

Interview of Dr. Michael Joseph Kerlin

University of Pennsylvania Hospital, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

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Interview conducted by Shelton Magee

Abstract:

Michael Joseph Kerlin (b 1936) grew up in a row house in southwest Philadelphia. During High School he decided to join the Christian Brothers and entered La Salle University. Upon graduation he taught high school in Virginia for four years. He pursued his doctorate degree at the Gregorian in Rome and shortly after Graduation in 1966 he became a professor of philosophy at La Salle. He left the Christian Brothers on his 34 birthday but continued to teach at La Salle. He chaired the philosophy department for 28 years and won the Lindback Distinguished Teaching Award in 1986. He married Maryanne Williams in 1972, and has two children, Michael and Christine. During the last couple years his battle with Leukemia has cut into his teaching load. He enjoys reading and learning languages and is a true intellectual. The Interview focuses on his involvement with the Christian Brothers, his childhood, his education both at La Salle and in Europe, the philosophy department at La Salle University, and his thoughts on subjects such as: University students, the Catholic Modernist Crisis, Pope John Paul II, Brother Azarias of the Cross, and the effects of Catholicism on philosophy.

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0:00:12 Michael Joseph Kerlin was named after his father. He was born at University of Pennsylvania hospital on Jan 13 1936. His parents were from Ireland and lived in Ulster before they moved to Philadelphia, where they met. Both his parents had family in Philadelphia area. They were married in 1931. Dr. Kerlin first lived in apartments in both west and north Philadelphia and later moved to a southwest Philadelphia three bedroom row house in which his parents lived until 1981. He was an athletic striver without success. He also did a lot of reading and had paper route as a teenager. His Father was janitor at GE and his mother also worked as a kitchen helper. His Father was an alcoholic, but was an affectionate father. Dr. Kerlin's best subjects were English and history and math was his worst. He went to West Catholic High School for boys, and finished at La Salle Hall. Franklin Roosevelt was an early hero, as well as members of the Philadelphia athletics. His nick name was Connie Mack.

0:07:02 The Kerlin family was affected by World War II when it lost two cousins. The Great Depression effected people around him. People did not want to get into debt and thus wanted to own their own houses. He also remembered a little of the impact of McCarthyism.

0:8:41 He became interested in Christian Brothers because he admired teachers at West Catholic. He was religiously preoccupied and thought he could focus on that and find resolution with the Brothers. He was not much into girls and was thought it was an attractive guys life in the Brotherhood. He joined Christian Brothers in September 8, 1953 when he received his habit and robes, but was a novitiate and an apostolate before that for a year. His Christian Brother's name was Brother Elrick Joseph. He took annual vows of chastity, poverty, obedience, teaching the poor gratuitously and living in community at the scholasticate in Elkins Park.

0:12:00 He took classes at La Salle and in three years and two summers received a bachelor's degree in English Education, and received a Masters degree in religion during the fourth year. This was typical of a Christian Brother student. They all received an education degree in some subject and a master's degree in religion. Around 1950 Eleanor Dixon sold the mansion in Elkins Park to the brothers. Religious classes focused on the commentary of Thomas Aquinas. Kerlin looks back on those religious studies as very useful and was glad they did not focus on contemporary religious figures at that time

0:16:40 His interest in Philosophy came from religious doubt. He thought that his doubts could be solved in good philosophy. For Kerlin Philosophy was a personal

passion. Emilian Fitzpatrick was a teacher who at La Salle Hall was Kerlin's first introduction to formal philosophy.

