

Interview with Paul McNellis, S.J.

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

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Nov. 24, 2025

Chestnut Hill, MA

Fr. Fortin Archive Interview I. (revised, ver. V, 12/25/25 by PWM)



Beginning

Fr. McNellis:

I'm tremendously grateful and indebted to Fr. Fortin both as a teacher and as a thinker. Other than the classical texts—the Bible, Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, Pascal, etc.—there isn't anyone else to whom I owe more in the development of my own thinking. He was also always kind and encouraging as a teacher and mentor. His goodness and kindness as a priest has also served as an example for me. I had begun to fear that his thought was being forgotten, so I'm delighted to discover that you are forming a Fr. Fortin Society. How can I help?

Elliott:

I think we would really like to know Fr. Fortin better. To know a little bit more about him as a person and also about his ideas. And lastly, so this will be sort of the structure of our conversation: One, who is Fr. Fortin? Two, what are his ideas? And, thirdly, what is his legacy and what can we do to continue his legacy? Which as you say, you feared was in danger of being forgotten.

Fr. McNellis:

Can you explain again how you became interested in Fr. Fortin and his thought? What attracted you to him, was there any one article by or about Fortin that pulled you in?

Peini:

Yes, there are actually a lot of reasons why I'm interested in Fr. Fortin. As you know, we have some Straussian professors in the Political Science Department here at BC. And regardless of what people think of them, I think they are good teachers in reading texts. And I learned a lot from them. But whenever I have a conversation that made people think I am a Straussian, like even with Elliott, people tend to presume that if you are a Straussian, you must be a nihilist. But I'm clearly not a nihilist.

Fr. McNellis:

No, clearly you are not. But I think the reaction you describe is kind of stupid, to just jump to a nihilist conclusion. In any case, it does not describe Fr. Fortin, me, or either of you.

Peini:

And the most useful example I have found to refute this strange prejudice is to say that Fr. Fortin, was the founder of our Perspective program...

Fr. McNellis:

Well, he's not the only one. I think...

Peini:

Co-founder, I should say.

Fr. McNellis:

Yes, I think Fr. Flanagan was the true founder.

Peini:

Flanagan?

Fr. McNellis:

Yes. He was a Jesuit, head of the Philosophy Department for many years. He was Prof. Cronin's uncle.

Peini:

Oh, wow!

Fr. McNellis:

I think Fr. Flanagan was the main dynamo. He had a special talent for getting other people involved, people like Fr. Fortin, Prof. Mary Ann Glendon from Harvard, Profs. McLaughlin and Peterson, from the Economics department here at BC. Prof. Glendon would be a good one to talk to as well as Prof. Cronin. When I arrived at BC the Perspectives Program was well underway. But Fr. Flanagan had a gift for attracting outstanding people. It was an amazing group of people he pulled together. I've only mentioned a few of them. What have you read by Fortin? Do you remember the first thing you read by him that got you so interested?

Peini:

Actually, yes. So there's the published correspondence between Leo Strauss and Eric Vogelin, *Faith and Political Philosophy*. And I read Fr. Fortin's review of the book.

Fr. McNellis:

Was that review published in *The Review of Politics* at Notre Dame?

Peini:

I don't recall. I read it from a collection of essays by Fr. Fortin, maybe in the fourth volume. And there is a sentence that I like very much. And we use that to open and end our discussion as well. Fr. Fortin says that "What the correspondence has made us see, in case we had not seen it already, is that the nature of the philosophic dialogue and the theoretical as well as extra-theoretical obstacles that stand in the way of its producing the agreement that constitutes its goal, in an age that has mostly given up on truth, the example, is an edifying one. That a conversation such as this one was possible in our time, regardless of its result, reminds us of a certain higher calling, the existence of which has all but vanished from our impoverished intellectual horizon." I was very touched by that. On the other hand, ... before I knew of Fr. Fortin, I did read his articles on Dante in one of my classes at BC.

Elliott:

Oh, really?

