

Interview with Mary Ann Glendon

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



Mary Ann Glendon

Thank you for including me in your collection of interviews with people who knew Ernest Fortin. Regretfully, I did not know him as well as many others did, but I am glad to share what I recall. My late husband, Edward Lev, was Ernest's guardian during the period when Ernest was in assisted living, and I have often wished I knew what they talked about in their weekly visits. I know Ernest enjoyed those afternoons with my Jewish husband—and not just because Edward would often bring him one of those tiny bottles of spirits.

I first became acquainted with Ernest through other friends at Boston College, and I remember thinking that he was quite different from the other priests at BC. He had a way of shifting from high discourse on theology or philosophy to everyday speech that was surprising and delightful. I recall a lecture where he was introducing his friend Allan Bloom. He began by praising Bloom to the skies, describing him as the greatest expert on all kinds of things. Then he said to the audience in a kind of confidential tone, "You know what an expert is—it's some guy from outta town."

Peini Feng

Yes. As you can imagine, as we interview more friends and students of Fr. Fortin, we have heard many anecdotes about the Bradley Lecture Series. In those lectures, he introduced speakers in such memorable ways that his students still remember them twenty or thirty years later. That has become a major part of our interviews. I want to emphasize again that all the insights and life details you are providing are very valuable. We truly appreciate your doing this, so please share more anecdotes if you have any.

Mary Ann Glendon

I am glad you mentioned the Bradley Lectures. Ernest made them into exciting events—nearly everyone in the human sciences at BC looked forward to them. He had a vast acquaintance, and the speakers he brought in were often people one always wanted to meet but never thought an opportunity would arise.

Another context in which I got to know Ernest was at an interfaith roundtable organized by the late Richard John Neuhaus, the founder and editor of *First Things* magazine. That group met at the Union Club in New York City four or five times a year to discuss topics related to religion and public life. There were about thirty members, including Catholics, Protestants of various denominations, Jews of differing degrees of orthodoxy, and one Mormon.

At one meeting, the question came up—I do not recall how—whether Mormons are Christians. Richard Neuhaus, who was very much the leader of the group, declared that they absolutely were not. Our one Mormon member, Bruce Hafen, very politely pointed out that members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints consider themselves Christian. When the others, including the theologians, remained silent, I suggested that, as a matter of courtesy, if Mormons consider themselves Christians, we should

respect that. After all, I said, we were not gathered there to resolve theological questions, but to discuss issues of religion and public life of interest to all of us. The Mormons had been plaintiffs in some of the landmark U.S. Supreme Court decisions on religious freedom. Everyone else remained silent except Ernest, who backed me up. To the great loss of the group, Bruce Hafen left and never came back. That was another occasion where I thought Ernest seemed different.

Elliott Jones

Many people have said the same thing in our interviews: Father Fortin was an unusual priest. One reason is that he tended to give the impression—and also said explicitly—that he left open the question of theology, the question of philosophy, and the relation between the two. He held those questions open for debate, and I think that is something one often does not see in priests, philosophers, or academics more generally.

Mary Ann Glendon

Yes. At Boston College the other priests on the faculty were mainly Jesuits, but Ernest and I also attended a reading group at St. John's Seminary on the *Summa Theologiae* led by the distinguished Dominican moral theologian Father Romanus Cessario. Father Cessario always presided in the flowing white robe of his order, and the other priests were usually in clericals, while Ernest was usually in ordinary civilian garb. Again, one had the sense that there was something different about Ernest, or perhaps about the Assumptionists.

Elliott Jones

But there is also this: at the time in the theology department, the sense from conservatives was that many professors were challenging orthodoxy, especially in moral theology. Without putting a value judgment on the matter, did you get the impression that Father Fortin was challenging orthodoxy, or was he proposing a new way to think about theology? In other words, would you call him a radical, or someone trying to take a more moderate approach to orthodoxy and heterodoxy?

Mary Ann Glendon

I find it difficult to classify Ernest, and I see that you have the same difficulty. It seems to me that in some ways Ernest was orthodox, in the sense that he could say the Apostles' Creed without his fingers crossed. I would even say he was a strong defender of the faith, but in a way that was gauged to what he thought his listener was capable of taking in. He did not water anything down. He was very intelligent, and he had a keen sense of audience.

