THOMAS H. O'CONNOR

Interviewed by
Dalmar Fisher

I graduated from Boston Latin School in 1942 and the following September I started at Boston College. My freshman year was interrupted because halfway through it, I joined the enlisted reserve along with about 25 of my fellow students. The importance of that move was that it guaranteed our finishing the semester before we went into the army. So, I completed my first year at BC and, after serving three years in the army, I returned to the Heights in 1946. In December of 1949, my undergraduate work was completed and I received the AB degree. Since I was already at BC, I decided to continue in history, and during the course of the next year I worked, while completing my master’s degree.

Let me go back a little bit to the time I returned to Boston College after my military duty. It seemed as though the classes were predominantly made up of GIs. There were many like myself, who had been in the army for two, three, four years, and were back in a classroom. We were all older than the normal college students. We were tougher and some of us were married. As a matter of fact, I remember I had my commencement and three days later I got married and we were off to face the world.

I should mention that the general attitude of those of us who had returned to school in some ways surprised the professors, who were mostly Jesuits. No longer were they looking at fresh-faced, raw kids right out of high school. We were more mature; our features were also a little weathered. We asked questions in class and took nothing for granted. We would often ask professors to explain, more than once, what they were saying. Some of them did not appreciate being called to order, and occasionally, arguments arose. I would call them fights initiated by the teaching staff, but they were over almost as soon as they began. Tempers cooled and discussions became quite civil during that period of time.

The returning students were interested in their studies and there was a certain drive in them. They were anxious to get finished and start their careers. They were not interested in joining clubs. I have to be careful here. What I want to say is that the GIs parceled their time carefully with no stops, no deviations, and no slowdowns because they missed out on three or four years of study and believed they had no time for little things. However, that frame of mind soon changed, as many began to write for the Stylus and the Heights. They joined the Glee Club, which is now the Chorale, and a great number became members of the Debating Society.

I have already alluded to how hot discussions could get during class. There was a very eminent Jesuit, Fr. John Ford, who was a moralist and a person of ethics, who was preaching morally and technically about there being no such thing as a just war. He became very critical in class about the use of the atom bomb on Hiroshima. Well, you can imagine how we reacted with strong disagreement. Many of us had been in Japan or had been headed for it. I was in
India at that particular time, but the European war was moving. In my case, I had already moved to Calcutta and my group was on its way to become part of the invasion of Japan, about which we had mixed feelings. The United States government already announced that it expected one million casualties. So to us, the use of the atom bomb was a godsend. One could tell that things were changing; students would no longer simply sit and take things at face value.

Upon completion of my master's degree, I was giving serious thought to earning a doctoral degree at Boston University, where I would meet new professors and be given the opportunity to expand my choice of courses. I loved history and wanted so badly to teach it. In my job hunting, I decided to start at the bottom (freshman level) in looking for a teaching position. I sent applications to Stonehill and Merrimac colleges and received notices from each that the semester had begun and no teaching positions were available.

September went by, and one Thursday evening in early October, I received a call from the History chairman, Fr. Burke, SJ, whom I had had for class. He was a Harvard graduate and also received his Ph.D. from there as well. I had great respect for him. At any rate, he said, "Mr. O'Connor, would you like to teach?" I said that I would very much like to teach. What led to this was that one of his instructors had up and left for another job, the school year was under way, and so forth, and he needed someone to teach...tomorrow! He asked me to come out to see him the following day. I went to his office the next morning and we talked for about an hour. He told me the name of the person who left, what was required, the texts the instructor was using, and all of the technicalities of the job. He finally asked me if I were still interested. After I said Yes, he told me to show up Monday morning to start. I was feeling so happy about having what I yearned for...a teaching job. Just then, as I rose from the chair and had my hand on the door knob, with one foot almost over the threshold, I heard him say, "Mr. O'Connor." I said, "Yes, Father." He told me to keep in mind that the position was for one year. I laugh about it now, as I have been teaching here for more than 50 years.

