

Interview of Steven J. Stahley
By: Kate Ambrose
Westminster, Maryland
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Audio File 1

Ambrose: My name is Kate Ambrose and today I will be interviewing Mr. Steven J. Stahley. We are conducting the interview in Westminster, Maryland from Mr. Stahley's home. Today's date is March 12, 2011 and the interviewee and the interviewer are related. The interviewee, Mr. Stahely, is my mother's brother. So, Steve before we begin are you aware that this interview it being recorded?

Stahley: I am.

Ambrose: Okay, so, first of all I would like to start out by talking about your birth and your early childhood. So, can you tell me when and where you were born?

Stahley: Sure I was born on August 14, 1951 in Philadelphia Pennsylvania at the Thomas Jefferson hospital which is in downtown Philadelphia.

Ambrose: Okay, how many years did you live there, in Philadelphia?

Stahley: I lived in Philadelphia from the time of my birth in 1951 until I departed for the college seminary in September of 1969; so eighteen years.

Ambrose: Okay, I'm going to switch gears right away and we're going to move right into your parents.

Stahely: Okay

Ambrose: So, first I'd like to start with your father. Can you remember when your father was born?

Stahley: Yes, my father, George J. Stahley, was born September 20, 1924. My mother, Rita Marie O'Neill Stahley was born June 5, 1925. Both parents were born in Philadelphia.

Ambrose: Okay, and speaking of your father, what kind of work did he do?

1:56

Stahley: At the time of my birth, my father worked for a steel company based in Philadelphia, Edgecomb Steel and I believe the job that he had was as a dispatcher for the steel trucks that would haul the steel that Edgecomb produced to various manufacturing companies and shortly after my birth, I think by the time I was five or six, maybe seven, my father had moved from that job into sales for, as it turned out, for various trucking companies that worked in the Philadelphia area. He had met a lot of salesmen for trucking companies when he was with edge comb and decided that that was the kind of work he would like to do so I believe by the time I was maybe seven he was working as a salesman for, I can't remember the name of the company, but he worked, ended up working for several trucking companies as a salesman.

Ambrose: Okay, so that was the line of work he kept through his entire

Stahley: Sales, yes.

Ambrose: And, can you just describe his character to me, your father?

Stahley: Sure, (Laughs)

Ambrose: (Laughs)

Stahley: Umm, maybe I can't. (Laughs)

Ambrose: (Laughs)

Stahley: (Pause) Trick question already, huh? No, it's not a trick question. (Pause) My father was intense. He was quick tempered. He had a sense of humor with a bit of an edge to it. In his own way, he could be affectionate but it was in his own way and as a small child, I guess I didn't really get a chance to experience that until I would get sick with things like the measles or the chicken pox or the mumps which all the kids of our generation would get sick of like one after the other it was kind of like you had to get through these things. One of my first real clear memories of my father was coming into the room where I was in bed usually for several days on end because that's how those sicknesses were treated in those days and my father would sit not on the bed but he would sit in a chair near the bed and he would talk about his days in the navy in world war II and this was a subject that I was very interested in and he felt very comfortable doing that. He would just, I can remember him very well sitting in the chair, rocking, it was a rocking chair, and he would, he had this habit of twirling his hair with his finger and I can picture that, I can see that very clearly and he would tell the stories and it was very much like a child hearing fairy tales where hearing the same stories over and over again become very comforting to a child and the child at some point gets to know the details even better than the adult telling the story. My father would leave something out, I would remind him and he would put it back in but it wasn't physical contact but there was a lot

of affection there and a lot of warmth and so I remember that thoroughly and as I look back that softens my image of him greatly.

6:09

Ambrose: Great. Okay, let's switch over and talk about your mother.

Stahley: Okay.

Ambrose: Well, we already discussed when your mother was born and where, so what kind of work did she do?

Stahley: My mother, Rita Marie O'Neill Stahley, was a registered nurse. She had been, she had finished her training and was working as a nurse before I was born and I believe that, I think she might have worked intermittently when I was an infant but she was mainly at home with me and my memories of her are much clearer and more distinct going way back in my childhood. She was very, very loving, very affectionate. My mother came from a very large, Irish family and they were all pretty good looking people. I just remember my mother being very beautiful with her black hair and her beautiful smile. My strongest memories of her in terms of connection and affection go way back to some of my earliest memories of life, of just being a human being. That strong bond and strong connection began to diminish rapidly as my sisters came along because I think she became overwhelmed and by the time my final sister, Teresa was born in 1960, it's almost as though the mother that I remembered had kind of disappeared into a lot of anxiety and worry. She began to feel very distant.

Ambrose: Now you mentioned that you had sisters, so how many children did your parent have?

Stahley: My parents had five children, myself and four sisters.

Ambrose: And, can you tell me the names of your sisters and can you remember when they were born?

Stahley: I can, very well. Maryellen follows me. She was born January 18th, 1954, in Philadelphia. The next sister, your mother of course, Marguerite was born May 25, 1956, Philadelphia. Then there's Joan. I always miss the exact date of her birth. I think it's November 26th or 27th, it's on the calendar, 1958 and then the final, the baby of the family was Teresa who was born May 20, 1960. She's the only one of the five of us who was not born in the fifties. I believe that after Teresa, my mother had two or three miscarriages and I'm not sure how far into the pregnancy those babies went.

Ambrose: Now is that a typical family size for the time period?

Stahley: Very much so. My mother was one of eight O'Neill siblings. The oldest Peg became a nun, of course, but the other seven all had children and I was just thinking of

this the other day. Two of her siblings had seven children, two of her siblings had five children, like she did, and I think the remaining two siblings had three so we were, in the O'Neill family, we were like the median or the mean, whatever would be right in the middle and in terms of the Catholic families in Philadelphia, without being ironic, five was almost a small family because six, seven or eight was more the norm so five would often illicit a comment that, "Oh, you're from a small family."

10:27

Ambrose: (Laughs)

Stahley: And that's how the world seemed until I moved out into the bigger world and realized how skewed those numbers were.

Ambrose: So, being the oldest of five children, let's say, as the only male, can you describe your childhood? Was it difficult being the only male sibling?

Stahley: Yes it was. It was because I passionately wanted a brother and I kept waiting for my mother to bring a brother home and it just never happened. But, I remember in the neighborhood that we grew up in, in the Olney section of Philadelphia, it was teeming with kids so there were a lot of friends that I had. My mother's sister Helen had seven children, six of whom were boys, so I very closely identified with my Morris cousins many of whom were clustered around my age. So, it was somewhat stressful being the only boy but I was the oldest so I did have access to lots of other little boys to play with and lots of male cousins so I felt.

Ambrose: Did you and your siblings get along as children?

Stahley: No (laughs)

Ambrose: (Laughs)

Stahley: As you know. The one I was most competitive with was Maryellen. We were at loggerheads, I would say, virtually the entire time I lived at home. With Marguerite, not so much, and actually I should revise my quick answer to that. It was just Maryellen and myself that were the competitors. Marguerite was literally and figuratively in the middle and Joan and Teresa were like the little kids so there really wasn't fighting there but I guess the striving between Maryellen and myself was so intense for so many years that it kind of colored my perception of how we all got along but on the whole I would say it was balanced. It wasn't any more or any less than other families, so.

Ambrose: Okay, now what kinds of things did you compete over?

Stahley: (pause) I think for our parent's attention, toys, what else? Well, I was the oldest boy and she was the oldest girl and I think there may have been some tension there because a lot was expected of both of us in terms of example and concern for the others

and I guess I felt the, I felt a certain amount of pressure as the oldest in the family and I didn't know this until many years later but Maryellen felt a lot of pressure as the oldest of the girls and so I think that, I think those expectations carried a burden with them that were weren't even aware of and it fueled a lot of the tension. It was certainly there.

14:11

Ambrose: Alright, switching gears, I am going to ask you some questions about your schooling. We're going to be going with your primary schooling and then move into, I guess the later, high school and then college.

Stahley: Okay.

Ambrose: So, what kind of school did you attend for your primary schooling?