0:18:25 He lived at Elkins Park while with the brothers at La Salle. His daily routine at La Salle was waking up at 5:00AM, followed a half hour later by morning prayers, followed by 40 minutes of meditation and mass. Breakfast was at 7:00AM. He left at 8AM or 8:30AM for the 20 minute bus ride to La Salle. There were about ninety students in the brotherhood living at Elkins Park at the time. They wore robes to class. Buses were replaced by vans at some point. They had 18 hours of class a week. He would return to Elkins Park for lunch. Public reading was conducted at lunch which was eaten in silence except for the reader. Kerlin used to tease his family that they should still have reading at the dinner table. Spiritual reading and a prayer service took place in the late afternoon. Kerlin does not remember exactly what the service was. Dinner was followed by a little unsupervised time. Study hall was from 7 to 9, followed by evening prayer and silence. On weekends they were free in afternoons to play sports and read. There was a TV in the late 50's; he remembers others watching American Bandstand but he was too serious to watch. The Brothers went to Ocean City in September for three weeks or so before school started.

0:24:53 Kerlin states some physical differences between La Salle when he first started and now. Most important for him is now there are women, the only women before were those who cleaned and such. Also, Brothers who are students and teachers no longer wear the robes of the Brotherhood. Ocean City was a vacation spot for the Brothers and they also had a retreat there in the summer. More retreats took place at Elkins Park, but Kerlin did not like them because they allowed him too much introspection.

0:27:03 Kerlin taught high school at Dennis O'Connell in Arlington Virginia for four years after graduating from La Salle. He did some grad work at George Washington University in chemistry and physics and then at an extension of the University of Virginia did political science. In the summer after his third year of teaching, Kerlin did three courses of philosophy at Catholic University.

0:28:18 From, 1962- 1966, he went to Gregorian in Rome for a PhD in philosophy. His teachers were all Jesuits. Dittimus John or William Quinn was looking for someone in philosophy to pursue a grad degree and be on the faculty at La Salle. Kerlin was interested and was made his life long vows and learned that he was going to Europe to study. Charles Henry Buttimer advocated Gregorian because he wanted more American brothers to learn abroad. Kerlin had advantages in Rome and was there during 2nd Vatican council. He was there when Buttimer was elected the first non-French Superior General of the brothers. He lived in a French community in an Italian city and used Latin in school; this was useful in learning those three languages. Kerlin speaks French, Italian, and German, could take exams in Latin and is currently studying New Testament Greek. School was different in Europe because the method of teaching was lecture. Exams were oral, usually in Latin. Professors there had little interaction with students. He took some classes in Germany and Belgium during the summers and during one

semester abroad. There was less hand holding in Europe and, it was more impersonal than school in the states. One class was in German and he understood almost none of it. He still had the same prayer routine at the brothers community in Rome but had afternoons off because classes ended at 1PM. He was also off on Thursdays because there was no school, but had class on Saturdays. He went by car to the University. The “great silence” was after evening prayers and was supposed to be for prayers but Kerlin used it to study. The academic year was from October to February and February to the end of June. Kerlin visited Austria, Germany, Ireland, England and Belgium during summers.

0:42:15 Kerlin did his dissertation on George Tyrrell and Friedrich von Hugel who were Catholics as well as modernists. Tyrrell was a Jesuit who got excommunicated from the church around the turn of the century (1900). Kerlin does not think his dissertation was very creative but it did involve a lot of scholarship and he still works on it. He was interested in this subject by Emilian Fitzpatrick at La Salle, who then suggested that Kerlin do a paper of Catholic Modernism. Kerlin wrote a 30 page paper, as an undergrad, on Catholic Modernism. During his 2nd year in Rome, he had a teacher Peter Enricci who suggested these two modernists. Kerlin like him and wanted to write his dissertation under him. He did not write papers in grad school at the Gregorian so he showed his undergrad paper to Enricci. Dr. Kerlin still continues to work on that field and was in the middle of working on something related to modernism when he relapsed with leukemia. He did his defense in May of 1966, and started as a teacher at La Salle in the fall of 1966.

0:49:40 He thought of himself as an insecure teacher pedagogically and intellectually when he first started but is no longer insecure. He thinks that wearing religious garb and living at Elkins Park with students and Brothers helped him feel comfortable.