There is a little irony here because I had made arrangements for a position at the Boston Public Library, where I had worked during my last two years of high school and after I came home from the war. I continued to work there, in an assistant capacity of course. When I finished my degree work, I applied for a permanent position and was accepted for the job at a starting salary of $3,000. After I showed up for my meeting with Fr. Burke, I accepted the teaching position for, would you believe, $2,500! I wondered about the wisdom of choosing the lower salary. The more I thought about my love for teaching, the more the salary did not bother me. I notified The Boston Public Library that I would not be accepting the position there. Many of my friends asked me why I did not just take a leave of absence from the Library. I said I did not want to be tempted to go back when I knew I wanted to move ahead in teaching.

So that famous Monday morning when I began to teach, the schedule was to carry four courses a semester. At that time, the Ratio Studiorum was the Jesuit system of studies and in effect at BC. Students were required to take four years of theology, four years of philosophy, two years of English, and two years of history. As I say, it was my first plunge into the water and I liked it!
During the ’50s and ’60s, one of the big changes which occurred was the large influx of lay persons joining the religious group which was dominant until about 1950. With the advent of the GI Bill, the student population almost tripled. New faculty members were needed. Although we had a large number of Jesuits, we needed recognized lay faculty who were qualified to teach in new areas. Naturally, the Jesuit faculty was Catholic. How would a Catholic tradition be maintained if so many lay people were joining the ranks? As Fr. Donovan would ask, “Is there a Catholic way to teach biology or statistics or whatever?” The word “Catholic” rarely came up. New hires, especially in the sciences and social sciences, had to be exemplary in their fields and give evidence of being good people.

Alan Waxstein, a member of the History department, was Jewish and a prominent example of all a faculty member should be, regardless of religious persuasion. The first group of math teachers, many of whom were my friends, consisted of people like Paul Banks, Archie LaFerrier, Joe Krebs, and others. Some were Catholic; some were not. Somehow it didn’t matter. These were top-notch teachers.

Diversity was always an issue to be addressed, but it seemed to happen gradually. First we had religious diversity, then gender diversity, and we soon wanted African Americans to complement the faculty as well as the student body. Before Fr. Mike Walsh became ill and left BC, he developed a scholarship fund to encourage black students from the Roxbury area to come to Boston College. This was the beginning of the Black Studies program during the very late ’60s and the gradual beginning of what is today the Office of AHANA Student Programs.

This idea of mass hiring did not just happen. Fr. Walsh, president during most of the ’60s, was a big advocate for transforming the college into a leading national Catholic university. Many lay people who were hired in the ’50s became administrators whether they were Catholic or not. Admission standards were being upgraded, and for the first time in BC’s history, some Irish Catholic kids from South Boston were not admitted because their academic abilities were substandard. Fr. Mike ran into a problem with alumni, board members, and diocesan priests. Richard Cardinal Cushing and Fr. Walsh were great friends, having grown up together in Southie. They met here over the issue and Cardinal indicated he would not support BC anymore, but would send donations to Stonehill and Merrimac instead. He walked out of the meeting. Eventually, they came to terms and were friends again, but the tension indicated the depth of feelings on this issue.

Fr. Walsh believed that chairmen of departments should be involved in the hiring of people for their departments. He appointed chairmen whom he knew were interested in hiring people who were research-oriented. I didn’t even have tenure when I was appointed chair of the History department, but Father knew I would search for faculty who were writing, conducting research, and had qualified Ph.D.s from the best universities in the country. John Donovan chaired the Sociology department and told Fr. Mike Walsh that many of the best people in sociology were not Catholic. Father said that was what he expected, but that for God’s sake they should not teach Marriage or the Family.
I was chairman for 12 years, and like chairs in other departments, I had faculty members who did not want BC to become a university. They believed we had made our name as a great undergraduate college and should let the university work be done by BU, Harvard, Northeastern, and good state universities. Most of the faculty members at BC were behind Fr. Walsh in wanting to make this a university and were ready to turn out our own Ph.D.s.