Stahley: Initially I went to St. Helena's, a large, very large Catholic parish in Philadelphia. I went to the parish school and typical of my cohort in the baby boom generation, when I started as a first grader, I think in 1957, I guess 1957, I was in a class with, it had to be at least fifty other little kids and I vividly remember my first grade teacher Sister Marie Steven because she had the same name as me so I remember (laughs)

Ambrose: (laughs)

Stahley: But somehow she maintained order and I have such awe of these women who both religious and lay teachers who were asked to handle these huge classes. Somehow the system worked, I mean this was the fifties so there was there were just certain expectations that everyone was expected to meet and you were, it became part and parcel to who you were in those days. I remember the school being it just huge I mean it was, of course you're just a little kid but the building seemed huge, the numbers seemed huge. I was fortunate in that one of my cousins who I became very close to and continue to be close to my cousin Terry lived just two streets over from where we lived and she was a big second grader when I was a first grader and she would often hold my hand on the way to school. She was like a very loving big sister and just knowing Terry was around was a great comfort to me. But, I guess the point I would make is that from first grade all the way through the end of high school, everything was on the huge scale. I mean this is just what you got used to huge numbers very, I wouldn't use the word severe but a strong code of behavior and the expectations were that you were going to toe the line. For the most part that's the way it went. Looking back I have to say somehow the system worked, I mean, because you got your education. You learned how to read, you learned how to do arithmetic and the grades would build on each other and I guess the socialization came with it because there were just so many people.

Ambrose: Can you describe this code of behavior because I'm sure it's a lot different from what the Catholic school system is like today?

17:34

Stahley: Yeah, it, well in addition to being (pause) very clearly communicated in terms of what you could or could not do and how you had behaved. It had the additional aura, if I can use that word, of religion in the sense that this just wasn't a school you were going to this was a Catholic school and you were being taught for the most part by nuns although there were some lay women there. In addition to the expectations of good order and correct behavior it had this layer of religious authority on top of it which was that these women in these very (pause) these very total habits, I mean, in those days the habits were, they covered the women from head to toe and the sisters of St. Joseph had kind of a boxy head piece, that they wore and I can't remember all the names of the pieces, the accoutrements I guess is the word, but the bib or whatever, overall I don't know what these things were for. It wasn't just that you better behave it's that God is watching and these are the agents of God and you will behave because if you act out or misbehave it's not just wrong it could be sinful. So, for a young child immersed in the Catholic culture of the day, these women, and I don't mean to miscast them as being overly harsh or anything, but they were emissaries of this deep and expansive tradition and I guess I must have been marked at an early age because I was sitting way in the back and (laughs) they would sometimes sell penny candy in the school and the girl next to me had bought two or three pieces and I was hungry and I was nagging her, I guess, for a piece and somebody else was doing something similar and Sister Marie Steven saw the two of us and

Ambrose: (Laughs).

Stahley: and you didn't want to get noticed, you didn't want to get noticed but Sister Marie Steven summoned the two of us up and I think it might have been myself and a little girl and she took us over her knee and spanked us in front of the class. This was, well, it was beyond humiliating. It was beyond shocking but this, this is how order and discipline were going to be maintained and so lesson learned!

Ambrose: (Laughs)

Stahley: I mean, I just disappeared into the woodwork after that and that was all the correction I needed!

Ambrose: (Laughs)

Stahley: To get through the next seven years in terms of good behavior. I guess it's important to note that my primary school education went from 1958 until I graduated from the eighth grade in 1965 and these were the last years before the Second Vatican Council was held and of course the Second Vatican Council introduced massive change into the Catholic Church. It filtered down through every level and everything. By the time I was in high school, everything was beginning to change. Things that were thought to be as rigid and as solid as the Soviet Union were breaking down much the way the Soviet Union disappeared but I was the last group to go all the way through from the first grade

to eighth grade under the system where corporal punishment was just a part of the system; the sisters were in full habit. I did not have my first male teacher until I was in high school

22:12

Ambrose: Oh, get out!

Stahley: So it was completely female dominated. These women for the most part were very dedicated, very capable. I remember, because I went to three different grade schools: St. Helena's in Philadelphia, our family moved because of my father's job to Dayton, Ohio for a period of maybe nine months. I went to Holy Angels there. Then my father was transferred back to Philadelphia; ended up at St. Cecilia's so I was taught by three different orders of religious sisters, different in their own way but the underlying infrastructure of Catholic education was the same in terms of very tight rules, heavy emphasis on conformity, and (pause) just a very heavy influence of Catholicism and learning the Catechism, and being drilled on the fundamentals of the Catholic religion.

Ambrose: Okay. Now you talked a lot about how you had all female teachers. Where most of them sister or nuns? Did you have any lay teachers, in primary school?

Stahley: Yes, I had lay teachers in the third, fourth and seventh grades. The rest were all religious sisters.

Ambrose: Okay. Did any one of these teachers stand out to you, now? Maybe stick in your mind, teach you anything that?

Stahley: Yes, yes there's one. Her name is Sister Madeline Sophie and Sister Madeline taught me in the second grade and the fifth grade at St. Helena's and the reason she stands out is because she was very, very sweet and very kind. What I saw play out was that she could get as much conformity and good behavior from her class through her empathy as other sisters and lay teachers would through fear or intimidation. I didn't figure this out until many, many years later but I remembered that Sister Madeline, who was, of course, covered by the habit of the Sister's of Saint Joseph and I had no idea how young these women were but I remember Sister Madeline's face being very, very red and it was only years later I realized she had horrible acne.

Ambrose: Oh!

Stahley: Which covered her, she had puffy little cheeks and they would get redder when we would be driving her crazy. But, I only realized years later that it was acne because she was so young. She was probably maybe nineteen or twenty.

Ambrose: Oh! (Laughs).

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Stahley: But, she was very sweet. I think I remember her also because early on in the second grade she learned my name and would call me by my name and then of course I had her again in the fifth grade and she had remembered me from the second grade so there was a little bit of a bond there. I thought that she knew me and took a special interest in me and was very encouraging. As I look back it was the sweetness and the empathy that came through her. Not that the others were unduly harsh, but she was especially a kind and loving and that made a big impression on me.

Ambrose: Did, because you said it was kind of special that she learned your name.

Stahley: Yes

Ambrose: Did other teachers not because of how large the classes were?

Stahley: (Pause) I think they all did, eventually. I think what set this one Sister apart was that I just, I'm not sure why I can remember this but I just had this sense that she learned it early on.

Ambrose: Okay.

Stahley: Whereas other teachers, they would have to learn your name I guess by the middle of the year, but she seemed to go out of her way, not just with myself, but with others too to learn the names and to call you by your name as early in the year as possible so, it kind of forged this little bond.

Ambrose: Okay. Alright, so after you completed your primary schooling, what was the next step?

Stahley: The next step was going to high school. Philadelphia, and again I would only learn this later, Philadelphia, unlike virtually every other large city in the United States, had its own system of what we'll call diocesan high schools. Philadelphia because the Catholic population was so large and because at one point in its history, the diocese, the archdiocese was run by a Cardinal, Cardinal Dennis Dougherty, who became really a real estate magnate and was probably in addition to being a very powerful member of the hierarchy in the country had this ambition to build Catholic high schools that would not be private high schools run by religious orders like the Jesuits or the Franciscans but he would build a system of high schools that would function much the way that parish schools functioned where there would really be none or minimal tuition requirements and students every Catholic student could get a Catholic high school education. This was his dream and by the time I was moving through eighth grade there must have been, there had to be at least twelve or maybe fourteen of them around the archdiocese of Philadelphia, which is a very large archdiocese and we had to as eighth graders we were all required to take these high school placement tests and I remember that my grade school, St. Cecilia's, was in the catchment area of Cardinal Dougherty so my first

experience, the school named after the Cardinal, who is long since dead at this point but who had been the architect of the system. I remember my impression of Cardinal Dougherty going there as an eighth grader when we, when it was our turn to go and take these tests was, very negative. It was large, I thought it was dirty, I thought it was just, I was used to bigness but this was just too big and (laughs) I passionately did not want to go to Cardinal Dougherty high school.¹

30:10

Ambrose: (Laughs).

Stahley: The school that I wanted to go to was Holy Ghost, which was a very small, Catholic, private high school run by, at that time, the Holy Ghost Fathers and so my parents let me take the test to get into Holy Ghost; it was less wanting to go to Holy Ghost than not wanting to go to Cardinal Dougherty and I didn't pass the test and I remember the day I came home from school and my mother broke the news to me that I didn't pass the test for Holy Ghost and I was crushed. To ease the pain my mother said, "Don't worry Steven; we couldn't have afforded to send you there anyway." So it just,

Ambrose: Yeah. (Laughs).