0:51:12 He left the Brotherhood because he wanted to have sex. The late 1960s were a time of social and intellectual turbulence and they affected the Brotherhood. It became plain to Kerlin in 1967-68 that the nature of the brotherhood was changing and many of Kerlin's generation were leaving. Kerlin had had no chance to work out issues of sexuality as a Brother. He realized he had to make a decision about whether to leave sooner than later and did not want to make the decision as a fifty year old and he gave himself three years to make a decision. The instability of the times continued and he came no closer to resolution until the summer of 1969, lying in bed he decided he had to leave. He left on his 34 birthday January 13, 1970. He did a degree at Temple in religion during the summer in 1969 and met his future wife there.

0:56:44 His wife, Maryann Williams, is from Long Island and was a grad student who came to him to ask for help on writing a paper. His children are Michael David Kerlin, 32, and Christine, 34, who gave him his only grandchild Nevid.

0:57:50 Kerlin left the brothers but did not have to leave the school. He was one of the first to have a contract at La Salle. He received support for the decision to stay

and claims to be the first to leave the brothers and continue at La Salle. Kerlin said the Brothers were good to him. He told David Ryan, his superior, that he was going to leave. He then filled out a form saying he could not keep his vow of chastity and submitted it to Rome for a dispensation of his life long vows. Kerlin stated that this was the usual reason for leaving the Christian Brothers at this time. He signed final papers on his birthday, got an apartment, and was married a year and a half later. Lay faculty had contracts, and brothers were signed to faculty but did not have contract until the fall of 1968 or 1969 and lived out of the pool of funds of the Christian Brothers. Once they had contracts the community was paid the money. Brothers were also uninsured; if a brother got sick the community took care of him. They also did not pay into or receive social security and were not in the retirement system.

1:06:10 Kerlin converses with nurse.

1:07:10 Kerlin continues with his story about how long he has been there and how there were no records of his first few years because he was not under contract his first couple of years. Margurete Walsh at human resources asked if Kerlin had proof he was there before 1968 when he first received a contract. There was no paper trail but Brother John McGoldrick who was an assistant to the Provost said that when Kerlin received tenure who be a good indication of when he started. Brother Joe Grabenstein was also contacted to provide proof. Also during this story he tells another of Brother Michael McGuinniss throwing a basketball at his head for calling a foul. Brothers are now in health pension and retirement systems.

1:13:03 Kerlin talks about the Philosophy Department at La Salle when he started teaching. Students were required to do four courses instead of the two that they are now. There were 19 full time members of the department when he became chair; there are now 8. Adjunct instructors have lowered the number of full time professors. They are cheap so instead of 12 full time faculty members, there are 8 and plenty of adjunct instructors. Kerlin says the department is very conscious of the status of the professors. Now the two courses consisted of one of two introductory courses (the human person or moral inquiries) and an elective. In the early years of Kerlin's stay at La Salle, the four courses consisted of three required courses, the first being logic, and one elective. Conversation with nurse interrupts his thought process.

1:18:57 Kerlin talks about how students have changed. Brothers are not a presence as students or teachers. He also says girls are a huge difference and now compose more than half the student body. Kerlin thinks the average credentials of students are about the same. He says they are giving fewer full scholarships and are getting fewer very good students. He then talks about an excellent student this semester Francesca Laboso. He says there was never a time where he didn't have passive students and that when his son was at Princeton, students would come to class unprepared and thus passivity is not unique to La Salle. He says writing is a large problem, and the students need more hand holding. For example students can start a paper the day before it's due and cannot be successful giving such little thought to a paper. For Kerlin, there seem to be more practical majors at La Salle now and thus less history and English

majors. Thus his classes have fewer people who can provide context for discussions. He gives an antidote about a recent student who did not know what a prophet is. He does not know if it was ignorance or passivity. He then gives a story from 20 years or so ago about a student that did not know what intellectual or utility meant. For Kerlin these antidotes show that students were the same as they are now. He says it's hard to say whether kids are more or less prepared or more or less passive, but again states that he has fewer exceptional students. He says students express less opposition than they did in the turbulent times of the late 60s and early 70s.