Peini:

Yes, taught by Prof. David DePasquale in the Political Science department. He was a student of Fr. Fortin, when he was a Masters student. And Fr. Fortin was very radical in the way that he claims that Dante is actually a pagan author writing Christian themes. I was totally shocked, as anyone who knows Dante would be.

Fr. McNellis:

I'm not sure if Fr. Fortin would say Dante was a pagan author, but I do know he thought Dante was writing a kind of political utopia writing. To your point, Fr. Fortin did once tell me that in reading Dante he would often wonder if Dante was really convinced of the truth of the Christian faith. I'm not sure that alone makes you a pagan.

Peini:

Yes.

McNellis:

And I'll tell you about when I was doing my own thesis. You go ahead. I can come back to it. Go ahead. Finish what you were going to say.

Peini:

Oh, I think that's a good place to start your account.

Fr. McNellis:

Well, I was working on my thesis in Munich at our Jesuit school of philosophy there [Hochschule für Philosophie, Berchmanskolleg]. I spent three years there. Although I started on Johannes Messner, by the end I was actually doing more work on Robert Spaemann than Messner. Spaemann and Fortin are probably the biggest influences on my own thought. But it was Fr. Fortin who taught me by example how to read carefully and critically. I'll try to give you an example of what it was like to hear Fr. Fortin lecture.

I recall an evening with Fr. Fortin at the Siemens Stiftung [Foundation] in Munich. The Siemens company funded an institute that would sponsor very high-quality lectures, and the foundation in Munich had invited Fr. Fortin to give a lecture on Dante. I'm sure the text, or some form of it, is in Fr. Fortin's collected writings (See the volumes edited Brian Benestad and Michael Foley).

Fr. Fortin's thesis was that Dante was primarily a political writer, and it was already a controversial thesis. Some of the best German Dante scholars, in particular from the University of Munich [Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München], were there. And it soon became clear that most of them were convinced Fr. Fortin had to be *wrong*. You could tell they were angry and you could almost hear the grumbling. Many of them had spent their whole lives studying and publishing books on Dante, and they had shown up to oppose Fr. Fortin. Whatever Dante was, they were convinced he was not a political utopia writer. They were angry, irritated, but in the polite, icy manner which German academics can pull off so well. It was polite but fierce.

At this point I should probably say something about Fr. Fortin's lecture style, which I always found fascinating. It was not a great magisterial lecture, like students going to Berlin to hear Hegel. I don't think you came to Boston College to hear Fortin *lecture*, but many graduate students came here to *learn* from him.

As a graduate student, I took several courses with Fr. Fortin. I thought he was a great lecturer, because of the content, not because of the style. As for style, he was kind of frumpy, disheveled almost. He'd lose his place in his notes (actually, he never really needed notes), and that evening in Munich he was like that. Allan Bloom dressed to impress. Fr. Fortin dressed for comfort, on a tight budget. He would wear a coat and a too-loose tie, and, it has to be said, ugly running shoes (because they were comfortable). That night in Munich he had a handout for the audience, and he was looking around, shuffling his papers as if he'd misplaced something. He did not *look* impressive. But then he began to speak. And within a few minutes, *everyone* was listening.

It wasn't a big lecture hall, probably 60 or so in a palace on the edge of Munich, with an overflow crowd watching on Closed Circuit TV. So in total, maybe 100-150? But anyone who was anyone in Dante studies in Germany was there.

It's hard to describe that evening. I've only seen something like one other time in my life. Everybody attending was there because they were sure Fr. Fortin was wrong. But Fr. Fortin began by slowly, calmly, deliberately, respectfully pointing out interesting things in Dante's text, double meanings, allusions to contemporary Italian political events. Fr. Fortin would explain at a deeper level what Dante was getting at. It soon became clear that many in the room had probably never seen in the text some of what Fr. Fortin was gently pointing out. He would make a very concise case for his interpretation, and you could tell that gradually the German professors were thinking (it not yet saying) "Yes, that makes sense." And he did this again and again throughout the evening.