Stahley: The whole consolation on top of being a harsh reality. So that was it. I knew at that point that I hadn't passed the test for Holy Ghost. I thought Holy Ghost was going to be my best chance because I didn't think that I could have passed the test for LaSalle, St. Joe's Prep was too far away, what else? Public school was not even an option; it was going to be Catholic school. So, I resigned myself to Cardinal Dougherty which, as it turned out, was one of the best things that ever happened to me. I mean, I'm so glad that's the way it worked because I ended up going there with most of my friends from grade school. Once I got there and was assigned to a section, I was reunited with a lot of kids I knew from St. Helena's, the first parish, who were also in the Cardinal Dougherty catchment area, because Cardinal Dougherty was right there in St. Helena's. So, I began as a freshman at Cardinal Dougherty in 1965, was there straight through, and graduated 1969. I believe it was either my junior or senior year that Cardinal Dougherty reached the enrollment of 6,000 kids and was, for that period I believe, the largest Catholic high school, if not the world, certainly the country and the thing about Cardinal Dougherty where I received, I think a college prep course of studies that could rival even the private schools in Philadelphia and certainly prepared me well for college. It was so large and so competitive in every aspect of its being that it was this great preparation for life and for the variety of people that you would meet, and for the kinds of challenges that you would face. Some of the brutalities of life because the system of corporal punishment and heavy discipline that I had experienced as a grade schooler, even though there were changes happening in the larger church, Cardinal Dougherty, and I'm sure the other diocesan high school still ran on a very heavy discipline code and this was just the way it was. Corporal punishment I think even some gratuitous corporal punishment was a fact of life and you

¹ Cardinal Dougherty High School closed at the end of the 2009-2010 school year due to decreased enrollment.

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just had to adjust yourself to it and that's just the way it was. It was, I made friends there who continue to be my friends over forty years after graduation. The school had a tremendous tradition of cross country and track and field of which I participated in even though my first love would have been football but I was just too small to play football but I found my way to these teams which won city and state championships and ran under a legendary coach and formed bonds there that continue to this day. So, it was, I look back very fondly, it was a very positive experience, not without its strange episodes, but a very positive experience. My years there '65 to '69 were all so, the years immediately after the Second Vatican Council when enormous changes swept through not just the church but the world but so many things the Civil Rights, political tumult, breakthroughs in science and technology, it was an exhilarating time to be a teenager because it seemed that the scope and the dimensions of change were just unprecedented and this even began before I got to high school because I was a seventh grader when John F. Kennedy was shot and this was 1963, I was in the seventh grade and I just remember when that happened. Experiencing this leap in consciousness that history wasn't just something that you read about in books but you were apart of history because as shocking and awful as this was, it happened and it happened and even though TV had been around for a good fifteen years, this was being televised and you were watching the suffering of his family, you were watching the swearing in of a new president on an airplane in Texas. He was standing next to the former first lady who was still in the dress that had the blood on it from Kennedy's murder and you were seeing this and then two days later, if you happened to be in front of the T.V at the right time you saw his assassin get shot on live T.V. I mean this was changing everything. This was 1963 and then it seemed that those things, those kinds of things, then just accelerated when I was in high school with, as a junior in high school, waking up one morning in April of 1968 to find that Martin Luther King has been assassinated and then the riots broke out in Philadelphia and other cities. There was almost a huge fight between my high school and Olney high school when a bunch of black kids came up Second Street from Olney and things were very tense and the police were called. Nothing happened but that was April, less than two months later around the time of my mother's birthday, Bobby Kennedy is shot in California when he's campaigning for the Democratic nomination for President and I mean, I was a junior in high school and your going to school, you're studying about the Civil War and your studying about the end of the Civil War with Lincoln getting assassinated and you come home from school and you're dealing with these kinds of murders so I mean, I know the sixties have become a cliché, I'm fully aware of that but as one who went through it, it's hard to capture how shocking it was to and I've put these in the period of my adolescence but to be at your mother's parent's house in '64 on a Sunday evening where you were forced to sit there and drink ginger ale while the adults were talking and they're watching the Ed Sullivan show and he says, "The Beatles!" Even though I was only in the seventh grade, I knew that these were not like, this was not Lawrence Welk. These were guys only, maybe ten years older than me, with, we'll call them mop tops

Ambrose: (Laughs)

Stahley: And they're playing guitars and we were sitting in our O'Neill parent's living room and this was shocking. I mean the songs they were singing: "I Want to Hold Your Hand" and "She Loves You" and you know, (laughs) this was, it's hard to convey how shocking it was to see things like this because Ed Sullivan was like the MC of middle, old head America or something like that and he's introducing an act like that that. That was '64. Then in '69, with one of my cousins I'm watching live footage from the moon as Neil Armstrong steps down so it was a, I mean going from what I described as my primary education then ending up in this huge school with a very strong Catholic identity as everything about Catholicism and the United States was changing at this rapid pace was kind of like being on a rollercoaster I mean it was exhilarating but scary because of what, where was all this going? It was quite a wild ride.

40:54

Ambrose: I can't imagine being in high school during all that. It sounds amazing and I don't know as a high schooler I would be paying attention to all that stuff. Did your teachers kind of discuss it and say you know these assassinations are going on and the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War, I mean, did you have discussions about that kind of stuff?

Stahley: Well, yeah, I mean some no I guess in (pause) to their great credit, I mean there were courses were you really couldn't bring that in, for instance in Chemistry

Ambrose: Right.

Stahley: Or Biology I mean they had and again these were in high school it was fifty percent priest, fifty percent laymen and they had a lot of material to cover especially in math and the sciences and to their credit they did it well. They pushed hard; there was a lot of homework every night. There was, I mean, it was just a fact of life and I struggled with math and science so it was even more for me to handle all of that but I have to say that in the humanities and in religion, I think looking back that a lot of my teachers were struggling as much as we were. I mean some of them were men in their maybe, well, most of them were probably men in their thirties or forties or fifties which looks less and less old all the time to me now.

Ambrose: (Laughs)

Stahley: But I think a lot of them were struggling. I found out years later that some of them had either made major changes in their lives either resigning from the priesthood or as laymen doing other things. I think some of them were struggling with sexual identity issues and the ferment was so intense and so global that it was inescapable and I think that some of the more progressive ones were very open to letting us explore these things. I remember one of them, I can't remember which one it was but another thing that was happening when we were in high school were a lot on nations that had been colonies of European powers were throwing off colonialism and one of the things, one of the more pronounced things that was happening was the terrible Civil war I believe going on in the

Congo or Angola. There was a country that tried to break away and they called themselves bi-afra and I can't remember exactly what, there were some students at one of the other Catholic high schools that were very, it was Cardinal O'Hara, how I remember these things, I don't know.

43:50

Ambrose: (Laughs).

Stahley: Some of the students, girls, at Cardinal O'Hara were very concerned about this and somehow they got permission to travel around to other Catholic high schools to talk about it and to try and raise funds and this, I think I was a junior, she was a junior from Cardinal O'Hara and came in and pretty brave thing to come in front of an all guys class at Cardinal Dougherty and I'm sure there was some hooping and carrying on but she was very serious and I remember being so impressed with her that she would travel around saying this is happening and you need to be aware but you know, we are supposed to be concerned about other people and we are have this fundraising campaign and whatever you can give. I just remember being very impressed by her and thinking that that was a noble thing. I use that as an example of some of the more I guess enlightened faculty members you know, welcoming these topics into our discussions because it wasn't just a matter of learning. We didn't have Sociology or Psychology in those days but some of the history and some of the English and some of the religion teachers would fold those subjects in and make that part of what we were learning so it was a good thing, it was a very integrated education I think for its constraints at the time.

Ambrose: One of the things that you had mentioned prior was that you had a switch over from Vatican I to Vatican II and it kind of was split between your primary and your secondary schooling.

Stahley: Yes.

Ambrose: You said one of the things was corporal punishment was kind of being, I guess, phased out. Can you discuss some other changes between Vatican I and Vatican II that you can remember?

Stahley: Yes. Well, one of the biggest things was the mass which was celebrated in Latin as I grew up was now being celebrated in English and this was a momentous shift because attending mass before high school, you were very, it was very passive. I mean you would sit in the pew, everything was happening on the altar, and the priest had his back to the congregation. Your job was to pray, make some responses in Latin to the priest but it was the priest who was doing the work and the congregation was along for the ride. Well this began to change because not only was the mass being celebrated in English so you could understand what was being said but the priest turned around. Instead of facing the altar with his back to the congregation, the altar was moved out, the priest went behind the altar and it was more of a dialogue structure so you were learning about that. All of a sudden the words of the mass took on a new meaning. Another huge

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thing that came out of the changes in the church from Vatican II was that social justice was important. It's not just a matter of your isolated religious experiences between you and God but that as Catholics, Christians should have a responsibility to the larger world and to be concerned about the welfare of other people. The way that this began to play itself out while I was a high school student is that you had priests and nuns joining Civil rights marches and this was shocking and revolutionary that they would, that you would have priests and nuns who would be attending rallies with Martin Luther King and they were saying things like, "If you're Catholic you should be on the line with these people who are fighting for their basic Civil rights. It's not just a matter of going to church and praying and putting your money in the collection plate, it's a matter of taking your faith out into the world." Beyond the United States, in places like Central and South America, and I knew this because my mother really was interested in learning about these things and she subscribed to magazines and periodicals that I found myself reading that she would get that would talk about movements in Central and South American where you had priests and lay people coming together and challenging autocratic structures that basically had participated for centuries in oppressing poor people, very much with the blessing of the church because it was the established structure and the church was identified with the power structure of the government. You had theologians saying that this is wrong that the gospel, this is not what the gospel is about, it's about, you know, justice for all people, people should not be kept in poverty and illiteracy and you had this tremendous ferment that was taking place and I was finding out about this and it was finding its way, not to the degree I was reading about it, but it was finding its way into things I was learning in high school. It was like the whole impulse in the church was that it's not, we just can't sit on the fact that we are the true religion and everyone needs to come to us and we have the whole deal. Vatican II took that and turned it upside down and said that God pressing in other religions, we have to acknowledge our own sinfulness and we have to do more than just pray, pay and obey. We have got to immerse ourselves in the problems of the world and make the world a better place for everybody, not just Catholics. So, that was finding its way everywhere with a tremendous fervor and intensity; it was inescapable, it was just everywhere so the change and emphasis from pre-Vatican II to post-Vatican II was dramatic.

