Analysis on the Interview of Brother Tom McPhillips

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The Christian Brothers are an old and venerable society whose purpose is to educate, feed, and better the lives of poor people. (Anderson) The Brothers of the Christian Schools are a Roman Catholic congregation of lay religious men and is the largest such group in the world today. Begun in 1680 by St. John Baptist de La Salle to serve the needs of the children of the poor and marginalized of France, the Brothers grew in numbers and now, aided by thousands of Lasallian partners, carrying the vision of their founder to hundreds of education-related works in over 80 countries throughout the world. (Alpago 21) Brother Tom McPhillips is a man who dedicated his life to the Christian Brothers since the age of 17 in order to promote the Christian Brother ideals. The values and ideals of the Christian Brothers have played, and will continue to play a significant role throughout his life.

Brother Tom McPhillips was born in 1949 to Louise and John McPhillips and was born in Einstein Hospital, located in Philadelphia. (McPhillips 0:45) Louise was born in Belfast, Ireland, which is a staunch Roman Catholic country, and thus, Brother Tom McPhillip’s upbringing was very much imbued with Christian values. His father did not follow religious practices too closely, but according to Brother Tom, “In the part of Philadelphia that I grew up with, it was sort of a given that one would follow in the Catholic heritage”. (McPhillips 3:08) All of this was reinforced by the fact that he attended Catholic schools since elementary school. All of the elementary schools were run by the nuns and the high schools were taught by the brothers, and although he didn’t connect with the nuns too well, he got along quite well with the brothers. So, since he was a young kid, he was surrounded by the many Christian influences around him, that later led to him joining the Christian Brotherhood of St. Jean Baptiste de La Salle.
While at school, Brother Tom McPhillips spent a lot of time doing extra curricular activities. He was a member of the Scholastic Letter club, the Science club, the Library club, German club, Glee club, Band, and intramural sports. Because of this, he spent a lot of time after school and on some days, he never got home until late at night. He acquainted with some of the brothers at the high school, and they invited him to join them for lunch sometimes. (McPhillips 11:56) He remembers the Christian Brothers being a happy group of people that enjoyed themselves, and at around this time, he got the idea that he would like to be part of this type of organization. During Brother Tom’s teenage years, he remembers a lot of confusion going on in America, and in Philadelphia. (McPhillips 11:42) And while he was at the brothers’ house eating lunch with them, he developed the sense, “that this was a very happy group of people”, and simultaneously, he had the idea that he wanted to be a teacher. (McPhillips 12:08) So he put two and two together, since the brothers were teachers, they were a stable organization, and they were happy, and decided to join the Christian Brothers.

He declared as a Christian Brother his junior year of high school, and much more was expected of him academically because of this. Brother Tom McPhillips was not the best of students academically, and he did not like to read much. But he had a biology teacher by the name of Leo Smith, whom he admired very much. (McPhillips 14:17) “I would not say that he was a great teacher, but he inspired me, he got me interested in stuff even to the point where I would borrow other Biology textbooks and go home and read them.” (McPhillips 14:03) He also said that Leo Smith was a teacher who cared about every individual student, and made time for each of them as well, which means that Leo Smith had more of an influence as a Christian Brother than as a teacher. This also
means that Brother Tom was more drawn to the Christian Brother side of Leo Smith, and not as much his teaching. Brother Tom did not like to read much in high school, but this certain brother who taught biology inspired him to read biology, and since then on, it became his favorite subject, and that experience in high school with that one teacher, has led him to pursue a career in the area of science.

Brother Tom McPhillips went to La Salle University as a Christian Brother, and since he was part of the brotherhood, he was quartered in a 47 acre mansion that was located in the Cherry Hill area of Philadelphia. (McPhillips 28:36) He spent much time with the brothers in classes, praying, and in leisure. The older Christian Brothers on campus had to be mentors to the younger brothers, and in this way, the virtues of the Brothers was passed down from generation to generation. (Knight) Over time, Brother Tom came to know everyone in the Brother’s residence, and in fact, he knew some of them so well, that he “could tell all of them apart from the sounds of their footsteps”. (McPhillips 33:45) This mansion also had the law and order that Brother Tom McPhillips sought instead of the chaos that he saw in high school. If he wanted to leave the campus, he had to obtain a written permit from the director in charge. (McPhillips 36:35)

The Christian Brothers are known for their extensive learning, and it was normal for the brothers to attend graduate school and get their masters degrees. (Alpago 57) This was true for Brother Tom as well, because he taught biology right out of college, and then signed up for some graduate school classes at Villanova University. He took a class in virology, although he did not know what it was at the time, and again, it was the influence of a teacher that led him to a certain path in life- virology. (McPhillips 48:07)
After completing the course, he decided to go for his doctorate in virology at Baylor University. He spent four years down there doing a lot of research in the field of virology, writing a few papers that got some wide recognition. But, he said the work was hard, and the hours were long—for example, Monday through Friday 8AM to 8PM and some work on Saturday and Sunday as well. (McPhillips 58:24) This whole experience taught Brother Tom a lot of discipline, due to all the time constraints, and the value of hard work. All the many long hours of hard research paid off when he went before the board with his dissertation and got certified in virology by the board. (McPhillips 1:03:17) But despite all of this, he wanted to teach students and have the same positive effect that some of the Christian Brothers had on his life.