The tone of the questioning slowly changed from, an antagonistic, "this has got to be wrong," to really good, respectful questions like, "What about this?" "What do you think Dante means here?" I think everyone in attendance gradually realized two things: Fr. Fortin loved Dante, and he knew more about Dante than anyone else in the room. The reaction of the German professors was, of course, a real tribute to them. They soon realized they could learn something about Dante if they asked Fr. Fortin the right questions. So they started to do that, and gradually it seemed as if no one wanted the evening to end.

It was one of the most remarkable evenings I've ever experienced. I saw it again with Prof. Robert Spaemann in a lecture he gave after the Fall of the Berlin Wall. It was a much different topic, but it was the same remarkable transformation of an audience that I first saw in Munich with Fr. Fortin.

Fr. Fortin would never attack anyone. He had a kind, gentle, respectful manner about him and a droll sense of humor. As a young graduate student doing research in Munich, watching him that evening served as a life-long example for me. Here I am in Germany working on my thesis, worried about when I could finish it. And then this Catholic priest from Boston College, in ugly running shoes, provides a living example of how to search for truth. What I saw that evening was truly amazing. It showed me that if you are looking for truth and present the results of your search in a non-antagonistic way, assuming that your audience is just as interested in Dante as you are, it will be persuasive to most people. And to the credit of his audience that night, it was.

Yes, I still remember that evening. How did we get off on that? I'm talking too much. What are your questions?

Peini:

But I enjoy hearing about that evening.

Elliott:

Yes, that's great.

Peini:

It's very touching.

Fr. McNellis:

Yes, Fr. Fortin was also very humble. He was fond of quoting Strauss about teaching: "Always assume that there is one silent student in your class who is by far superior to you in head and in heart". He took Strauss's advice to heart.

I also remember something he once said about teaching Perspectives. He was teaching Aristotle and as two young men were walking out at the conclusion of the class (they were *not* his best students), he overheard

one of them saying to the other, “Man, I eat this shit up.” Fr. Fortin said it was the best compliment he ever received as a teacher.

If you’ve got an insight on important things, you can begin to direct your life. I think he thought of himself as a teacher in a Socratic way, like a midwife. He wasn’t interested in founding a school or attracting a group of followers or disciples. He kept up with his former students. He was always delighted to hear what you were doing. But he wasn’t interested in making you a follower or admirer of *him*. I went on to teach in Rome at the Gregorian University, but when I came to BC to visit he peppered me with constant questions. He wanted to know everything I was seeing, doing, and thinking. As a former student, that’s a tremendous encouragement to have your mentor be so welcoming and to be so interested in your own work.

It was humbling because he immediately treated you not as a former student but as a colleague. He was completely sincere in it, but it was humbling for the former student.

Peini:

So how did you understand his role, not only as a good teacher, and not only as a good person, but also as a good priest?

Fr. McNellis:

You know, I know less about that, just because he is an Assumptionist and I am a Jesuit, and therefore we didn’t live together. You should talk to would be his former superior with the Assumptionists. They have a house across the street from St. Columbkille’s Church and School in Brighton.

There are many people still around you can talk to. I’ll give you some names. I never saw him in clerics. He wore a coat and a tie. I think it was a European thing. But I never had any doubt that he was a deep spiritual man of prayer.

Peini:

Oh, wow. That is interesting.

Fr. McNellis:

Several times we attended the American Political Science Association annual meeting, and we would share a hotel room at the convention. He was very simple and frugal in his tastes. Once when we were in Chicago, he said, let’s go out and get something to eat. He was looking for the cheapest place we could find. Although he certainly appreciated a good meal, I sometimes got the impression that food was more like fuel for him. We finally found a Coney Island hot dog place, what I would describe as a Ptomaine Palace. It looked so grungy I was worried that we might get sick eating there, but he was delighted because the hot dogs were less than two dollars.

And then I remember—and this is an example of the way his mind worked—as we were walking back to the hotel room, he suddenly stopped in the middle of the street, and said, “I see now. I see it! I’ve got to get back to the room and write this down.”