The great Jesuit theologian Bernard Lonergan once said of Vatican II that there would always be some Catholics who want to go back to a past that never existed, and there will always be innovators who want to take doctrine in this or that new direction, but that what will count is a "perhaps not numerous center" that is willing to make the eternal truths of the faith fresh for each generation, one step at a time. I see Ernest in that "not numerous center"—figuring out the best ways of bringing the eternal truths to a new generation, like "being a Jew to the Jews and a Greek to the Greeks".

For example, Father Fortin liked to surprise people by saying that Agatha Christie was a great moral philosopher. When asked to explain, he would cite the mystery novel—I do not know which one—where the characters are exclaiming about the horrible things that were done to a murdered person. At a certain point, Hercule Poirot intervenes to say that everybody knows what murder does to the victim, but what interests him is what murder does to the murderer. That was Ernest's way of illustrating Aristotle's point that with every action and decision one constitutes oneself as a certain kind of person, and one becomes virtuous—or not. Ernest had a great gift for making his points in a way that nobody who heard them would ever forget.

Elliott Jones

It is fascinating to me that crime and mystery novels have already come up in our former interview with Professor Michael Foley. Of course, Lonergan was a fan of detective novels for obvious reasons—"insight." It is just so interesting that all these thinkers were interested in detective stories. I must start reading them.

Mary Ann Glendon

I recall that Ernest had two favorite mystery writers. The other one, besides Agatha Christie, was Georges Simenon, the creator of the detective Maigret. I do not think he considered Simenon a moral philosopher. Perhaps he liked the Maigret stories because they reminded him of his student days in Paris, or he may have admired the portrayal of everyday domestic virtue in the detective hero. Maigret was not a tough-guy cop, a cynical PI, or a ladies' man. He was the embodiment of French bourgeois virtue, a steady reassuring presence amid the disorder of the big city.

Peini Feng

How did you meet Father Fortin initially?

Mary Ann Glendon

When I began teaching at BC Law School, I was already involved in interdisciplinary work, and I found that many of the people who shared my academic interests were in other parts of the university. Most importantly, I got to know Father Joseph Flanagan, then chair of the Philosophy Department. With the help of a large grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, he established what became BC's Perspectives Program. As one of the professors he invited to help design the human sciences part of that program, I attended a series of summer seminars where he brought many of the great teachers of the day to advise us on how to teach "the great books." Ernest was part of that program as well.

Peini Feng

It is very interesting that they had this kind of circle at that time. I heard from Professor Thomas Kohler that you introduced him to Ernest Fortin. He also mentioned that you had summer seminars in which everyone would read books together.

You mentioned that Father Flanagan brought all these people together: teachers teaching teachers, and teachers across different disciplines who were willing to come to these seminars and read together with professors from different departments. Why do you think they were willing to come together, and what commonality held them together?

Mary Ann Glendon

For me, and I imagine for many others, those seminars were like receiving a second graduate education at a time when I was in the best position to benefit from it. What an amazing privilege to be in the small group planning the Perspectives course on the human sciences. It included colleagues from economics, theology, political science, and sociology.

Father Flanagan insisted that we begin by reading the foundational works in each other's disciplines. To our amazement and chagrin, it turned out that none of us had read certain famous works that would be considered foundational in our own disciplines. The theologian had not read *The City of God*; the economist had not read *The Wealth of Nations*; the sociologist had not read Max Weber's *Economy and Society*; and I had not read Blackstone's *Commentaries*.

The experience of reading those works, and others, together was transformative for all of us. Our everyday work was greatly enriched by acquiring a really deep interdisciplinary dimension. What made it work so well was that Father Flanagan had taken pains to include people who had a certain cast of mind, who were open to learning, and who were comfortable with collaboration. We came to have real caring and respect for one another in the process.

When I moved to Harvard Law School, I kept on teaching Perspectives III, calling it “Foundations of Western Legal Thought.” Many students who took that course have told me that it was transformative for them, widening their horizons. I will always be grateful to Father Flanagan and to Boston College for the privilege of being part of that great intellectual adventure. Ernest was not in the social science group, but I believe he worked on other parts of the program.

Peini Feng

It was Professor Frederick Lawrence who invited Father Fortin from Assumption University to come to BC and then to be involved in the Perspectives Program. I believe Father Fortin had two major contributions. The first was to reorient the purpose of the Perspectives Program from epistemological...

Mary Ann Glendon

From epistemological to what?

Peini Feng

...from epistemological to the question, “What is the best way to live?” and “What is a good life?” The second great contribution is that he designed the ancient section, “Athens and Jerusalem,” for the Perspectives Program.