He came back to La Salle University and started teaching Biology classes in 1984. (McPhillips 1:01:08) As a teacher, he had this habit of walking into his morning classes and saying “Good mourning Biology Fans” early in the morning for his 8 o clock classes which was his way of getting the students attention. He also says that he changes his teaching styles in between classes. In this way, he wants to cater his teaching style to each particular class. For example, he teaches his biology course that is filled with primarily business majors differently than a class that is filled with actual science majors. Brother Tom McPhillips uses this new teaching style called ‘Problem Based Learning’. (McPhillips 1:12:23) This takes real life situations and he puts them on display in class. One year, on the first day of class, he brought in a lawnmower and had the class try and argue that it is not alive, but for every argument that the class came up with, Brother Tom had an answer to refute them with, and in this way, he gets the students attention. (McPhillips 1:13:50) He has received very positive feedback using this teaching style,
and says that it is reflected in the course evaluations that the students fill out. By making his classes interesting and interacting positively with the students, Brother Tom is doing exactly what his teachers did for him back in high school. In this way, he is promoting to others, the values of the Christian Brothers that Brother Tom holds dear.

The Christian Brothers hold the values of education, devotion, and piety most dear, and they have an award that is given to a Christian Brother who exemplifies these values each year. (Anderson) This award is called the Lindback Award and it is presented to the teacher whose teaching is characterized by superior knowledge of the subject matter, vitality, and inspiration in its presentation in class, and devotion to helping students realize their potential. It was awarded to Brother Tom McPhillips in 1988, and other notables who won the award including Roland Holroyd, Dan Rodden, and Br. Michael McGinniss, among others. (McPhillips 1:15:55) Brother Tom also won another award called the Provost's Distinguished Faculty Award which commends exceptional involvement and devotion to the good of the University, and the advancement of its mission. These awards are given to distinguished faculty members, and to have won both of these awards is quite an accomplishment considering the number of teachers at La Salle University. But despite the accolades, Brother Tom had a sense of humility about it all as can be exemplified through the following quote, "You almost feel bad taking an award for doing something that you love to do—and I just love teaching." (McPhillips 1:22:14) So the Christian values that he was brought up on, and continued to be nurtured in him through the help of the Christian Brothers, has paid off, and now, he represents all that the Christian Brothers stand for through the receiving of these two awards.
Brother Tom continued to teach at La Salle University for a while but he decided to go and teach at Bethlehem University for a year from 1994-1995. The Christian Brothers were asked to set up a university in the Holy Land by the late Pope Pius and in 1963, they did it. (Knight) English speaking Christian Brothers from all over the world would come to teach there, and this was the time right after the first Palestinian uprising. Brother Tom went down there for many reasons, “I just wanted to help some people, and experience new things at the same time. Also, teaching in North Philly, I did not get a sense that I was helping the poor, and this was an answer to that.” (McPhillips 1:26:03) The people down there were very poor, and this was the time of Israeli aggression. But as Brother Tom recalls, there were tanks rolling right down the streets at times. “Sometimes, students would be in class every day for a month, and then all of a sudden they would not show up for a week or so.” (McPhillips 1:51:24) One of the bylaws for teachers was that if a student was thrown in jail, the teacher had to go visit the student in jail and still teach them under rule #13 of the Bethlehem University Charter. Although he never had to do that, the fact that he came down there to teach and accepted those rules shows that he is a very committed man to his line of work- in this case teaching and promoting the values of the Christian Brothers.

Since he came back, Brother Tom has devoted still more of his time into the University, and although he is not allowed to win any of the awards anymore because he won them all already, he still teaches all his classes with intense energy. He is very passionate about teaching, and he has many vast experiences to draw on. Everything in his life that he accomplished was through the Christian Brothers, and almost all of his experiences were because he joined them. It would not have been possible for him to go
to Bethlehem if it were not for the simple fact that he was a Christian Brother. He has touched the lives of many with his teaching style, and has come to exemplify the many qualities that the Christian Brothers hold dear.


McPhillips, Tom. Interview 2.5 hrs Interviewer-Michael Roethel

(I don’t know how to cite this, but I would like to cite and thank Brother Joe Grabenstein for his turning up publications and research on Brother Tom.)