Well, what he had seen, maybe in a new way, was one of Augustine’s problems. Augustine was a Christian, and if you’ve read the Confessions, that’s the best insight into his soul, his journey and everything else. But what Fr. Fortin suddenly saw in Augustine, like a new, unifying insight, was that Augustine also really *admired* Rome. Augustine admired Rome for its achievement, politically, philosophically, and in its literature. And so, for Augustine, there was a real tension within him. But it’s now 10 pm in downtown Chicago, the Ptomaine Palace has closed, I cannot see another human being in any direction in what looks like a dicey neighborhood, and I’m a little bit worried about getting back to the hotel. But Fr. Fortin’s in the middle of the street, as if struck by lightning, worried about writing down his insight before he loses it.

What else, as a priest? I remember when we were together in this room, and I took out the Breviary to pray, and he had his Breviary, and he said, “Well, I’m glad to see that the next generation is still doing that.”

There were some sad cases that I'm not at liberty to discuss where he was kind and compassionate to students who were suffering in tragic situations. I can't say much more, but I saw him more than once where he was first and foremost a priest rather than the professor.

His main mission and service to the Church was research, writing, and teaching. Again, you talk with his former superior in the Assumptionists for more on this.

In the Perspectives program, the first semester used the metaphor "Athens and Jerusalem" (from Tertullian) and Fr. Fortin was the only one with the background reading to fully understand what was at stake in that metaphor. It was really Athens, Jerusalem, and Rome: the Bible, Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, Dante, Cicero, Virgil and many others.

So he was on fire, like Augustine, for the truth. The result was immense, staggering learning. And some of the people who dismissed him or didn't take him seriously just weren't that bright, hadn't read anywhere near the kind of things he had. They couldn't keep up. None of us could. But we wished we could.

Ah, yes, the Straussians. I've learned a great deal from Leo Strauss. Fr. Fortin and the late Prof. Bruell taught me how to read Strauss. I wouldn't call myself a Straussian, and I don't think Fr. Fortin did either. He once gave a lecture titled, "Why I am Not a Thomist." He knew Aquinas well, but he thought systems and schools could be the death of true, zetetic thinking. I think there is a group of "Straussians" as you describe...I was never involved with them. Strauss taught me (with Fr. Fortin's help) how to read texts closely, and I'm really grateful for that. I still think his books on Hobbes and Machiavelli, his *Natural Right and History*, and his essay, "The Three Waves of Modernity," are all brilliant.

A warning on his collections of essays. A disadvantage of collections of essays is that if you get something right once, you're probably going to repeat it. So you'll come across phrases and things where he doesn't have to come up with a new way of saying it. If he got it right the first time, he used it again.

He did say once that the reason that he had resisted writing a big, a main book, a *capo lavoro* or something like that, was that he had noticed when people did that, the second part of their career was devoted to defending "the book" rather than learning new things. He loved to write a well-crafted essay. He once described how he prepared for it and how much he enjoyed doing it. I think he wrote them out long-hand before he typed them up.

He didn't particularly like Lonergan. He said, "it's too scholastic, it's too dry." Lonergan is an elegant, clear writer, but not in the same way Fortin was. Fr. Fortin once said toward the end of his life, that he wished he had read more of Lonergan. He also said that of Spaemann.

Peini:

Wow.

Elliott:

That's good to know. Interesting. Would you say there was any tension between the sort of the Athens-Jerusalem debate in his person or in his ideas, the tension between him as a priest and him as a philosopher?

Fr. McNellis:

I never saw any of that in him. It was like 10 pm in downtown Chicago near the hot dog place. He was Augustinian in that he was capable of loving more than one thing at a time. I think he was often misunderstood because he didn't think Western Civilization was a mere synthesis of faith and reason, Athens and Jerusalem. He thought that the dynamism of Western Civilization depended on an on-going tension between faith and reason. I think there were a number of theologians who didn't take him seriously because they didn't take philosophy all that seriously. A neuralgic point for some people was Fr. Fortin's contention that natural rights and human rights are not the same thing.