I mentioned earlier that Fr. Walsh was instrumental in raising undergraduate standards as well as those in the graduate programs. He was also anxious to widen recruitment efforts beyond Massachusetts. He himself recruited from a number of Jesuit schools around the country. He gave his assistant, Fr. Mackin, money and sent him off to recruit as well. Together, they promised scholarships to the best and the brightest. Now, with so many very bright young people coming to BC, we had to have an honors program, which he helped to get off the ground. We were no longer only a streetcar college; dormitories were going up, modern facilities were being constructed, new faculty were arriving, and all of this, and more, was costing a lot of money and eventually led to the problems of the '60s when we were literally out of money.

Through all of this I was really enjoying teaching. Some of my students were part-time and had to leave school for their jobs somewhere between 3:00 and 4:00 P.M. I found that note-taking could become boring if it dragged on too long, so I tried to intersperse my lectures with jokes, funny sayings, historical anecdotes, and so forth. I found that if one talked continuously, students tended to go blank. One morning, when I was brand new, I remember putting my books down on a desk and students kept talking. They liked the person who left and were chatting about him; they had no idea who I was and didn't seem to even notice me. I started to speak, but they kept talking. Then, as if I were still in the army, I shouted, "Tennnmm hut!" They stood erect until I asked if they were ready to take their seats. They answered almost in unison, "Yes, sir!" It broke the mood and started me off in the right direction. I never had any classroom problems after that, and we got along just fine and it was fun.

When I began my career here, we had very few women. In fact, we had just begun to talk about diversity and how it would enrich faculty and the student body. One woman in particular, Alice Bourneuf, was a reputable scholar who was greatly admired by everyone at MIT and Harvard. She was brought here to teach in our Department of Economics. Soon she won the respect of all at BC. Another woman, Louise Moore, was hired by Fr. Donovan to teach history in the School of Education. Gradually, more and more women were hired within the University.

As faculty, we were quite close. Many of us would meet about 9:00 am for coffee in a lounge in Lyons. Jesuits and lay faculty discussing just about everything is a treasured memory. We had a Faculty Wives Club to which most of our wives belonged. They were wonderful for getting the whole faculty together for social events and parties. The Christmas party every year was something very special. Lasting friendships were made at those potluck suppers the wives prepared. Vin Harrington used to call them poverty parties. Occasionally, there would be a Sunday afternoon tea. Wives got to know each other and often brought up issues they
heard their husbands discuss. This was good; it was somewhat of a bonding between the men and women. Frank McLaughlin's wife, Henry McMahon's wife, John Donovan's wife, and my wife got to be the best of friends. The Club began to die out after the mid-'60s because more wives were working outside the home or going to school. Also, more women were joining the faculty.

Sometime in the '60s, the Andover weekends provided a spirit that drew faculty together. People selected for each weekend represented all departments and schools. Many friendships were formed that probably would not have come about if it had not been for those weekends. We were made to feel like members of the University rather than faculty from one department.

This was in Fr. Donovan's mind when we purchased Connolly House. Father envisioned it as a faculty club, but it never really caught on. Geographically, it was in the wrong place. For a short time, small groups of faculty would have dinner there and then go to see a drama production or something. The idea of a faculty club was great, but that was not the place for it.

When lay faculty began to arrive in big numbers, it seemed as though we were two distinct groups: Jesuits and lay faculty. The Jesuits had their own social connections. They lived together, worked together, and recreated together. Often for the lay person, life was similar to that of being a civilian at West Point. Lay faculty just did not belong to the corps. The corps existed, and regardless of other factors, it was the corps' place. And, should there be a fight, it would be the thin blue line against the thin khaki line. At any rate, we formed a lay faculty club to fill in what we believed was lacking in social interactions. It took on features, if you will, of unionism. I don't mean that as a technical term, but as our numbers grew, we found ourselves talking about what we needed and what we wanted. It died as a faculty club, but some good ideas were born there.