1:34:36 Kerlin talks about the effects of Catholicism on La Salle's Philosophy department. He used to think that there was too much emphasis on Catholic identity at La Salle, but now thinks the opposite. He has become an advocate of putting emphasis on Catholic Identity to see Catholicism as a cultural and intellectual resource and not as a barrier to limit what you can do. Administrators have to make "we can't" decisions: Can't pay certain people as speakers, can't give a certain person an honorary degree, can't have this program and can't give out birth control. Kerlin is interested in things La Salle should do because of Catholicism. He says the department has non Catholic Christians, Jews, and atheists, but the interest in Catholicism is more prevalent in philosophy classes than in the religion department. Kerlin says philosophy is tied to Catholicism at La Salle; the less La Salle is concerned with being Catholic, the less concerned they are with philosophy. He thinks it is good for the University to have a Catholic tradition and that it's better to come from someplace than no place. Kerlin says he asked perspective job applicants how they see themselves contributing in a diverse department at a Catholic university.

1:39:12 Kerlin talks about universities' autonomy or lack of it from Rome. He then shifts to La Salle's autonomy. Kerlin thinks La Salle has more autonomy in what's taught than a state university because it's a private institution. He says the church has no power over La Salle but concedes that surrounding society has some control over La Salle. He talks about basketball players being accused of rape at a summer camp. If La Salle does something that offends Catholics, the power society has is that they can say "you can't come recruit kids at our school", or alumni will not give money and people will refuse to send children to La Salle. Kerlin says he has almost complete autonomy in the class room. He does say that there is not as much autonomy in public events such as honorary degree, in which award winners have views that are against those not necessary of the church but of Catholic culture. He says in the philosophy department they can talk about anything and invite any speaker. However, Kerlin states that teachers can get in trouble by flirting with students or with sexual harassment. He tells story of a colleague, who used to kiss his female students when they got a right answer during private tutor sessions that was fired. But he makes the point that this happens at all Universities. Also says that the practice of Professors dating their grad students used to be accepted but can get you fired today.

1:49:20 He talks about his highs and lows of being a teacher. He hates being ripped in evaluations, likes being loved and admired. Kerlin says he had some battles as chair with the administration. Kerlin says the philosophy department is a peaceful one

and not like some departments that are at each others throats. He does not mention winning the Lindback award as a high point. He does describe it after being asked about it.

1:52:02 He talks about Azarias of the Cross, a Brother from the area who lived in the 19th century, on whom that Kerlin had done some research.

1:55:27 Kerlin talks about Pope John Paul II as a philosopher and about the Pope's book *The Acting Person*. Kerlin considers John Paul II a serious intellectual. He says he often thinks about what it would be like being the Pope and how difficult it would be balancing responsibility for the institution and being aware of all the intellectual problems of Catholicism. Kerlin says for him it is easier to be a philosopher as a layman without having to worry about being consistent in what he thought and thus avoid internal tensions.

1:58:28 Kerlin talks about his marriage and how satisfied he was with he decision to leave the brotherhood and get married.

2:00:28 He thinks it will be hard to get another Brother as President of La Salle. Thinks there will be brothers at La Salle but can't see who Michael J. McGinniss's successor could be from the brotherhood. Talks about other schools that have had lay presidents. He says McGinniss has been good to him.

2:03:42 Kerlin talks about the Modernist Crisis in the Catholic Church just after the turn of the 19th century and says the ideas are still live ideas. He talks about Immanuel Kant's philosophy effecting modern Catholic thought which set people astray and led Pope Pius X, under the influence of Joseph Lemius, to denounce the modernists. Kerlin states that relativism is still an issue with the current Pope and John Paul II. He then talks about how these ideas are still around and that you can still see debates about these ideas in the *The Wonderer*, *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal*. Kerlin mentions John D. Caputo (Kerlin refers to him as Jack) and his thoughts on Post Modernism.

2:09:32 Kerlin says that Chemotherapy has not affected his answers, or his brain, and that he is well treated by the nurses. The interview is finished up as Kerlin says he needs a walk and wants to get on to the next part of his day.