Many Christian theologians just presume that “human rights” or “natural rights” are just the logical outgrowth of the Christian position. Well, it’s not. Natural rights come out of state-of-nature theories, Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau.

Rousseau says this the state nature is a state that may never have existed, never could have existed, but about which we have to know something to understand ourselves in the present. I think Aristotle would look at that and say, “Never existed, never could have existed? You’re talking nonsense.”

Take for example Luigi Taparelli who was very influential in the Church’s social encyclicals. He’s considered by many to be a Thomist. Fortin thought Taparelli’s Thomism was basically more Locke than Aquinas. But Fortin actually went back and looked at...Taparelli’s writing!

Taparelli didn’t really know Aquinas that well and co-opted Thomistic language. Nonetheless, I think *Rerum Novarum* is one of the best social encyclicals. It’s clear, concise and you know what it’s talking about.

And Pope Leo XIII is trying to make a link between rights and duties. In the modern situation we have, as MacIntyre has said, free-floating, ungrounded rights not anchored in anything other than human desire, wish, or power.

Fortin could see this and it troubled him. I think ultimately, it’s a false, misleading view about what a human being really is.

Peini:

So you have gracefully mentioned how you are indebted to Fr. Fortin as a teacher, and you also vividly described Fr. Fortin’s life when he lived with you in the same hotel at the convention.

Fr. McNellis:

Yes, that’s just a narrow kind of example. Here’s another. I remember at one of these conventions, probably also in Chicago, when he was doing a review of Pierre Manent’s latest book which had just been translated into English. The book was getting a lot of buzz, and a huge crowd showed up to hear what Fr. Fortin had to say about it.

Fr. Fortin began by saying Manent’s book was one of the best, most interesting books he had read in the last *couple of months*. A gasp went up in the room. Months? Didn’t you mean to say years?

It sounded like a dismissal. And then Fr. Fortin said, “I say that only because in the last couple of months, some of you might have written a book that’s even better which I have not yet read.” Fr. Fortin had this disarming wit about him. Gracious and disarming.

I’m sorry I think I cut you off. I didn’t mean to.

Peini:

No, no, no. You were talking about exactly the things that I want, Fr. Fortin’s life, and especially the life details. As Aristotle would say in the beginning of metaphysics, we have to learn the person from the sensible experience we have of that person. And unfortunately, we as students are not old enough to learn from Fr. Fortin’s example in person.

Fr. McNellis:

There’s a lot of people still around who knew him well. You can learn from them. This is a very good time to start your project. It’s badly needed.

Elliott:

We have just two more questions. One is, what can be said about his legacy here at BC, and what can we maybe learn about that to spread his legacy here at BC?

Fr. McNellis:

Well, what you're doing right now with this project is the best way his legacy can be handed on. Encourage people to read his work. Fr. Fortin is a very clear writer. As for his legacy, I'm not sure that his legacy here is fully appreciated.

You'd have to ask Professor Cronin about this, but my impression is that the Athens and Jerusalem metaphor has been dropped. I still use it and will continue to do so.

I think it is well worth going back to some of those seminal articles, rereading them and encouraging others to read them for the first time. Some of the things that he saw and warned about in those articles on natural rights, for example, has for some become a kind of the received, unreflective understanding of politics and ethics. If you think about it, it's almost impossible to have a discussion about anything without talking about it as a clash of competing rights claims. Well, that's not how Aristotle or Aquinas talk about it. They talk about justice.

Elliott:

Virtues.

Fr. McNellis:

Yes, and virtue, yes, exactly.

So I think he may be a casualty of sorts given the direction theology has gone. There's a fragmentation. For instance, he has an insightful essay on environmentalism. And I don't know if he calls it that, but that's what he's writing about.

He writes of the danger of some environmentalists divinizing the environment, Gaea, if you will. I think he was prescient about some the dangers in superficial accounts of "environmental justice", "eco-justice," etc. Who is the moral subject here?

Who's the subject of environmental justice? Or the switch from talking about sin and virtue to unjust structures. Well, who exactly is responsible? If it's a question of justice, you can assign some responsibility or appeal to someone's duties.

