Interview with Frederick Van Fleteren

Narrator: Frederick Van Fleteren

Interviewer: Leo Wong

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Location: Wister Hall, LaSalle University, 1900 West Olney Avenue, Philadelphia, PA 19144

Topic: This oral history details the life of Dr. Frederick Van Fleteren from his birth in 1941 to the present day. He began the interview talking about his early childhood and how his relationship with his parents shaped his education. During his description of his undergraduate and graduate years at Villanova in Chicago, he also talks about the duties he had as an ordained priest. After receiving his master’s degree in 1968, he received his PhD in ancient philosophy at the National University of Ireland and University College, Dublin in 1971. He taught at Villanova for six years before leaving the priesthood and working at two different hospitals and company that helped bereaved relatives and loved ones of the recently deceased. Beginning in 1987, he began working at LaSalle as a professor in the Philosophy Department and continues to this day. The end of the interview contains his description of his teaching style and philosophy, as well as his plans for the future.

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Time Stamp Topic

00.0 Introduction for both myself and Dr. Van Fleteren as well as verbal legal consent to conduct the interview as well as uploading the recording and associated documents onto the website of LaSalle University.

01:00 He was born at St. Clair Shores, Michigan, not far from Detroit, on July 14, 1941. There were two houses that he associated with his childhood. He details the streets and locations around his birthplace. Both houses were by Lake St. Clair. He talks about how his grandfather was involved in the illicit alcohol trade during the Prohibition era. It never played a role in his childhood however.

04:39 His father was an attorney in Detroit who also graduated from the Jesuit institution of the University of Detroit. He also went to law school at the same university. His mother had a high school education in the public school system of Detroit.

05:10 He said he had a happy childhood and that his relationship with his mother and father was very good. After he graduated from Austin Catholic Prep in Detroit,
his father wanted him to be a lawyer. He felt that he did not want to stay in St. Clair Shores chasing money so he went to the monastery where his father could not tell him what to do.

06:37

His parents greatly valued his education. Especially during his early school years, once he got home from school, all of his work had to be done. If there was any time left afterwards, then he could play. Although his father was like the “captain of the ship,” both he and his mother played a major role in providing him with the best education.

07:28

Religion played a major role in Dr. Van Fleteren’s family. His mother was a devout Irish Catholic while his father was also a practicing Belgian Catholic. They prayed nightly rosaries, and went to Catholic schools including St. Gertrude Grade School, Austin Catholic Prep, Villanova, and the National University of Ireland, and University College Dublin.

08:47

When he lived in Jefferson Michigan, the only neighbors they had any relationship with was an elderly couple next door. When they moved by Lake St. Clair, they did so because there were people who had the shared the same religion. His family were friendly with their neighbors overall.

10:09

Some of his favorite subjects included Latin, history, and English literature during his grade school years. In college, he was a double major in both Literature and philosophy. He also liked the philosophical aspects of theology courses he took.

11:23

Initially, he could not remember too many specific titles of books that have greatly influenced him. However, he mentions authors such as W. Somerset Maugham (Of Human Bondage), John Steinbeck, Shakespeare (Macbeth and Hamlet) having memorable impacts on him. He went recalls going to a play written by Maugham because he wrote Of Human Bondage. When I mentioned that what he told me sounded similar to the curriculum in modern public schools, he stated that good schools had courses on foreign languages. While he prizes his education from Austin Catholic Prep, his only regret was that the school never taught Greek, which would have given him a foundation since much of Christian theology and philosophy (which he studied in college) was written in Greek.

14:58

After graduating high school he went into the Order of St. Augustine. He liked his high school so much, and based on the fact that he was familiar with some of the friars at his school, that he decided to go into religious orders. It was also to an extent, his attempt to escape from the domination of his father. He does add that it would have happened regardless since his father developed cancer during the summer before he went to the Austin friars. At the age of 18, he went to the
monastery at a town called Oconomowoc, roughly thirty miles west of Milwaukee. It was a yearlong religious retreat that serves to make men into good Augustinians. Afterwards, he went to a Villanova affiliated extension school in Chicago.