Ambrose: So was it a smooth transition, would you say?

Stahley: No, not at all. It was

Ambrose: (Laughs).

Stahley: It was very lumpy and very difficult because I think a lot of people, especially in my parent's generation were threatened by this. It was like everything that they had been told was now up for question, things which almost seem laughable now when you look back. For instance my parents had grown up where eating meat on Friday was a mortal sin. Well, the church finally said, "well no not really." I mean for kids, it was like "so what who cares?" But for, you know, that was just one example of how, it's like the rules

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are being changed and you can't do that and we had stability we had consistency, we had constancy and now there's too many things that are up for questions, there's too many things that used to be a certainty that aren't. I think that one of the things that gave Catholics a lot of security, especially of my parents generation was that the church had all the answers and it was very clear what you could do and couldn't do. I mean it really was a black and white dichotomy. All of a sudden, what seemed like all of a sudden, that was changing because what had happened at this council of the church was that they were saying "well maybe not." I mean maybe not, and the ironic thing was that what people of my parents generation had thought was true of the church in its entire history was not, I mean the church my parents grew up in had its roots in what was called the counter reformation, after Martin Luther challenged the Catholic church in the 1500s. The Catholic reaction to that was immense and it basically formed the structure of the church that carried then from the 1500s to the 1960s; four-hundred years is a long time. But, the church is much older than that, the church is 2000 years old and many of the things that Vatican II was trying to reclaim were things that ironically were much more authentically Catholic because they went all the way back to Jesus and the Apostles. So what the Catholic Church was doing, whereas it was seen as radical and liberal and overly progressive, was in many ways trying to reclaim something that was very ancient. I mean, not only did Jesus not talk Latin, he (inaudible) no Latin.

Ambrose: (Laughs).

Stahley: But in the minds of the generation ahead of mine, it was as if the applecart was being turned over and it was a huge mess. The first shockwaves, if you will, were hitting full force when I was a high school kid and it was big.

Ambrose: I basically just have one more questions about high school and then we'll move on. You said that you were apart of a very historic track team in high school so how did you get started in the business of running cross-country; when did that come up?

Stahley: Well, I, as a kid (laughs) little kid, I passionately loved football and I was able to play it as a kid; by a kid, I mean fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh grade. I was able to play it because at the time, I guess this has changed, but at the time there were lots of weight division football teams in Philadelphia and so it's hard, kids are so different these days. I think I was on the seventy-five pound team for two years.

Ambrose: (Laughs).

Stahley: Then I graduated to the eighty-five pound team, this is, again, fifth or sixth grade. I mean it was fine and it was safe. We wore helmets and pads and all that but you were basically playing against other kids who, for the most part, were your same size and weight class. It was well regulated and it was a lot of fun and I enjoyed it. I just became very taken with the game of football but by the time I was in the eighth grade, I wasn't growing as much as the other kids (laughs) were growing and it became clear to me just

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from seeing some high school games when I was an eighth grader that I, you know, despite the fact that I could run fast and could catch a football, I, even if I made the team, I probably wouldn't get much. It was my father who said, "Well you ought to think about this" and I didn't take it immediately but the more I thought about it, I thought "Well that might be an idea" and I guess I had sorted that out by the time I got to high school and decided that this is what I wanted to go for, not knowing at all anything other than that cross country teams run through the woods and that they run a little further. So I joined up and I made the team because they didn't cut anybody and so I was on the freshman team at Cardinal Dougherty and I was the slowest kid on the team (laughs)

Ambrose: (Laughs).

Stahley: despite the fact that I was pretty fast. I think there were, I think they would maybe take ten or twelve of us to a race and the way that they would do cross-country races is we would compete against three other Catholic high schools and each team would bring ten or fifteen kids and so we would all be on the starting line and we would run at Fairmount park in Philadelphia, Belmont Plateau it was called. And, although I was, I was certainly the slowest kid on Cardinal Dougherty's team and there were so many good runners there that even thought I wouldn't beat any of my teammates from my high school. I would beat lots of kids from other high schools and that was kind of gratifying. Then I just got into it and worked out on my own in the summers and most of my teammates didn't so when I when back as a sophomore I did much, much better and was a good JV runner and then when I was a junior and senior I made varsity and ran on those teams. There was just a tremendous *esprit de corps* unlike most other teams at Cardinal Dougherty because of the coach we had, a guy named Jack St. Claire², who later went on to coach at Temple University. He had for some reason he had built this tradition from literally the time Cardinal Dougherty opened in 1956 so that by the time I showed up, and I was in the tenth graduating class, by the time I showed up the team had won several Catholic legion city championships. I just became part of that and it was like the other teams at Cardinal Dougherty were striving to keep up with the runners and as it turns out, when I was a senior it was like the, maybe the stars all aligned but the football team won the championship that year, the soccer team won the city championship, baseball team won, we won the track championship. It was like expected for us to do that because the team had gotten so good and the other teams kind of caught up. Even though we were good, there's just no escaping that fact that in high school, the football team, that they're the sexy ones

Ambrose: (Laughs).

Stahley: you know, they're the ones and the basketball team. I mean, track and cross-country is, I mean we were respected and everything but you don't have the star appeal that the others ones, which was okay with me, I mean I was just happy to be apart of a good team so that was fun.

² Jack St. Claire died in 2007 at the age of eighty. He coached track for Temple from 1967-1983.

Ambrose: Were there any thoughts of continuing a track career after high school?

59:30

Stahley: Oh, funny you should ask that question. Mine no, my father, yes.

Ambrose: Oh! (Laughs).

Stahley: My father was thrilled that I was doing this. I think that my father was a frustrated athlete because he had never, he went to North Catholic, he had never played sports. He played pickup baseball, I'm sure he played touch football but he was never apart of any of North Catholics teams and my father was, not only was he glad that I was a runner, he never missed a cross-country race or track meet; he was there. My father came and he had bought a stop-watch and he had, in Fairmount Park we would start in this open area and we would do this circuit of about a mile and then we would disappear into the woods for maybe three-quarters of a mile, do this loop, and then we would emerge from the woods were we had gone in and then it was maybe like a half a mile to the finish line. My father would position himself at different places and he would have his stop watch and he would have his little clip board (laughs)

Ambrose: (Laughs).

Stahley: and he was watching all of the Cardinal Dougherty runners and he would shout out, he was almost like an assistant coach, he would shout out everybody's, he would give the person's time as they went by, to the point that they would all count on it like, "Where's Mr. Stahley?" and then we would come out and many times when a cross-country race was over, everyone was clustered around my father, not the coach. I mean it didn't bother the coach; he was (inaudible) enough with things to do because there were several teams running but my father would keep charts of were people were and how they did and he was very, of course, I was the focal point and my times were never good enough and my father would buy all these books about the inner game of running or all this kind of stuff because he thought I could do this better. I mean, I learned to live with it and he was pushing and I was glad he was interested. He, some other fathers came but not with the consistency that he did and not with the intention to detail that he did and when I guess (pause) between my junior and senior year at Cardinal Dougherty, the guy who had coached us, Jack St. Claire, moved onto Temple, he had been doing part time work at Temple but he moved to Temple full time to take over their cross-country and track and field program. He was building the program up down there and I was one of four or five guys from Cardinal Dougherty that he had arranged partial scholarships for to go to Temple and for my father this was like a dream come true, that his son would get a scholarship to Temple, you know, my father was just ecstatic. (Laughs) It was in the latter part of my senior year that I decided I was going to enter the seminary and my father and I negotiated that and it was, for him it was crushing that I wasn't going to do this but we had this long discussion. Around this time of year it was March of 1969 when I said this is what I want to do, I want to go to the seminary. It was like we were playing

chess, you know, we sat down and as I recall, it was the first real adult discussion that I had with my father. It was the first time that I was, very politely, but very strongly saying no to my father and my father and I had gotten close. I would say we were close when I was in high school because he was so passionately interested in my running and he was good to me, I mean, he was generous in terms of keeping up with the other guys, they liked him very much. My father would drive team members to track meets that we would have in Delaware and New Jersey and they just became very fond of him and I was kind of pound that he was interested but this, this was our first real, I mean I was scared to death of him

1:04:05

Ambrose: (Laughs).