I think Fr. Fortin foresaw an environment in which—Alasdair MacIntyre described this very well in "Whose justice? Which Rationality?"—You have these separate, ungrounded rights claims.

And of course, those who are already here, can claim their rights for themselves, and the claim will trump somebody who can't claim their rights for themselves, like the child in the womb, for instance. Who speaks for him or her?

I'm delighted in what you're doing. I don't know if you're going to get a uniformly positive reception. Those of us who knew him, and benefited from his work, will all say we owe him an immense debt of gratitude.

I think you're doing this at a time when maybe some recovery is necessary. It's a good thing to do.

Say to members of your generation, "You might be interested in looking at this."

Peini:

We actually heard, before we are doing these formal interviews, we actually asked around the professors who kind of know Fr. Fortin's fame. And I received many different opinions of Fr. Fortin.

Some say that he is first of all an Augustinian, and not necessarily a Straussian. Some others say that he's...

Fr. McNellis:

I think there's some truth to that. I don't think he would have liked... I never heard him refer to himself as a Straussian, though he always spoke with gratitude about Leo Strauss.

Peini:

Oh yes, I saw that. And also, some other professors referred to him as being too Straussian to the extent that they doubted his faith. And some other professors even told me the rumor about Fr. Fortin that some of his colleagues mocked him by saying that he's too smart to be a priest. So all these...

Fr. McNellis:

He's too smart to be a priest? Like Augustine and Aquinas? We have enough stupid priests; we can always use someone who is really, really smart.

Peini:

That's true. But he has a very interesting, controversial, but also intricate fame as being both a student of Strauss...

Fr. McNellis:

Fortin could see that agreeing with someone on everything need not be an obstacle to learning from him. He taught a course on "Nietzsche and the Problem of Christianity." It was a wonderful course. He thought that ultimately Nietzsche was wrong, but he took him very seriously and thought we could learn from him. Fortin didn't agree with Strauss on everything, but he took him very seriously and learned a great deal from him. I think Fr. Fortin had read everything Strauss ever wrote. *Some* 'Straussians' thought that moral probity required a choice between faith and reason, and moral honesty required the choice of philosophy. There is enough in Strauss to support that position, but I think Fortin thought it wasn't Strauss's own view, and it certainly was not Fortin's own view. In any case, I never saw any evidence that Fortin's admiration for Strauss lessened his commitment to the Christian faith.

Peini:

I think so. Yes. He's complex for both sides to receive.

Fr. McNellis:

Yes, I think that's true.

Back when I attended the American Political Science Association meetings, the people interested in political theory or philosophy, would be mostly Straussians. I think Fortin thought that Strauss had single-handedly revived political philosophy, especially in the USA. No, Fortin didn't fit in with analytic or modern political thinkers like Rawls or Nozick. Fortin had met Strauss personally, sat attended his lectures, and had great esteem for Strauss.

But I think Strauss, as I said above, came to the position that intellectual probity required you to opt either for faith or for philosophy. There's an exchange of letters someplace where Strauss says, with great emphasis, "I am not a practicing Jew," and he also says, "I'm not an atheist." In other words, he was a searcher. He thought intellectual probity had to acknowledge that neither from the position of faith nor from reason could either side prove the other wrong.

There is a strain in the so-called Straussians (I don't like that term) a kind school, keepers of the flame, that could turn toward a kind of nihilism or think that intellectual probity required it. That's not how I read him, nor Fortin nor Prof. Bruell, who died last year. For many, many reasons, I wish Prof. Bruell was still with us. He knew Fr. Fortin very well. They were close friends. Together they founded the Bradley Lecture series at Boston College.

But you still have good people to talk to, like Prof. DiPasquale, Prof. Mary Ann Glendon, Prof. Marc Landy, and Martha Martini. I will contact some of them and let them know about your project. I'm sure they'll be as delighted as I am to learn that a new generation is discovering Fr. Fortin. I'm happy to help in any way I can. Just let me know what you need.

End