strauss and Allan Bloom in his living room?

Marc LePain

I have heard that before. I do not know whether I saw it, though I may have a recollection of seeing it.

But yes, I think it is true. These were two people very dear to him. As a Christian and a priest, he had them at heart.

Peini Feng

I see.

Elliott Jones

You mentioned that he lived in the residence hall. Dr. Martha Martini told us that, in his Boston apartment, he had books from floor to ceiling and nothing in his refrigerator.

What was Father Fortin's room at Assumption like? Was it similar?

Marc LePain

I do not know that much about that apartment. I went there a number of times, and I can imagine that the refrigerator might have been empty for lack of investment—even of time.

But let me go back to Worcester when I was a student, which I think is what you are asking about. Nobody had refrigerators in their rooms.

Nobody had cell phones. Nobody had a computer. When I say that he had a room in a residence hall, I mean that he had a suite.

The rest of us shared rooms, two students to a room. At the end of the corridor was a small suite with a private bath, a separate bedroom, and a desk in the other room, which also served as his office. He ate all his meals, as did all the religious, in one common dining room on campus.

In our dining hall, there was a smaller, separate dining room for the fifteen or twenty priests and brothers, who ate all their meals there. So he did not need a refrigerator or need to go out and shop. It was all provided.

His room was more of a small suite. I suppose he had one chair in which to sit and read, and then a desk.

Peini Feng

As I recall, while living in the residence hall he was also a spiritual adviser to students.

Marc LePain

Yes.

Peini Feng

What kind of spiritual adviser was Father Fortin?

Marc LePain

Well, in many ways he was very willing to talk to students about just about anything. I never saw him for spiritual advice myself. I know that he was very good at recommending readings that might profit a student's spiritual life.

He had a great liking for Romano Guardini. I do not know whether that means anything to you. Guardini's name is Italian, but he really grew up and lived his life in Germany.

He died in 1968 after a very prolific and influential life. Romano Guardini's book *The Lord*, which is really an attempt at a life of Christ in Guardini's own way, was a book that he cherished and often recommended.

There were other books he had picked up along the way that he liked and would recommend to students on the side. So that was one way of doing things. He also simply listened to students.

There were instances in which he helped students who had difficulties—besides academic difficulties. This he was glad to do.

I cannot think of particular instances here, but I know there were some.

Peini Feng

This also makes me think about the nature of good education. I have compared Carl Schmitt and Heidegger with Leo Strauss. Schmitt and Heidegger seem to want to put a strong spirit into the souls of their students.

Strauss, by contrast, wanted to recognize each student's nature and allow that student to be educated accordingly. Father Fortin seems clearly closer to Strauss in this respect. He did not try to impose the same spirit on every student.

Marc LePain

I think this is very much in the DNA, if you wish, of Assumption. As you noted earlier, Assumption was a school of at most 300 students all the time I was there. It's now 2,000, not a big university, but certainly many times over what it was then.

When Father Fortin himself was a student, there were no more than a dozen students in the college. His graduating class in 1946 consisted of three students, all three of them Assumptionist student brothers. It was wartime.

So many students were drafted. In order to keep the school alive, you had just a small number of students. So what did that mean?

Well, as he describes it in the two documents that you have available, Mike Foley's interview and before that, the 1969 autobiography, it really meant a close-knit community of so few students so that there was an awful lot of sharing with faculty.

Peini Feng

Professor Michael Foley's interview with Father Fortin also reminds me that Fortin said some nuns at his school were very good at matchmaking among students. I wonder whether he learned something about education from that early experience as well.

Marc LePain

No, he was not responsible for my meeting my wife. I do not think he was engaged in that. I think he was simply respectful of the knack of a nun who tried to match him with a girl.

But that happened way back when he was in the eighth grade in Woonsocket. No, matchmaking was not something that he did.

He was, however, very interested in attracting young men to the Assumptionists, as best he could. Father John Franck did not become an Assumptionist because of him, but he was certainly marked by Father Ernest as a teacher and director.

But as for what you are asking about—no, that was not the case, so far as I know.

Elliott Jones

You have been at Assumption for a long time. Could you tell us more about Assumptionist spirituality and how it differs from Ignatian spirituality?

Marc LePain

Yes. It is really rooted in Augustine more than anything else. There is a story about the founder, Father Emmanuel d'Alzon, in the middle of the nineteenth century. He founded an order that he wanted to be stamped with the spirit of Augustine.

He founded it in a school in southern France, in the city of Nîmes, which he had taken over. He was a diocesan priest, a young priest who had assumed direction of the school. So he was not only a religious founder and priest, but an educator as well.