16:37 During his affiliation with the Augustinians, Dr. Van Fleteren was a member of a religious order under vows for 17 or 18 years. He left at around age 35 or 36. He was in vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience during that period. He was an ordained Catholic priest from 1967 until 1978. He has been released from the vows since then. He states that while they cannot remove the vow, they can take away the matter.

17:59 He was not always at the Villanova extension school in Chicago. He did his master's degree in philosophy at Villanova University. Dr. Van Fleteren states that Fr. Robert Russell created a good philosophy department at that university. There was a direct link from the highly regarded Institute of Medieval Studies in Toronto to Villanova. He talks about how as he went into his doctorate, he encountered questions over the philological aspects of St. Augustine’s writings, and the existential elements of St. Thomas Aquinas’ writings.

20:03 He majored in philosophy for his master's degree. For his undergraduate years, he majored in philosophy and English literature. During his university years, he discovered that he was not a creative writer. Rather, he was more interested in philosophy. He states that while the latter subject did help his writing skills, he never saw himself as a writer of novels, poetry, etc. although he double majored in philosophy and English literature during his undergraduate years.

21:00 Aside from philosophy and English literature, some courses he enjoyed at Villanova included a course on the history of English literature. He says it remained with him as a guide to literature in different periods to this day.

21:59 At Villanova in Chicago, he lived on campus in what was called a house of studies. According to Dr. Van Fleteren, these houses had 40 to 50 intelligent students where you would learn from them. He recalls getting into philosophical and political debates, as well as going to the library constantly to do research for the next intellectual battle. He believes this to be useful in education. He states that the ambience of an institution plays a major role in helping students to learn. His undergraduate and graduate experience at Villanova was reading, writing, and thinking amongst intelligent people. Even to this day, he tries to find a quiet place to read, write, and think.

25:50 He never got into too many theological debates during his years at Villanova. He explains the meaning of the word Catolica, which is defined as universal. He
explains how Catholic theology is a wide spectrum. He talks about how St. Augustine said that studying the liberal arts helped one interpret the Bible. He adds that early Christians on the other hand, did their philosophizing from reading the Bible.

In terms of extracurricular activities, he explains how being part of a monastery meant having a regular prayer life. There would be prayers in the morning and evening, before meals, at mass, etc. There was two hours of physical recreation every day, which he later considered later in life to be a benefit. Since then, he puts in 45 minutes of swimming Mondays through Fridays. When asked if his time at the monastery overlapped with his time in Villanova, he responded affirmatively. He then showed me his bachelors and masters degrees from Villanova on his office wall.

Three years prior to the interview, he attended a 50 year reunion for the former Austin Catholic Prep. According to him, a large percentage of his graduating class came. He was meeting people he had not seen for 50 years and remembering how beautiful the Lake St. Clair area was. Although he was initially hesitant about going because he has left the Order of St. Augustine, he was glad that he went and hopes for a 60th reunion.

Dr. Van Fleteren speaks about professors who had made a lasting impact on him, although he does not mention any specific names. He includes the English professor who taught the history of English literature course, and two philosophy professors who influenced him by the material that they had the class read from, as well as his teaching methodology. In Dr. Van Fleteren’s view, you take the good points from your professors, and try to correct what you see as the flaws. He adds that although his philosophical training was good, his theological training was not as good.

He pursued a master’s degree because he wanted to be knowledgeable in philosophy and to become a philosopher. When going for his doctorate, he wanted to be an expert in the works of St. Augustine. He chose to focus on that particular Church Father because he wanted to find out why he was considered the basis of Christian thinking in the West. In the process of studying him, he realized that one had to have a background in Greek, Latin, the history of his time, works on him in other languages, and even archaeology of his times. Just like St. Augustine, Dr. Van Fleteren believes that philosophy and theology are not mutually exclusive.

When asked about employment during his years in higher education, he reminded me that during the period he was getting his masters and PhD, he was an
ordained Roman Catholic priest. He would have duties on Sundays, and sometimes hear confessions on Saturdays. He said that he might not have had a job in the normal sense, but he did have a profession. One of his favorite hobbies was playing bridge. Knowledge of the game helped him ease into Irish and Scottish social scenes. He talks about how in the course of immersing oneself in a different culture, a person begins to question their own values based on their observations on the values of other cultures. He mentions how his experiences in Ireland where he had taken a vow of poverty while in the priesthood, and seeing how many people were less concerned with financial wealth as he was, changed his perspective on monetary wealth.