Stahley: (Laughs) I was really scared to death of him but this was our first big disagreement and we sat down at the kitchen table and it was almost like playing chess and I said "I want to go, and I want to go now" and he countered as best he could, he said, "Well, if it's a true vocation, you won't lose it by delaying it a year or two" and I said, "I know that but I want to go now" and he said "But you have a scholarship to Temple University" and he for some reason, he loved Temple, I don't know, maybe it was St. Claire. He said, "You have a scholarship to Temple." I said "I know, but I want to go now" and he said, "Well if you go and decide you don't like it, you probably won't be able to come back and get it," I said, "I know that" and he, my father had, my father was very adept at the use of sarcasm which was very cutting and I learned at an early age to despise sarcasm which I still do.

Ambrose: (Laughs).

Stahley: I'm sure that I am sarcastic myself at times but if I catch myself, I'm not very pleased with myself but I remember, I can remember the discussion going well and he said at one point, "Well, I guess it's your decision" although he said it with a real edge and I remember saying, "Yes, it is my decision" and actually being fearful of saying those words because I was really kind of standing up for myself and even though my father had stopped by this point with this particular discipline tool, until I was in the eighth grade he would crack me across the face, that was just what he would do and I just thought that was the way things were done and there wasn't any of that in high school but he had a very short fuse and when he was angry, you knew it and I guess I lived with, because he was still my father, even though at this point I was taller than him, he was still my father. I just, I lived with that and I was saying things, I wasn't saying them flippantly, but I was saying them in strong disagreement to him. It was still the fear that the hand could come and like when he said, "Well, I guess it's your decision" and I said, "Yes, it's my decision" and he couldn't let that go and he said, "And a year from now, or two years from now when you decide it isn't for you and you drop out and have to figure out what to do, it'll still be your decision cause you made it." I remember pausing and saying, "Yeah, I did" really thinking that the crack might, but there hadn't been a crack for years but the fear of the crack, the fear of the crack was deep and he sopped it up and

1:07:14

that was it. I mean, even though things were changing rapidly around the world and the church, I knew and he knew that a Catholic parent in that, it's completely different now, but a Catholic parent could not stand in the way of a child's, be it a young man or woman, you just would not stand in the way of a child's vocation and although he, I don't think he was quite sure of where this was coming from because I never talked with him very much about my feelings for the priesthood, I had talked with my mother quite a bit. That kind of threw us back to get into some closeness like when I was a high school kid but it wasn't something I discussed with him. To give him credit, the arguments he was making were not unsound. I mean, he was simply doing what he felt was best in terms of a father and that I had developed in this particular sport and I was in one of the higher academic sections, in fact I had already been accepted to both Temple and LaSalle. It wasn't a matter of not getting in, I was already in and even though Temple was affiliated with the state system and by today's standards the tuition was very low, but it still would have been a burden to families so to be offered a partial scholarship that would have defrayed some of those costs, with increasing sympathies, I'm older now, I can understand much better why my father would feel this was an opportunity that I was maybe not squandering but letting go so the push pull between us came to a head that night and I have to say to his credit he realized that it was going to be my decision although he was getting the knife in there a bit. He was going to respect that and it was, that would have been early March of 1969, it was about a month later where I was pretty sure that I wanted to join the Missionary Servants and I made an Easter time retreat with them which was spectacular, it was wonderful and I remember my mother saying that, it was like a five day retreat around Easter time and the vocation priest, Father Randy, had picked up a bunch of us from the Philly/New Jersey area and drive us down to the seminary in Monroe, Virginia which is down the blue ridge but it was such a wonderful experience and I met guys who are still my friends today, some of whom entered the seminary and some who dropped out after a few years, but when I came back to Philadelphia and ironically, I had to get back by this particular night because I had a date for her junior prom. Of course, I hadn't told her yet, but my parents, my father, said that when I walked into the door of our house that I was just radiant and my mother said she had never seen me so pleased and happy and she knew that this choice I was making was a good choice, My father begrudgingly agree. It was funny that it came this pivotal moment came connected with sports and religion and all that so.

Ambrose: Alright, let's take a break

Stahley: Okay.

1:11:11 - End of Disc 1. Begin Disc 2

Ambrose: Okay, so after you graduated from Dougherty, in 1969 you said that you went to join the Missionary Servants of the Most Holy Trinity

Stahely: Yes.

00:13

Ambrose: So, can you tell me a little bit about why you wanted to join the priesthood; where that came from?

Stahley: Sure. My interest in the priesthood was surprisingly far back in my life. I don't know here exactly it came in but I know it was in grade school when I began thinking about it. Of course growing up in Philadelphia, which was such an intensely Catholic culture and being Irish Catholic and there was just a lot of emphasis on that in your life and of course in the family, my mother's oldest sister was a religious sister, Aunt Peggy or Sister Margarella. I had a cousin, a second cousin who was ordained a priest when I was in the seventh grade, Michael Sheehan, who is still a priest in Philadelphia so these influences were very strong and I saw this as a way of serving and, of course, it was presented as the highest way that you could serve, coming from the Catholic culture. Then as I got a little bit older in grade school and then even into high school, just thinking more about this as a way to go began to really appeal to my idealism. I think I had a very strong sense of idealism and I think I still have a fair amount of it in my life, but what appealed to me about the priesthood was just that it was like the ultimate way to serve. You would give yourself over to this and you would help people grow and become fuller adults and, of course, it's linked to our purpose in this world which is to love God and love one's neighbor. So it was a combination of factors that I guess grew stronger and when I was in high school even though there was so much tumult and so much change and the priesthood itself was changing in many ways and I was aware of that to a degree but still it appealed to my idealism and my initial inclination when I thought about the priesthood was to be a foreign missionary and again, I'm not even sure where all these things came from but the idea of not only being a priest but traveling far away to do things for people in other lands and other cultures was tremendously appealing. What changed in high school was the fact that as I became very aware of all the problems in this country especially questions around poverty and racial injustice and things like that I thought, "Well, there's no need to really travel to some other country when there are so many problems here." That's where the Missionary Servants kind of began to dominate my thinking. I liked that fact that the Missionary Servants were a small order as opposed to some of the large, world-wide orders like the Jesuits or the Franciscans. I was attracted by the fact that the Missionary Servants were young. They had only been in existence less than a century, actually only about fifty or sixty years at that point. The founder had been an American priest who very much wanted to respond to the needs of America, so it was all those things combined, but especially working in a poor area, I just thought that that's really where I wanted to do my service. So it was for all those reasons that I opted for the Missionary Servants and as I said, previously in the interview, I had the opportunity to make that retreat down at Monroe, Virginia and I was just caught up with the spirit of the order and knew that that was where I wanted to go. After I graduated from high school in June of '69 there was that last summer at home and then I entered, my parents drove me down to the seminary in Monroe, Virginia which is way, way down in the state. It's down in the area near Lynchburg, Virginia; it's also near Appomattox where the Civil War ended when Lee Surrendered to Grant. It's a very rural section of Virginia. The Missionary Servants had built a beautiful very modern facility there that served as a four

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year high school and a two year college. Those were the days when they still had a high school seminary which is something that I was not interested in but when I went there I went as a college freshman and there was high school there which was interesting. It was in this beautiful part of the country and I have never been out of Philadelphia before and I was far away from home. I was with other young men like myself who had come from New Jersey, Illinois, Georgia, Michigan, Minnesota; my class was very small there were only eleven or twelve us in freshman year. I think there might have been twelve or thirteen in the second year of college and then there was a high school, a population of maybe sixty but as the college, we were in a separate area of the seminary. We interacted with the high school class, but not very much. The school year of 1969-1970 might just have been the happiest year of my life. I was, I loved being there. I made good friends, some of whom are still close, in fact I saw one yesterday, we had lunch together. He's still in, he's a brother but I'm still in touch with several of those guys. The seminary was very modern, there was a beautiful pool. The rooms were simple but very nicely laid out. We were living in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains so I could look out my window and see these towering mountains and it was in a very rural part of the state; it was gorgeous and I just loved being there. I realize now that part of what made it so good was being away from home.

Ambrose: (Laughs).