Even before his time, the school had been called Collège de l'Assomption, or Assumption College—which, in French terms, is more like a high school than a university-level school. It still exists in Nîmes and now bears his name. The order was called the Augustinians of the Assumption.

He battled in France at that time for the freedom of Catholic education against the state system, which, in the wake of the Revolution, was always encroaching. He wanted to found a Catholic university, which he never succeeded in doing. By the time he was nearing the end of his life, however, Catholic institutes like the one in Paris had been founded and are still flourishing today—wLille, Toulouse, Paris, Lyon—so he was an educator. The story I find very endearing is one he tells of leaving a meeting with a couple of Catholic professors at state schools.

As the three of them were walking along, a young fellow came up. D'Alzon recognized him; the student recognized d'Alzon and gave him a big hug, to the astonishment of the other two teachers. After the fellow left, Father d'Alzon explained to them that this was a boy he had had to dismiss from the school.

And yet there were such terms of endearment that they would hug each other. The other two professors said, "We never thought of that at our state schools," because there you would never think of having an affectionate relationship with your teacher. You went through the ropes, and your teacher remained at some distance from you all along the way.

That story epitomizes what I have found at Assumption since I went to the prep school. I too went to the prep school, as Father Ernest did. So I came along through the system, as it were.

It is a question of friendship, which was very much a hallmark of Augustine's own life. In that spirit, if anybody wants to identify the charism that marks Assumption, I would say that it is friendship, in a simple way. I know much more about this than about the Jesuits, whom you must know better because you have been with Jesuits.

So there was this camaraderie without overfamiliarity, because it was respectful. There was an endearment in having a priest who was your teacher and professor, who lived down the hall, and who was available whenever you wanted to knock on his door. That is remarkable.

So the charism, I think, is steeped in Augustine. But at the same time—and I think this is clear not only in what Father Ernest says in those interviews, especially the Foley interview, but also in the founder—there is not only Augustine; there is Thomas Aquinas. Father Ernest told me that, during his early Assumptionist formation, when he was a novice in Quebec after his sophomore year at the college during the war, his novice master encouraged him to read the *Summa* every day. He did so before he had any formal education in theology.

Even though we never read a line of Augustine or Thomas Aquinas while I was a student, that spirit was there. I am happy to say there is more reading of those two now than there was then. But, to answer your question, I think it comes down to that Augustinian premium placed on friendship.

Peini Feng

That relationship between Augustine and Aquinas is also very interesting, because it appeared in the founding of the Perspectives Program. Initially, the program was more Lonerganian—and therefore Thomistic—and focused on epistemology: how do we know things?

Father Fortin reoriented the Perspectives Program toward the question of how to live a good life, which is more Augustinian. I can see the connection.

Marc LePain

Yes.

Peini Feng

Do you know whether Father Fortin ever commented on Professor Bernard Lonergan?

Marc LePain

Oh, yes. I did not hear this directly from him, but it is an anecdote told by Fred Lawrence, who was a great champion of Lonergan at Boston College. I have not seen Fred for some time and do not know how he is.

As Fred tells it, Father Fortin said, “Lonergan was the Christopher Columbus of the twentieth century, but the ship never left Genoa.”

Elliott Jones

That is wonderful. I have been trying to find an anecdote from Father Fortin about Lonergan. That is excellent.

Peini Feng

That is amazing.

Marc LePain

I didn't hear it directly from him, but I trust that Fred got it.

Peini Feng

Yes. I trust Fred's account as well.

Another interesting part of Father Fortin's legacy appears in the fourth volume of his collected writings, edited by Michael Foley. One section is devoted to speeches Fortin gave before sporting contests between Assumption College and Holy Cross.

Do you remember those speeches?

Marc LePain

Oh, yes.

Peini Feng

They are very good speeches.

A little vulgar, but very good.

Marc LePain

There were several speeches that he would give. Because he was very close to the students and was the assistant dean of students, he would always be the one to stand up on a chair. The whole school would gather in a recreation hall, and everybody was entitled to two bottles of beer.

We would do some drinking, and it was a pep rally before the basketball season. He would get up on the chair, make a great speech, and inspire us to be like David going against Goliath and bringing him down. So

you have read those, and they are authentic transcripts of the pep rallies at which he would always make a big speech.

Peini Feng

That seems to me another shining moment in the Augustinian tradition.

Elliott Jones

Yes.