40:25 He talks about the unique social and political characteristics of Ireland he observed. He mentions the movement in Ireland with regards to the unification of Northern Ireland and the rest of the island. Another notable aspect was how Roman Catholicism was seen as an ingrained part of Irish culture. He also talks about the “insular mentality” where the primary concern is the people who live on the island.

43:17 Since I did not earlier, I ask about when he went to Ireland. He said that he was in Ireland between 1968 and 1971. He took a trans-Atlantic ship ride from New York City to Cork, Ireland on October 1st, 1968, arriving shortly before the first civil rights demonstrations for freedom for the Irish people in Northern Ireland. He did not initially understand the events that were unfolding when he first arrived, although he did later on.

44:32 His master’s dissertation was about the fall of the soul. He personally feels that although his thesis was not good, it was comprehensive with respect to that subject. When he went to Ireland for his PhD, he was in a three year program where the first year you look into the field, the second year you formulate an idea, and the third year you write up your idea. His doctoral thesis was on the assent of the soul. He then shows me an actual copy of his thesis, a sizeable blue book on his desk. Dr. Van Fleteren adds that if you get a good idea in your thesis, and your professor lets you work independently, that is an enormous benefit. While it is a more difficult path, if you have an original idea and you pursue it, the idea is purely your own. This was how his doctoral thesis turned out and it helped him branch out on his studies on St. Augustine. He shows me the numerous works of Augustine written by others as well as his own works.

49:48 He did not have a dissertation defense for his master’s thesis, but he had one for his doctoral thesis, known as a viva in the British Isles. After that sentence, I check the battery on my recorder and make too much noise. There would be three people present at your defense. The first is the internal examiner who is the
person you studied under, and the person you gives you your degree if he or she feels you have earned it. The second individual is the external examiner who reads all the theses from the faculty over the last two years. The third person is a specialist in the field who works with the internal examiner. His viva was waived when one of the most prominent scholars in Augustinian studies reviewed his thesis and told the review board that no defense was necessary and that he should receive the degree.

After receiving his PhD, his plans were following the orders of his superiors in his religious order. He taught at a small school in Chicago that was run by the order. He said that he was not aware that it was “disintegrating” at the time, and attributes his bad first year there to his own faults. He then makes a comment about all the bad things in his life being his own fault. When he returned to that school, the staff there saw him as someone who would “save the school” despite his own uncertainty.

After another year, he was sent to the main Villanova campus in Pennsylvania for 6 or 7 years as a professor of philosophy. He still has many personal friends there both inside and outside the order. He says that there is an institutional prejudice that exists and prevents him from going back. When asked about details on this prejudice, he said that he could not say much about it other than the fact that it exists. He explains that there were some laymen philosophy teachers in the philosophy and theology departments who did not agree with his social views. He believes that they also influenced the university president to not allow him to come back. He does acknowledge that he does not know the full details about the situation, and does not believe mentioning names would help things.

He became an academic journal editor because both the order and Villanova expected him to do so. When he was at the Augustinian Historical Institute, he worked alongside a knowledgeable colleague who helped him edit. Overall, he learned by doing.

In terms of academic and professional criticism, the main type of criticism he has received are that some people have said that he has too narrow of a focus. He believes that if one wants to be good at something, they must concentrate on it. Dr. Van Fleteren states that even if his views are not accepted, they will have to be contended with regardless. He does state that although he had debates with Augustine scholar Bob O’Connell early in his career, he has not had many debates recently.

He explained how after he left the Order of St. Augustine, it also entailed him leaving the position of associate professor. People who helped him find jobs
afterwards felt that since he was familiar with spirituality, a career in healthcare would be a good transition. He was hired at Crozer-Chester Medical Center to set up a hospice. The plan that he set up for the project was never realized until he left the hospital however. He was then asked to work as an executive director of a hospice program at a hospital at Binghamton New York. He said that once the department was set up, there was no need for him to be there and they gradually eased him out. He said it was a kind way of saying they fired him. Afterwards he came to Philadelphia and worked with a Rabbi founding a short-lived company that helped the relatives of the recently deceased. After that, he became an adjunct at LaSalle.