Stahley: Finally getting away from my parents and my sisters but more so my parents. I needed to make a break with them and I did. That year was rigorously, academically rigorous because we had Greek, Latin, Chemistry, English, Theology and Trigonometry. And, very, it was taught by priests in the order who had been trained in those areas in the Missionary Servants; very demanding so we studied hard, we played hard. There was a lot of intramural sports, football, basketball, I found some guys who liked to run so we would just do everything. We would hike. Sometimes somebody would sneak beer in so I did some

Ambrose: (Laughs).

Stahley: I was doing some misbehaving for the first time at the seminary, misbehaving and it was wonderful. That year passed very quickly, I was homesick for maybe a day or two and that's all and then I wasn't home sick because I found so much enjoyment there. Within that year that I was there, my religious order, the Missionary Servants changed their entire philosophy of education and decided to move away from having a high school seminary which was good because the days for that were over. They had also decided that the days of isolating seminarians far away from other young people was not a good idea so the education committee of the order decided that what they would do would be to send the seminarians to Catholic colleges across the country where the seminarians would live together in a house on or near campus, not on but near campus and attend classes at the Catholic college, become responsible for their own tuition, live together as a community, but to greater or lesser degree, partake in the typical experience of Catholic

9:02

high school, excuse me, Catholic college students and I think the reason for this was again these were in the early year after the Vatican Council and there was a decision that it doesn't serve well to have priests who are too isolated from the people they are eventually going to serve so they need to be in a context where they are experiencing something more or less like other young Catholic people. That came as a shock to me, I was, I didn't think that was such a great idea because I had just left that and they were uncertain as to where the colleges would be. They were running an experimental program in Chicago at Loyola University, a Jesuit school in Chicago, and they knew they didn't want to have just one. At that point they're might have been altogether, between thirty and forty college age seminarians who would have to be accommodated. So the education committee of the Missionary Servants put together a search team and they reviewed colleges all over the country and the ended up choosing LaSalle for the guys on the east coast. I just found this very ironic because I had just left Philadelphia and being on the east coast that's where I was going to go. For the guys in the South and the West, they choose Loyola University in New Orleans so it was the three: Loyola in Chicago, Loyola in New Orleans and LaSalle in Philadelphia. Since I was from Philadelphia, they gave me the option, they said, "Well if you really don't want to go back to Philadelphia, you can go to one of the other two because that's where you're from." So I thought about it but had I chosen one of the other two that would have added travel expenses to everything else and I thought, well, I'll just go to LaSalle. LaSalle was where most of my buddies were going to go anyway so I came back to Philadelphia as a sophomore. We were free to major in anything we wanted although they strongly suggested Philosophy as a preparation for Theology so I kind of split my major between Philosophy and Theology. Some guys majored in English, some Sociology but we were paying for our own education which I think was a very good learning experience right there (door opening) and so I came back and began in 1970 as a sophomore at LaSalle and it was interesting because coming back to LaSalle, I ended up being back in college with a lot of guys I went to high school with, many of whom knew I left to go to the seminary and they were kidding me and saying "Oh, one year and you're out huh?" and I had to begin explaining to people that no I was still in the seminary but I was in this order and of course for people from Philadelphia, that didn't make any sense because in Philadelphia if you're in the seminary, it means you're at Saint Charles and you're locked away and, anyway, that was not too big a hassle. As with many things in my life that I thought were going to go one way and I didn't like it, it turned out to be just the opposite. My time at LaSalle, it was a good three years, the education that I got was excellent there. I had several Christian Brothers for my classes. The lay professors that I had were excellent. I just got a very solid education there and interestingly, when I got back again, I'm not exactly sure why but other than dating, they weren't real keen on us dating because we were supposed to be getting ready for celibacy and stuff like that, but other than that you were pretty much free to do any kind of extracurricular things that you wanted to do. I knew that I was done with running but I thought well, I'd like to try our for the crew team and to my surprise I made the team, so for that first year there I rowed on the J.V. team for LaSalle which was exciting rowing on the Schuylkill river and competing against other schools there. That was a lot of fun and I enjoyed being back in athletics again but when that year

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ended I realized that I was just going to need to work for the next two years in order to meet expenses and tuition and things like that. Junior and senior year I worked different jobs like fast food and I worked with a moving company for a while just to help defray some of the expenses. I ended up graduating in '73 and so my LaSalle experience was very good academically. We lived together in West Oak Lane which is about a mile from the campus. The community, the order, purchased a house where we lived together so the numbers changed each year because some guys would drop out of the program and other guys would come in. It was neat to experience Philadelphia as a college student at LaSalle and to be not at home, I wasn't at home although I got over there plenty of times and the family came over to visit me too so that was fine. It was a good experience.

I graduated in '73 and then entered what was called the Novitiate for the Missionary Servants, which is kind of a year of intense spiritual formation. That was based in Sterling, New Jersey which is up, Sterling is a little town that's like a far suburb of New York City where the order had a house. I was up there most of the year. For part of the Novitiate we were sent out to get field training. I was sent to Mississippi. I went down where the order had the mission among the Choctaw Indians. I was there for about four months just helping out in the parish, you know, just doing some religious education, helping drive people around, things like that. That was quite a culture shock because Mississippi is a pretty different world but it was good to get that kind of experience on the missions. After completing Novitiate in the summer of 1974 I took my first vows. We would take vows for a year at a time so I took my first vows as a Missionary Servant and then came to the major seminary in Silver Spring, Maryland where we would begin our graduate studies for Theology preparation, the final stage of preparation for the priesthood. I was there for three years, in a Masters program, it was a Master's program plus because we had to get courses to satisfy the academic requirements for Masters in Theology but we also had to take lots of pastoral courses that kind of added to our course load in terms of training for parish work and all of that. That was the years between 1974 and 1977 and it was an exhilarating time to be studying Theology, especially at Catholic University which was one of the major theological centers in the country because the energy from the Second Vatican Council was still very much in evidence. There was still a lot of change going on in the church. I was fortunate to study under some of the major theologians in the country who taught moral theology, church history, liturgy, and scripture. I was really exposed to some excellent professors and I just loved my time at Catholic University and I was there until '77. Finished then and was awarded my Masters of the Arts in Theology and the order had, it was four years of Theology, three academic to get the Masters and then one was called your Regency, or your pastoral year, and at that point the order encouraged us to get our toes wet in the kind of work that we wanted to do as Missionary priests. The predominate emphasis, when I was coming through the seminary, among many of my classmates was to work in a Hispanic area so that was an option. More and more guys were going into that like in Puerto Rico or California. Another area of mission work was the rural South; it just was not my interest. I mean, I just didn't have that strong of an interest and the other one was black inner-city work and that was what I wanted to do so that was fine and my option was to go to Cleveland where the community had had two parishes in the inner-city for quite awhile and I was

there for a year, had some adventure, some adventures (laughs) but thoroughly enjoyed the work there. At the end of that year, in 1978, I was ordained a priest in Silver Spring, Maryland and then went into the exciting life of the priesthood from there.

19:02

Ambrose: So, when you worked in Cleveland, you said that you were serving as a deacon there?

Stahley: Yes, I left that out. I went out in the summer of 1977 came back to Silver Spring to be ordained a deacon, the final stage in preparation for the priesthood is you become a deacon

19:26

Ambrose: Okay, so that is a step in the process, okay.

Stahley: It's a step in the process. I came back and was ordained a deacon and then went back out as a deacon. And when you're a deacon, with that ordination comes the ability to perform weddings, funerals. You don't celebrate mass or hear confessions but you can do some of the things and those were things that I did, not too many, but did some of those things. You assist the priest at the altar in a different way so I did that. I did that for a year and then was ordained and then was unleashed on the world.

Ambrose: (Laughs). You had mentioned, in the email that you had sent me, that during Cleveland, Ohio, this was the time when you said that you developed a love, a deep love for inner-city work.

Stahley: Yes.

Ambrose: So, can you expand upon that. What caused that or what prompted that?