Peini Feng

One must have a very close relationship with both one's students and one's rivals to give "offensive" speeches as genuine entertainment rather than as a real offense. There must be enough friendship to make those playful insults without actually offending anyone.

Marc LePain

Yeah, no, no. And I think people understood that very well. There was no squeamishness about these things.

Elliott Jones

Thank you.

Marc LePain

I should mention—and I do not know whether you know this—that the Foundations Program at Assumption no longer exists.

Elliott Jones

I did not know that.

Marc LePain

It was replaced a few years ago by a slightly different program called Core Texts and Enduring Questions. It is similar in its focus on great books and so on, but we no longer have the team teaching or the interdisciplinary religion and philosophy course.

They are taught separately. But the program still bears the two names, as did the Fortin and Gonthier Foundations of Western Civilization Program.

Elliott Jones

Yes.

Marc LePain

You know much about Father Fortin and are seeking to perpetuate that legacy. He was very good friends with Father Denys Gonthier. The two of them would be seen walking together and talking after meals on campus.

They were very different types. Father Denys, I think, hardly ever wrote anything except his dissertation on *Don Quixote* at Madrid. He hardly ever gave a lecture at a conference, but he was a master teacher.

And if there was any priest at Assumption who was giving spiritual direction, it was Father Denys Gonthier. He had that kind of gift, and he drew students more than the other priests did—not that the other priests would refuse, but he was a magnet.

He taught us French literature in our first two years. Enough of us at that time were sufficiently proficient in French to do a year-long *explication de texte* course, in which you took just a page or two a day and

milked it in order to understand it. That was followed by a year-long introduction to twentieth-century French literature.

We were only two-thirds of the way through the century, but there was still an awful lot to read for a whole year. We read every major work of note in the twentieth century—

Novels, plays, and poems—with Father Denys Gonthier. So they were really great friends. As one of my classmates put it, Father Denys taught us how to read.

So what did Father Ernest do? Given that we already had those skills in close reading from Father Denys, Father Ernest opened the mind to the whole treasury of the West, with all of its tensions—ancients and moderns, Jerusalem and Athens, and so on. We received an initiation into reading from Father Denys, who was that good friend of his.

Peini Feng

Thank you very much. That is a compelling pairing, and it reminds me of my interview with Professor Charles Butterworth, another friend of Father Fortin.

Professor Butterworth said that one of Father Fortin's most important legacies was the injunction to keep the question open. I sometimes wonder what that means. The phrase can sound as though one should remain open to every possibility, reject every conclusion, and become merely destructive rather than constructive. But in the case of Father Fortin and Father Denys Gonthier, keeping the question open seems to be a treasure that must be accompanied by the skill of close reading.

How do you understand the value of keeping the question open? What have you personally learned from, or gained through, that practice?

Marc LePain

Well, one thing that I certainly learned from Father Fortin was, if I can put it this way, the lay of the land. What is the difference between Jerusalem and Athens? What is the difference between ancients and moderns?

That is just the tip of the iceberg. There are so many other elements that you find in these distinctions. Along life's way, I met people from other backgrounds who had rather superficial understandings of these things. What Father Ernest did was help us make the distinctions and understand the root foundations of the sources available to us. You knew what they were, and you knew how they differed. Eventually, you have to make a choice.

One of the great things I found in him, and did not see elsewhere, concerned people who simply harmonize philosophy and theology, reason and revelation, without sufficiently understanding what Augustine made clear in his own experience: the difference between philosophy as a way of life and faith grounded in revelation as a way of life. These call for different virtues. They are different ways of life. All too often, in Catholic circles and elsewhere, whether you see them as opposed or harmonized, you do not rightly understand that they are ways of life.

That, I think, is what Father Ernest taught me more than anything else. This is not to say that choosing faith in revelation means something irrational—quite the opposite. I think he drew on a number of biblical, patristic, and medieval sources to show that faith is not unreasonable, but it is not the same as the way of life that is philosophy.

Peini Feng

That reminds me of my own reading of Father Fortin and of Christianity today. It also brings to mind Pope Leo XIV's recent encyclical, *Magnifica Humanitas*, which begins with the mystery of Christ. The pope later makes many valid ethical judgments, but they are grounded in the inner testimony of the mystery of Christ and of the Holy Spirit.

The mystery of Christ remains a mystery; it prevents us from reducing Christianity to a completely closed doctrine. A mystery is like a living spring of water that must be received by each living person, rather than turned into dogma understood as ashes left after a fire has burned out.