Security was one area we had to explore. We began to think and talk about health insurance. What happens if one gets sick? What about retirement benefits? We were beginning to think long term. We could be here 20 years or more; were our salaries competitive? I was president of the Lay Faculty Society for a couple of years. I recall that Phil Garrity, in the Business School became ill and was out for a whole semester. BC paid his salary and saw that his classes were covered. My colleagues asked me to speak to the president about health insurance. Father was kind enough to see me almost immediately. I brought up the issues of health insurance and benefits. For a minute, I felt as if I were stepping out of bounds when Father asked if faculty thought they were not being treated well. I brought up the case of Phil Garrity and said that because our numbers were increasing, perhaps we should look ahead for hospital coverage for all faculty. Father indicated that the Jesuits would be cared for by the Society. We began to discuss the fact that the Jesuits were also faculty, and were also getting older, and should be covered as faculty. Father said he had never thought about that issue, but that he would look into it. Eventually, insurance and health benefits began to be regularized.

When we were just a streetcar school, such issues never arose, but now that we were getting into the big time, people were beginning to ask about their futures. I should mention
that at this time, salaries were questioned because as yet there was no salary policy. A chairman could promise a faculty member a raise and it might happen or it might not. If a person taught four classes a semester, when could he write a book or take a course somewhere? Ranks had to be addressed as well. When I first came here, everyone was either a professor or an instructor. There was no formal process as yet. Right about this time, a handbook came out. Salaries were adjusted to recognize ranks, which were also spelled out with the process explained. Everyone was not equally satisfied, but all pretty much agreed that once something was in writing it could be modified if a need arose.

Fr. Seavey Joyce took office as president when Michael P. Walsh, SJ, resigned due to illness. During the late '60s, universities all over the country were into some troublesome times. Fr. Joyce asked me to serve as faculty assistant to the president. I liked him very much and thought he was a very good man. In retrospect, he was, on one hand, a victim of circumstances. During his period as president, college administrators were being spit out a dime a dozen. On the other hand, he probably did not have the temperament to be a top administrator. I believe now that he was the wrong person at the wrong time to lead BC. I wanted to help, but I felt a bit awkward and asked Fr. Joyce that with Fr. Donovan's being vice president and dean of faculties who advised him, what exactly was my role? He said that Fr. Donovan was in an official position to hire, fire, and make policy, but he wanted me to keep him apprised on how the faculty reacted to certain policies, or if there was talk of having anything changed. I met with groups of faculty to discuss my role and to ask if there were anything I should relate to the president. Some looked upon me as a spy. I tried to explain my role as that of a person who would hear things that might be too trivial to come before the academic vice president. I was just a source of information, but a number of the faculty saw me as an entrée to Fr. Joyce. Faculty members kept telling me that I should tell Fr. Joyce if he wanted me to continue in this role, an awful uproar would ensue.

I remember telling Fr. Joyce that there was talk of unionization when faculty learned of a possible salary freeze. Fr. Frank Shea, SJ, the executive vice president, was preparing to face the faculty. I sat with him and tried to discourage him from meeting with the faculty because he often spoke off the cuff and was not always careful of his tone. I asked him not to be belligerent because he could be accused of being a strike breaker. An issue such as this could be brought up before the labor board. Well, he addressed the faculty group, heard their grievances, and kept his mouth shut.

We were having a few academic problems, but the big one had to do with money, or the lack of it. We had followed the old custom followed by other institutions, which was to gather money for a building and then put it up. If another building were needed, money would be gathered and the building went up. There were no endowments, there was no money for repairs. One day, Father asked me if I had my car with me. I did, and then we were off to the Newton Bank, where he intended to open a line of credit. I told him that I did not think he could do that because we had nothing with which to open one. He knew that we were tuition-driven and thought we could promise the bank its money by February. We could have gone bankrupt if he had gone through with the plan.
Faculty were talking about our becoming part of the University of Massachusetts. All of this talk was going on while at the same time the student strike was in process. Vietnam, civil rights movements, and cries of, “Power to the People” were all major issues in which the students were concerned. The upcoming tuition rise was another factor which led to the strike. Students wanted changes in the curriculum. They believed they were big people who were paying for their tuition and should have a right to say what should be in the curriculum. They wanted some different courses that would prepare them for going into law, medicine, and graduate schools of their choice. They claimed to be tired of the Ratio Studiorum. I became involved in working out a compromise, whether for good or bad. Some of my colleagues thought it was for the bad.