Stahley: (Long pause) Boy, I have to think for a second. I guess that would've gone back to high school, when going through high school and the changes that I mentioned previously. I guess what was happening was that my consciousness was being raised and one of the things that drew me to the Missionary Servants was their commitment to serving not just the church but serving people in America. As a high school kid, I became very interested in Martin Luther King, in the work that he was doing. I thought that he was just a noble person, one of the bravest people that I had ever seen but it was more than Martin Luther King. Another towering figure when I was an adolescent was Muhammad Ali, the fighter. When I was a little kid, he began his career; I believe he went to the Olympics in 1960 and won I think the heavyweight gold medal and you probably know a little bit about Muhammad Ali became kind of a very flamboyant person and I mean, he was a very talented boxer and I became interested in him not just as an athlete but, a pivotal point in Muhammad Ali's life was when he was inducted into the armed forces during Vietnam and he wouldn't go. I remember he was already a controversial person and he said that he wouldn't go, he wouldn't join the army and he

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was being pressed as to why he wouldn't do it and I remember what he said in response to that, he said, "No Vietcong ever called me nigger and I'm not going to go serve this country over there." I just remember, of course, that making him even more controversial and a lot of people didn't like him already and people liked him even less but I just remember following his career and thinking that this person is a whole lot more than just a great athlete, he believes in something. He had become a Muslim and was very devout in his faith and I just remember being fascinated by him. He suffered terribly because of that, they took away his license to box; I think there was a trial and I don't think he ever served any jail time but they took away his ability to fight for three years and he eventually came back and recaptured the heavyweight crown but I just remember thinking how brave he was to do that and that he was going to stand behind his beliefs so there was that. One of the great things about Cardinal Dougherty was that there weren't many black kids there but there were a few black kids there. A lot of them, a lot of the ones who were there were very good athletes, I ran with a lot of them. I just began to, I liked them, I just enjoyed them. They thought differently, they spoke differently. As I got to know them, they came from very tough situations but were striving and I just began thinking how different all of that was and then of course in high school becoming aware of the history of slavery in this country and learning about the Civil Rights Movement and what blacks had suffered, it wasn't coming from a place of guilt but I just thought that if there's anything that I could do to help this group of people, it's something that I want to do. The Missionary Servants served them in several other locations so it was a number of things, it wasn't just the idealism of Martin Luther King, it was all these other things that were happening and becoming attuned to the struggles of these people, who through no fault of their own, were brought here and subjected to such cruelty and yet there's such nobility there and a lot of suffering of course too, and marginalization. So it was a number of things in this stew I guess of my life as an adolescent, as a high school kid, and this was what the Missionary Servants did. I didn't really get a chance to do that in terms of my ministerial training until I was just about at the end and then when it was time to choose a place for my Regency year, I chose Cleveland because the missions were there, the two parishes were there and also the priest at this point who had been named pastor of St. Agnes, which is where I went, turned out to be Randy Woods who was the first Missionary Servant I met, he was the vocation recruiter that first came to the house; he was the first Missionary Servant I ever met and he took us on that retreat and we had become friends as a result of that and so I thought this is going to be neat, I can go there and when I arrived there, he had only been there a few months and the parish was in pretty bad shape and there was a lot that had to be done. At this point, I was twenty-five or twenty-six and in a position to help and it was kind of exciting because it was new and a lot of things had been let go and there's a lot of rebuilding that had to happen, I mean building up the parish and things like that; it was a great place to go.

Ambrose: Okay, so you mentioned that you were ordained in 1978.

Stahley: Yes.

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Ambrose: That was, I guess, almost ten years after you decided.

Stahley: Yes.

Ambrose: I didn't realize it took

Stahley: It was nine years

Ambrose: Nine years to become a priest.

Stahley: Yes, it was nine years.

Ambrose: So, can you discuss the ordination. You know, is it a big ceremony, the whole process?

Stahley: Yes, it's huge. Well, of course, it's the sacrament of Holy Orders, one of the seven sacraments and of course for a young man to be ordained a priest was a huge step and it was big for the family. It was held at a Catholic parish near the seminary in Silver Spring and it's a very solemn event with the bishop. There were three of us that were ordained that day in May of 1978. It was myself and another guy in the Missionary Servants and we were ordained with a third guy who was a diocesan seminarian from Lafayette, Indiana who was living with our order and studying with us and so his bishop, Raymond Gallagher came in from Lafayette to do it. It's a very solemn ceremony where the bishop presides and often at an ordination, a lot of other priests come so maybe here were probably, maybe fifty or sixty priest on the altar behind the bishop. There are certain things that happen during the ordination ceremony that are very dramatic. At one point early in the Mass, they have it's called the Litany of the Saints where the bishop is leading the congregation praying for the men who are going to be ordained and the men who are being ordained actually lay on the floor; you lay on the floor with your head on your hands to be like in a pose of absolute submission

Ambrose: Oh!

Stahley: you lay down like this and people are praying for you and then after that you kneel and then one by one, you go up and put your hands in the bishops hands and he anoints your hands with sacred oil and you promise your life to do this and then the crowing moment of the ordination is when, and this happens individually with the three of us would go up one at a time and we would kneel in front of the bishop and he would impose his hands on our head and that's an ancient symbol of the church, praying for the Holy Spirit to come down upon us. So the three of us, one by one, went up and the bishop would impose his hands and pray silently over us and then we would go back to where we were and kneel. After the three of us had done this, all the priests who are present come up one by one and put there hands, as a sign of solidarity. It's a lengthy but very beautiful ceremony. The music is very beautiful and of course everything is in English at

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the time so everyone knew what they were singing and of course for the family, it's kind of like (laughs) a wedding and a coronation all wrapped up at once

Ambrose: (Laughs).

Stahley: so my parents were there and they were very proud and relatives came from Ireland and this was a big deal because of the O'Neill family in Ireland and most of the family was there on my mother's side and many relatives from my father's side came. After the ceremony, we went back to the seminary where there was a big reception, you know, a lot of fun people mixing. Then the family stayed overnight at a nearby motel and the next morning what the tradition was with the Missionary Servants, is that at the seminary chapel, the new priests would say their first mass together so that was, the family all came back for that so it was beautiful; a lot of pictures, a lot of tears, just a very nice things. It's a very solemn thing but very, very joyful and you're celebrating this enormous moment in not just the moment in the lives of the people being ordained but of their families and of course since the Missionary Servants were a religious community, it's like a family celebration for them too because here are three members, well actually two of us who were Missionary Servants but it's like two new priests for the family of the Missionary Servants and the Missionary Servants, since we were a religious order, we had our own habits. It was very simple it was like a long black robe with three buttons up here (pointing to his left shoulder/collarbone area) symbolizing the Trinity and then we would wear a sash around our waist with a little belt that, there were three parts that hung down that are symbolic of the vows poverty, chastity and obedience and on ordination day in the morning would be the ordination and then the reception. The reception finished with everybody coming up to the chapel of the seminary and at this point, we would wear our habits which we had not worn earlier in the day, we were wearing liturgical vestments but in the afternoon we would wear our black habits and the head of the order, his name was Steven also, Father Steven Quinn, led a short ceremony in which we were all presented with a special crucifix, which was called the Mission Crucifix, that was draped over our head and we would tuck the crucifix into our sash and that was symbolic of being a missionary and being sent out to the missions. A lot of ritual, a lot of solemnity but it was done in a way that was very understandable for the families; a very festive kind of a thing. It was just a very nice moment, certainty for me and the family.

Ambrose: Did your father come around at this point then and accept your

Stahley: Oh yeah, he had come around. I think once I was in for a few years; he was cool with it and got to know a lot of my friends and like them. I think, in fact I'm certain, that by the time I was ordained, he was very, very pleased and very proud. Of course, they had gotten to know a lot about the Missionary Servants and so many of the guys were many of them passed away, but many of the guys they had gotten to know were very down to earth. I think one of the things that was important for my family, especially my parents, is, having grown up in Philadelphia and knowing primarily diocesan priests, and many of them were very fine people, but they didn't have much of a feel for what other

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ways there were of service in the church. One of the things about the Missionary Servants that struck my parents and many others in the family was just how warm they were. There was just a, I don't know, just kind of a very down to earth quality and since so many of them had served in areas that were very poor and remote, I mean, they were just in touch with a wider range of people. I think my parents and most of the rest of the family came to feel very comfortable with the order and that helped so that by the time I was ordained they felt a very strong link to the community and that was good. But yeah, my father, he was cool with it.

Ambrose: I was thinking, I would imagine coming from an Irish Catholic family that having a son who would want to go into the priesthood would have been a great honor?

Stahley: It was.

Ambrose: So was your mother, from the beginning very supportive because you said you had talked with her about your decision?