Mary Ann Glendon

Ernest must have been involved in the first, foundational part of the program. That would have been a natural place for him to make a major contribution.

Peini Feng

If I may, I want to ask further about the friend group in which you were involved with Father Fortin. You mentioned that you were proposing the fundamental texts that students should read, but that the founding Perspectives teachers had not read all the texts in their own disciplines. It is interesting for me to wonder: why had these people not read all the fundamental texts before?

Mary Ann Glendon

Great question. The genius of Father Flanagan was that he recognized a serious problem with modern university education: the increasing fragmentation of knowledge into specialized areas had come at a great cost. I had received an excellent legal education on all sorts of legal topics at the University of Chicago Law School. But there were no courses where one could step back and look at the subject of law as a whole.

Peini Feng

It is also very interesting that you mentioned this as a transformative experience for all of you. I wonder if you could share one or two details about how you were transformed by this experience of reading these fundamental texts.

Mary Ann Glendon

The Perspectives experience helped each of us to understand how our own disciplines evolved and how they related to one another. It gave us “perspective.” As graduate students, we had been introduced to our disciplines as if they were completely separate fields. In the Perspectives planning process, we were able to see the increasing fragmentation of knowledge for what it is: a relatively modern phenomenon. By tracing the development of our disciplines, we were enabled to see them in the broader context where they belong. That made us better scholars and better teachers.

Peini Feng

I see. It sounds very much like what Father Fortin is good at doing, which is bringing things down to earth so that we can see their roots. Another thing I want to ask about is the Ernest Fortin Foundation. After Father Fortin passed away, I heard from Father McNellis that there was an Ernest Fortin Foundation, which

provided grant money for graduate students doing certain research. But after a few years, I remember that the money was used up and the grant closed. I remember Father McNellis was involved in that foundation, but you were also involved in that foundation, and Dr. Martini...

Mary Ann Glendon

I was not so much involved in the Foundation as my husband, who was its treasurer, and my friend Martha Martini, who succeeded him in that role. My understanding is that Ernest had inherited a modest sum that he wanted to leave for good purposes. Characteristically, he wanted to make it possible for young people to have the best kind of education.

Peini Feng

I see. I will ask Dr. Martini further about that when we meet her this afternoon. Another question I have is that I heard from Professor David DiPasquale that, at the publication of Father Fortin's first volume of the *Collected Essays, The Birth of Philosophic Christianity: Studies in Early Christian and Medieval Thought*, there was a conference in honor of Father Fortin, and many people contributed talks for that conference. He told me that you also contributed a talk, a speech, for the conference. Do you remember that talk?

Mary Ann Glendon

Yes. I gave the Fortin Lecture in 2023, titled "What's Wrong with Rights?," which I will send to you. I chose the topic because Ernest is regarded by many as a critic of rights.

Elliott Jones

I have one more question. I am more interested in Lonergan here, but if you can connect him to Father Fortin, that would be great. Professor Kohler said that you both had a reading group where you studied Lonergan for many years. I am reading *Insight* right now, and I am fascinated by Lonergan. I am looking forward to studying him in the future. Could you share some "insights" you had with Professor Kohler while studying Lonergan? I have tried to ask whether there are any connections between Lonergan and Fortin in terms of their thought, and I have not gotten far. But I know Frederick knew Father Fortin, interacted with him, and was also a Lonerganian. I was wondering whether you see any connection between Lonergan and Fortin that you would like to share.

Mary Ann Glendon

I am not aware of any connections between Lonergan and Fortin, but I hope you will look into that. It would be fascinating to know what Ernest thought about Lonergan.

Peini Feng

Thank you. Our last question: you mentioned the Bradley Lecture Series, which is very famous. How much do you know about that series and its origin? Who were the people involved, and what was the academic atmosphere in your experience?

Mary Ann Glendon

Well, the funding came from the Bradley Foundation, whose stated purpose is "to restore, strengthen, and protect the principles and institutions of American exceptionalism." I recall the Bradley Lectures as a highlight of the academic year at BC, very popular and well attended. I do not remember all of the people who came, but many of them were stars in their fields. It would be great if Boston College could bring them back—or establish something like them.

Peini Feng

It is our aim in the Father Fortin Society to bring the pursuit of truth together from all the disciplines. That is also the spirit of the Perspectives Program. We are very grateful for this mission and for the help of you, Father Fortin, and many others. We are deeply grateful for it.

Mary Ann Glendon

A place where you might find names of potential lecturers is the relatively new American Academy of Sciences and Letters.