Father Fortin's call to open one's mind to the treasury of Western civilization seems similar. I once heard a joke that there are two kinds of Thomists. One reads Thomas Aquinas but also reads Aristotle, Plato, Hobbes, Locke, and many other philosophers, while still understanding Aquinas's unique and supreme value. That person is truly open-minded and able to appreciate what is genuinely good. The other kind reads Aquinas alone and knows no other philosophy.

When Father Fortin says that we should keep the question open and remain open-minded, he encourages us to receive whatever is genuinely good. He frees us from dogmatic assumptions that might prevent such an encounter. Close reading educates us in how to appreciate things, while an open mind frees us from a merely dogmatic reception. Together, they represent genuine liberal education without sacrificing the depth and discipline of close reading.

Marc LePain

Oh, yes. Let those things go together: close reading, openness, and awe before the mystery of things. There is a cramped Thomism that, of course, he rejected. Fortunately, he was not nurtured in it as others were, largely because of de Koninck to begin with. But go on.

Peini Feng

Perhaps our last question for today concerns the Ernest Fortin Foundation. After Father Fortin died, Father John Franck served as its first president. What do you know about the Foundation's origins and its work after Father Fortin's death?

Marc LePain

Well, I know a little bit, and I can tell you who can tell you more. Father John Franck, of course, but perhaps others too. Father Fortin was the heir to some money from his own father, who had died some years earlier, and other people contributed to the Fortin Foundation. The people involved included Martha Martini and Father John Franck. I think Dan Mahoney was involved. Have you spoken with him?

Elliott Jones

We are trying to reach him.

Peini Feng

I heard that he had left Assumption University.

Marc LePain

He retired, but he is living in the area.

Peini Feng

Before we end the interview, is there anything you would like to mention that we have not covered?

Marc LePain

Here is a little anecdote. It has nothing to do with me, but we began by talking about the year-long political philosophy course I had with Father Fortin. Four seniors from that class went on to Notre Dame for further studies in philosophy or political philosophy, and they took a seminar with Eric Voegelin.

At the end of the seminar, the story goes, Voegelin said, "We had some very fine papers in this seminar, but four were particularly outstanding. Mr. So-and-so, where did you do your undergraduate work?"

“Assumption College.” He went through all four of them. Voegelin arranged for all four to go with him to Munich the following year and study with him there. Father Ernest liked to recall that story and was particularly proud that the four outstanding students in Voegelin’s seminar were his students.

Elliott Jones

That is wonderful.

Peini Feng

Father Fortin also reviewed the published correspondence between Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin.

Marc LePain

Yes.

Peini Feng

That is excellent. We will send you the first transcript so that you can revise it. Of course, we will not publish anything on our website without your explicit approval.

Marc LePain

Sure. Some other time, perhaps, we can talk more about Dante.

Peini Feng

Yes, of course—about your book and your translation. Professor DiPasquale taught the book; he was a student of Father Fortin at Boston College. It has been very nice to meet you. Thank you so much for all your help.

Marc LePain

I will be glad to help in any way I can. I feel very close to Father Fortin.

Peini Feng

I am sorry—one more question. What do you know about the relationship between Father Fortin and Professor Muhsin Mahdi at Harvard?

Marc LePain

Well, he, Muhsin Mahdi, and Ralph Lerner were the three editors of the medieval political philosophy book. By the way, it is known as the Lerner-Mahdi book.

Peini Feng

That is strange.

Marc LePain

Father Fortin’s name does appear on the title page, with the phrase “with the collaboration of Ernest L. Fortin.” But it is a bit of a puzzle: why was he not listed as one of the editors? Father Fortin explained it to me, and the reason is rather simple.

Father Fortin was teaching at Assumption, a small school. As a member of a religious order, he had guaranteed tenure. But Mahdi and Lerner were then seeking tenure at Harvard and Chicago, respectively, so it was obviously to their benefit that their names appear. Father Fortin did not need that.

It was really a threefold effort. They were good friends. Because everybody lived in Boston or Cambridge, they would get together and so on.

I do not know anything more. I think Professor Mahdi was present at a celebration not long before Father Fortin's stroke. It was a celebration at Boston College for the three volumes that Professor Benestad edited. I saw Professor Mahdi there. That is about it; I would not be able to tell you anything more.

Peini Feng

I had wondered why Father Fortin's name did not appear as an editor on the title page.

Marc LePain

Well, now we know. He did not need it; they did.

Peini Feng

Thank you very much.

Elliott Jones

Thank you so much for your time, Professor.

Marc LePain

Gladly—anytime. Have a good day, and all the best to you in your endeavor.

Peini Feng

Yes.

Marc LePain

Thank you.