Aside from being an adjunct for LaSalle, he was also working other jobs including selling university rings, founding a company called Ever-Kare (he mentioned earlier) for bereaved people. He was able to get the position as adjunct because during the Vietnam era, hours of required philosophy classes were diminishing, as well as the fact that many teachers were leaving or becoming ill. Overtime, he took on three courses rather than four. Having a fourth course would have made him a full time teacher and created problems with the university. He was pleased to get back into academic work because he realized he was an academic rather than someone in the medical field. He speaks of Plato and Aristotle and their views on everything having their place in the universe.

Dr. Van Fleteren believes that the best course to take or teach would be *The Confessions of St. Augustine*. He states that it is a useful tool in teaching about the problems of late adolescence since that period lasts until age 30 in Latin. One can teach almost anything on Augustine through that one work, as well as the obstacles in one’s journey towards wisdom.

He describes his teaching method is Socratic in the sense that he tries to get everyone involved in class. He thinks that it is the best method of teaching because it involves dialogue with the students. It does get wearing as time goes on since it physically tires him out, and he has more trouble remembering names. He feels that things such as questions of “how much will this count on our final grade?”, and multiple choice tests have no place in a philosophy course.

In terms of changes among the student body, he noticed that everyone who comes to LaSalle goes to school to get a job. He states the purpose of education is to investigate the great questions of life for four years, a four years that a person will never get again. He refers to Plato who states that education was to train the mind to see the good, as well as St. Augustine who says that education is to train the mind to understand scripture. He tells the story of how he had asked three Asian students at the end of their four years about what they learned at LaSalle. When
one of them said “train the mind to see the good,” he felt that the whole effort was successful. He says that most students and teachers do not understand that the message of “train the mind to see the good” should be made known to them in their first year. He disagrees with the emphasis on vocational training and the notion that a person can decide what they want to do for the rest of their lives at an early age.

The staff and faculty changed along similar lines. He talks about a past Chair who questioned the usefulness of teaching philosophy in terms of entering a career. He says that the current Chair understands that philosophy is not meant to be a vocational training course.

In terms of changes over requirements for tenure or promotion, Dr. Van Fleteren states that there have not been many changes since the three main aspects of job: teaching, service to the profession, and service to the community have not changed much. He says that there has been a greater focus on service to the profession, or writing. The downside to that he says is that many ridiculous things get published. He talks about how there are new studies and research on many subjects as time goes like for example, St. Augustine. He then shows me the first two volumes of his three volume work on the Church Father. He says that the “old boys club” of the past was a good method of helping people get jobs because people knew each other’s strengths and flaws and could help one another out.

He says that introducing young people to real philosophy, and training their minds to be more to pursue truth, good, and wisdom were what he felt to be his most meaningful service at LaSalle. How successful he was is up to others to judge he adds.

He cannot recall any particular conversation he has had with any students that has stood out over time. However, he says he always tries to engage students with discussions on various topics. While he also has had arguments with students, he cannot remember any particular ones.

He says that going to Ireland and discovering true scholarship, as well as rethinking his own values was the greatest experiences of his life.

The most difficult thing he has experienced in his life was the fact that he had never married. The relationships he had been in had difficulties because he felt he could not fully devote his time to a subject and another person at the same time.

In terms of what he was looking forward to in the future, he would like to continue doing what he is currently doing, teaching, for as long as his health holds
If he were to retire, he believes that he would still want to read St. Augustine, teach a little, and talk with students. He would also want to read both Shakespeare and Boswell’s Life of Johnson cover to cover.

1:34:11 He leaves parting advice for anyone who listens to the recording of the interview.

1:35:12 He thanks me for giving him the opportunity to be interviewed and apologizes for the initial mix up with times the previous week. I thank him for being part of this project.

1:35:47 Interview ends