We started to develop the beginnings of what we have today as a core curriculum. We made room for a few electives by proposing that two of the four years in some disciplines be reduced to two. This may sound simple, but it became a controversy over which lay faculty and Jesuits alike began to take sides. How was this going to be resolved? My resolution was, if you do not give in, you end up with nothing; when we come up with a modification, we keep the Ratio and have the basics of a core curriculum with elements of philosophy and theology.

Later, at the core curriculum meetings, it was difficult to decide on what would go and what would stay. The English department could no longer think of two courses, but only one that would remain. The same was true of History. There was a big fight in my department because I maintained we should have a modern European history course from 1815 to the present. Well, a number of Jesuits believed we should have medieval history, which I wanted to see as an elective. The Jesuits felt that by not requiring medieval history, we would weaken or minimize the Catholic element, which is a vital part of Church history. I suppose if I had been Fr. Callahan, a very strict Jesuit in my department, I would have seen it the way he did.

As I look back over my time at Boston College, I appreciate my good fortune to have been here to experience the growth and changes of the University as it went from being a small, Jesuit, all-male commuter school for young Irish males into a modern university which is almost totally diversified. We have a scholarly faculty of men and women, and a large body of international students which continues to increase. Our great sports association is widely recognized throughout the country.

Some positive things came out of the student strike. We now have a better system of financing. Before Fr. Joyce left Boston College, he brought a Mr. John Smith on board, who began to help invest our money and manage the financial end of our operation. When Fr. J. Donald Monan became president, he appointed John Smith as treasurer of Boston College. During this present phase, relationships have become more friendly and casual. Shirts have changed and ties are gone. Jesuits have removed the collars and many wear civilian clothes today. It is not unusual to hear Jesuits called by their first names. Our Board of Trustees is made up of lay men and women and a few Jesuits. The secretary of the University is a woman.

Today we miss something, however. We have many places on campus to enjoy a meal together, but more and more faculty are eating alone in their offices. Are we that busy? We
thought Connolly House was geographically out of the question, now we can't get to McElroy, where we always enjoyed a brief lunch together. Maybe it is not as important as it once was. Just recently, I was talking about the family atmosphere we had. I was reminded that we still have it, but it is known as community atmosphere today. I'll buy that. Even though faculty, secretaries, cleaning people, and carpenters may have their little groups, we all get along very well; we like it here and we don't seem to leave until it is retirement time. I believe that the old warmth is still here and people evidence this by sharing our general mission and taking pride in what BC accomplishes, even if it is beating Notre Dame in hockey. We all like to be identified with BC. When someone stops to say how happy he was to see that Boston College won last night, we swell with pride.

I would like to relate a short story about something that happened recently which underscores what I just mentioned about our having not lost that old warmth that has always been a part of BC. My son had a friend whose son was thinking of coming to BC along with another few places, so my son suggested that he come to see me. The father came with him and I could tell that the old man was a little upset because the boy wanted to major in history. It was easy to see that the dad believed it would be hard to find a job with a history major. We talked for quite a while, when the father told me that the more he thought about things, he would like his son to come here. I wondered why, and the dad said that after he and the boy left the parking garage, they were studying a map looking for the admissions office. A student ran by with books in his arms and then turned around and said they looked as though they were lost and could he help. They told him where they wanted to go, and he told them to come with him as he was going that way. He asked whether they wanted him to wait for them. Of course, they declined after thanking him. The father said to me that if that student, with the friendly attitude, were an indication of what students learn here, “I want Jack to come here.”

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