

2007

Interview of Francis Tri Nguyen, F.S.C., Ph.D.

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Field Notes

Narrator: Brother Francis Tri Nguyen

Interviewer: Melissa Schellinger

Date/Time: April 2, 2007/3:30 pm and April 16, 2007/4:00 pm

Location: 361 Olney Hall, La Salle University, Philadelphia, PA

Brother Francis Tri Nguyen arrived in the United States in the summer of 1975. A member of the large group of refugees who fled South Vietnam after the Communists took over, he experienced a tumultuous time in the history of Southeast Asia. Once he arrived in the United States, Brother Francis sustained his role as a Christian Brother by joining the American community, and pursued degrees at several major universities. He has been a faculty member at La Salle University since 1985, and currently serves as head of the university's Sociology Department. His office is located in 361 Olney Hall.

I chose Brother Francis as the narrator for my oral history interview knowing little more than he taught in Southeast Asia in the 1960s and 70s. Intrigued by his experience in that part of world during a turbulent time in the history of that region, I decided he would be a fascinating candidate for an interview. Dr. Barbara Allen sought Brother Francis's approval for the interview, and upon accepting, he expressed an interest in helping to formulate the topics, and even the questions, that I would be asking. While I was at first skeptical of this, after discussing the matter with my graduate level Oral History class, I was reassured by both Dr. Allen and my colleagues that there were some benefits to having the narrator aid in the formulation of questions.

I contacted Brother Francis via email on Tuesday, February 6 in order to find an agreeable date on which we could meet to discuss possible topics for the interview. The date we chose was Monday, February 19. To aid in my research, Brother Francis emailed me a copy of his most recent research project entitled, "Identities of Lasallian Universities in the 21st Century." Upon receipt of the paper, I began reading and taking notes.

In preparation for my meeting with Brother Francis, I also contacted Brother Joe Grabenstein via email on February 6, 2007 and requested a date that I could visit the La Salle University Archives to retrieve any primary or secondary source documents pertaining to Brother Francis. My intention was to have a good bit of my research completed before my meeting with Brother Francis.

I was supposed to meet with Brother Joe on Monday, February 12; however, due to a scheduling conflict and subsequent inclement weather, we postponed our meeting until

Monday, February 19. Brother Joe and I were only able to meet for 15 minutes on this day because of a prior commitment with the La Salle Singers that he had forgotten. Brother Joe did extensive research in the Archives prior to our meeting, and was able to provide me with a great deal of sources relating to Brother Francis's role at La Salle including: newspaper and journal articles, pictures, letters and yearbook excerpts and even the program from a memorial service that honored Brother Francis's father. Together, we sifted through all of the material and decided which documents would be most relevant in my preparing for the oral history interview. No taped interviews currently exist, so we determined that my interview will be an important addition to La Salle's Archives

On the same day, at 5:00, I met with Brother Francis in his office, 361 Olney Hall. It was nice to finally meet after exchanging several emails. During the meeting, we discussed possible topics for the interview, including his transition to life in America after he left Vietnam. We also talked about the actual format of the interview, which he knew little about prior to our meeting. Brother Francis seemed to have a positive attitude towards being interviewed; however, he seemed somewhat cautious as we discussed the legal release. He indicated his interest in possibly altering the legal release to allow for his interview to be made available only after the time of his death. I explained that altering the legal release is a possibility and something that we could discuss as the actual interview date approaches.

In the two weeks following my meeting with Brother Francis, I completed my research and submitted my formal interview questions to Dr. Allen in two parts. On Monday, March 19, I received helpful feedback from Dr. Allen, and edited my questions accordingly. On the same night, I had a chance encounter with Brother Francis on the third floor of Olney Hall, at which time I mentioned that I would be contacting him soon regarding the scheduling of our interview. He seemed confused at first, but once I reminded him that the interview was for Dr. Allen's Oral History class, he recalled our last meeting.

At the request of Brother Francis, I submitted the formal interview questions to him via email on Wednesday, March 21. At this time I also inquired about scheduling our interview. I waited several days, and did not receive a reply, so I emailed Dr. Allen with my concerns. She expressed to me that she had seen Brother Francis and he actually mentioned our interview, making it obvious that it was on his mind. She also sent me a follow up email indicating that Brother Francis approached her with some concerns about altering the legal release. He expressed to Dr. Allen that he would like to be forthcoming when speaking about his department; however, he did not want his words accessible to anyone at the University. Dr. Allen suggested that the legal release be altered to address this concern, and it was decided that the portion of the second interview session that deals with the Sociology Department at La Salle would be sealed until a time that Brother Francis specifies.

On Wednesday, March 28, I received an email response from Brother Francis, in which he requested the first session of our interview take place on Monday, April 16. I

responded that my in-class presentation for Dr. Allen is April 9, so, if possible, I would like to complete the first interview session before that date. He responded that the week of April 2 would be fine, and we settled on Monday, April 2 and 3:30 for our first interview session.

Interview Session One

Monday, April 2, 2007 – 3:30 pm

I arrived on campus, picked up the digital voice recorder from the Media Services department and arrived in Brother Francis's office at 361 Olney Hall around 3:25.

Brother Francis greeted me when I arrived in his office. He commented that I must be anxious to complete the interview, since I left work early. Prior to the beginning of our interview session, we discussed possible alterations to the legal release. I noticed that, on his desk, he had the list of formal interview questions that I sent him in an email two weeks ago. Certain words and phrases were highlighted, and notes were written on the pages. It was reassuring to see that Brother Francis had gone to such lengths in preparation for our interview. He commented on the fact that my questions were very detailed, and that they forced him to reach into the depths of his memory to recall some of the events from his past. His positive demeanor indicated that he had enjoyed the process, and allowed for a great deal of reflection on his part. One request that Brother Francis made of me was that I write and submit to him a reflection on our interview. After using the word "reflection," he decided that perhaps I should just write my "impression" of the interviewing process, since he felt a "reflection" might require too much work on my part. I told him that either would be perfectly fine, and that I would submit a written report to him after our second interviewing session.

Once our interview began, it became obvious to me that I should have closed the door to the office we were in. People were walking in the hallway outside, and doors were opening and closing. I reached behind me and closed the door, so that this background noise would not be audible on the audio recording. Throughout the interview, Brother Francis remained reflective, yet prepared for each of my questions. As a result of his seeing my questions ahead of time, I noticed that there were times I'd ask one question, and he would answer not only that question, but also the one after it on the list. In all, I feel as though the interview had more substance because he was able to gather his thoughts prior to our meeting. As the half way point approached, I noticed that we had only gotten through one page of questions. I never expected to get through all three pages; however, I felt as though I needed to prioritize, so I found myself looking ahead and deciding which questions were most relevant and would provide the most substance for the rest of the interview. While it wasn't important to me to ask every question that I prepared, it was crucial that I cover the scope of the content that I set out to explore.

One technical snag that I encountered occurred at the end of the interview. When I went to hit the "Stop" button, the recorder began beeping, indicating a low battery. Unsure of how to deal with the issue since it was borrowed from the University, I allowed Brother

Francis time to read the legal release, and went to the first floor of Olney Hall to inquire about a new battery and see whether or not my interview had saved. Luckily, when we placed a new battery in the recorder the session was there in its entirety. When I returned to Brother Francis's office, he told me that he would like to omit a sentence from the release so that his interview would only be accessible to scholars in the archives. Before I left, we decided to schedule the second session of our interview for Monday, April 16 at 3:30.

Overall, I was pleased with the ground that we covered. I felt as though I had great opportunities to ask follow-up questions, and that we stayed relatively on track throughout the session.

Interview Session Two

Monday, April 16, 2007 – 4:00 pm

I emailed Brother Francis on Monday, April 16 to confirm our meeting, and to ask if we could push back the interview session until 4:00 due to circumstances stemming from the weather conditions. I arrived in his office at 361, Olney Hall, just before 4:00 (after picking up the digital voice recorder from Media Services). Brother Francis was wearing traditional Christian Brothers garb, and a gray sweater vest. When I arrived, he was completing some tasks, but was ready for my visit. Prior to the interview, we chatted about the weather and briefly discussed the topics we would cover in the second interview session. I expressed that I'd like to revisit two topics from the first interview, including his transition to life in America, and his work with Vietnamese refugees. In addition, I also wanted to address the Sociology Department at La Salle and his research on La Sallian identity at institutions around the world.

In the few minutes before the interview began, Brother Francis asked if he could have a moment to collect himself and glance over the questions one more time. The flow of the interview went well, and I found myself trying to make natural transitions from one topic to another. As was the case in our first interview, he was well prepared and eager to answer questions. I learned during the interview that I had overestimated his role in the School of Nursing (he only taught there for one year), so I found it necessary to eliminate several of the questions I prepared. In retrospect, I am not sure how my research led me to the conclusion that he was involved with the Nursing School for an extended period of time, but it was only a small snag in the interview, and we simply moved on to another topic. Also, like in our first interview, I found myself prioritizing questions towards the middle of the session in order to cover as much ground as possible.

At the conclusion of the interview, we discussed the legal release. Throughout our session, Brother Francis was very candid in regards to his feelings on the Sociology Department at La Salle, and for this reason, he altered the legal release so that it reflected his desire to have the recording of the second session sealed in the archives for a ten year period.

We chatted for a few minutes before I left, and Brother Francis commented on the fact that he was skeptical when first asked to be the subject of my interview for the archives. He now says; however, that this was an extremely positive experience that really allowed him to reflect back on his life and to remember the many obstacles he has overcome and achievements he has made. I also expressed my feelings in regards to this experience, and promised to write a short reflection that I will deliver to him, along with copies of the audio recordings, sometime in the next few weeks. This was a unique and remarkable experience for me. It helped me to learn not only about another culture, but about how one person can rise above many challenges and be truly successful. Interviewing Brother Francis, and learning about his life experiences allowed me to put my own life into perspective, and see events from a new angle.