Stahley: Yeah, she was although it's interesting (pause) we did talk about it a lot but I was younger and then I remember having a lot of conversations with her in high school about it and I think she was very pleased when I decided to do this. Looking back, I guess this is one of the real values of oral history, looking back over my life and remembering, or trying to remember my mother from those years, I think that she struggled mightily with depression and I think she struggled a lot with self medicating. To what level, I don't know but I mean as a nurse, I know she had access to various pharmaceuticals. I think that by the time I was graduating from high school, she had gone back to work about a year before I had graduated high school. I think that my mother was really, really struggling with depression and her ability to really fully engage with myself or anyone else, I think it had become more and more limited. I couldn't have put a name on it at the time, not that I ever doubted that she loved me or cared for the family, but I think her ability to really engage with others was, I think she was really, really struggling with that. As I've talked to my sisters over the years, who of course were younger and more experiencing this, of course from the female perspective at a younger age, that's been confirmed and I think from the period of high school on, really through the rest of my life, to this point, looking back my sense is that the real level of emotional engagement was with my father and it certainly wasn't all for the good but there was good there, but the engagement, I mean the push-pull that characterizes all human relationships was certainly there with my father. I experienced it more negatively then, of course, it became much more positive later but whereas with my mother, I think there was, probably for self-protective reasons or because the struggle with the depression was so intense, despite my mother's gracious personality and in many ways, concern for others, her ability to really engage at a deep level I think was diminishing. In fact, I don't think it was until you and Ian³ came along that she kind of began to be able to break out of that. I think that

³ Ian Brown is the son of Maryellen and Robert Brown. Maryellen is the first girl in the Stahley family.

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was because now there were going to be grandchildren in her life and it was neat to see her regain some of her real vitality. I remember seeing this side of her when you were born especially; that was so wonderful to see because, and again, it's hard to put into words because it's not that I ever doubted her love or her care for me or any of us, but it was something that increasingly I couldn't feel and I mean the words were there and I know her heart was there, but her ability to engage. Whereas, with my father, as several of my sisters have said you know, what you saw is what you got.

Ambrose: (Laughs).

Stahley: He was there but he was engaged you know, but the whole, the cycle of the priesthood, going into it, I was very clear on where my father was at what he felt, his reservations. With my mother, I knew it was positive and good, but again, not expressed and then at the other end, when I would make the very difficult decision to leave, my father wasn't happy about that but he understood it. It was kind of like it showed up on the Richter scale, not like an earthquake but I could tell that, with my mother, I knew that it was not good and I knew that she was disappointed but that was never expressed, it came back to me indirectly. I would hear about it through maybe my sisters, or I would hear about it from; well, one time, I got a letter from friends of my parents in England and these were not even family and they're kind of weird on top of it. But I got a letter from Pauline when I was on a leave of absence saying you know, "I hope you're doing okay and we're praying for you and I know that Rita is crushed by this and how bad she feels." I just remember being angry, not so much that she was, I understood that, not that she's upset or even crushed or devastated but could you show me? Could I at least hear that from you? But, you know, it was like always way, way, way below the surface so, but I'm not sure how I got off on that; this is why oral history is so good.

Ambrose: (Laughs).

Stahley: But knowing and the ability to converse about it

Ambrose: Right.

Stahley: or let's talk this through or do you understand why I'm doing this or I'm not trying to embarrass you but I need to do this and I respect your feelings and if you are upset that's okay. With my father, it was much closer to the surface, I don't understand this but I respect it, but not with my mother so it was this remoteness.

Ambrose: Alright, so after your ordination in 1978, what was your first assignment, or where was your first assignment?

Stahley: When I was ordained, the custom for the Missionary Servants when you were ordained for your first year, sometimes your first two years, was basically to fill in where needed. I mean that was fine, that was just the way things were done so my first

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assignment was to Norfolk, Virginia, I was sent to, ironically, it was a very large, very white, suburban parish that the community had had for a number of years and I went there because there were four priest serving the parish and they all needed to take their vacations and each was going to be gone for three weeks so they needed someone to cover for a few months, so that's where I went. It was ironic because it was almost like I was being sent to a big, busy parish in Philadelphia because even though it was Norfolk, it was very urban and that was fine because it wasn't the kind of work that I wanted to do or knew that I would eventually do but it was what needed and it was a good place to get started because there were a lot of confessions to hear and a lot of baptisms to do and a lot of masses to say. I was there for maybe three months. When that was over it was a similar situation way out in California. A similar type parish in California needed me to come out and fill in for a few months so I went there. Again, it was a large, predominately white parish in Orange County, California. I had never been to California so it was a thrill to go out there and see that. I was the junior member of a staff of four and again, it was very much like the parish in Norfolk, it was very busy. I did a lot of the sacramental things that a priest is required to do so a lot of confessions. Both these parishes had schools so I would go and talk to the religion classes. There were weddings, that's was when I first started to do weddings, a lot of masses to say, so in many ways it was a good experience for a young priest, just to get thrown into the middle of a busy situation. It's while I was in California and I was going to be there until Christmas, which would have been the end of 1978; while I was out there, I knew they were beginning to deliberate about a permanent assignment for me and so I was asked what I wanted and I said that what I was interested in was the black inner-city work so that was under considerations. What happened was, right around the time they were assigning me, there was a small, a set of small parishes in West Virginia were the order served and two priests had been there together for many, many years, I think the two of them had been there for about fifteen years together, and one of them very abruptly decided to resign from the priesthood to get married. He didn't give them a whole lot of notice and they needed to get someone there quick because it was busy and the priest who was, the pastor I think, Lambert was probably sixty-five, and the one who was leaving was about fifty and they had been together, they were like an old married couple, they had been together for probably fifteen years, the younger one was very abruptly leaving to get married and they needed somebody to go there and I was kind of free so they said, "We need you to go there" and I said, "It's really not what I'm interested in" and you knew this was part of the deal so I didn't protest too much. So I got there and it was not what I was expecting and I certainly wasn't what the pastor was expecting because for him, I was ordained in '78, for the pastor anybody ordained after 1950 was a young kid so I was like

Ambrose: (Laughs).

Stahley: Well, the thing that saved us was, his name was Lambert, Lambert Stack. Lambert was from Philadelphia so since I was from Philadelphia, it couldn't be all bad. So we got along fine. I got there and, it's actually not too far from here, it's right over the Maryland line in West Virginia. It was Jefferson County and there were three little

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parishes: Charlestown, Shepherdstown and Harper's Ferry and the Missionary Servants served all three. The two priests lived together in Charlestown and we would take turns covering the three; each one had two masses on Sunday so, and then there were things to do during the week. It was a wonderful experience because I was brand new and I had only been ordained about six months. Lambert was a very good priest, a very good pastor and I got there and he explained a bit about the lay of the land and he told me that the priest whose place I had taken had been like the campus minister at the little college in Shepherdstown called Shepherd and he said I'd like you to take that on if you don't mind and you'll be dealing with college students and I said "Sure that sounds like fun." I mean, it was all new so that's, I did that for two years. He was a great person to be with even though he was much older. He was a good person to learn from, he was very earthy, he was funny, he was generous and we got along even though he was like my grandfather's age; we got along famously. We were there together for two years. That's where I met Lisa, she was a young, actually she was a high school senior when I was there. I was all of what, twenty-seven I guess, but that's where I met her and I was there with Lambert for two years and at the end of those two years what the Missionary Servants would do is they would evaluate their missions every so often like every five or ten years, to since it was a missionary order, to determine if we were still needed there or if the diocese could take the parishes back and we could go to other places where there was greater criteria for serving. And that's what happened, the determination was that our work was done here so it was a matter of handing the parishes back to the care of the local bishop who in this case was the bishop of Wheeling, Charles Town West Virginia, he covered the whole state because they had priests they were going to send in which was hard because the Missionary Servants had been there for twenty-five years but in keeping with the constitution of the order, and keeping with the missionary spirit, the parishes were handed back. And again, when you're young, it's just like being in the service or the army, when you're young, you can have your desires, what you'd like to do but then there's the needs. So what was chosen for me after that was it was called vocation work which was like recruiting and that certainly wasn't my interest either but that's what the need was and the Missionary Servants were, they experimented with new ways to attract young men to the order and so I was sent to the University of Kentucky. There was a Newman Center at the University of Kentucky in Lexington. Kentucky, although it's Southern is a very Catholic state and there was a very active Newman center there and the thought was to put a recruiting priest there to cover the geographical area but also to be centers at this new place to meet a lot of Catholic people both men and women because we were recruiting for the sisters as well as the priesthood brothers. So that's where I was sent; I was sent there for a year and I served for two diocesan priests of the diocese of Covington, Kentucky. There were just there as pastoral ministers. I was there to help them but also drum up business for the Missionary Servants and ironically, I met a lot of young men who liked me and liked what they were hearing about the Missionary Servants and told me quite frankly, they would love to be priests but if it meant not getting married they couldn't do it. Not that that was news but it really hit me in a way it hadn't before. Even with that, I think there were maybe two of three guys that signed up and then left in the seminary to get married. I enjoyed being there, it was a very dynamic

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campus parish and it was nice to experience that way of doing the priesthood. When that year was over, things were finally getting into place for me to move back into the inner-city and the order at that point was looking for new African American missions to take on so I became part of like a roving, exploratory team to find out where to go and I was assigned to Chicago for a few months to check a few things out there. As it turns out, there wasn't a parish for us there but while I was in Chicago for this exploratory thing for about nine months and opening came to me. A pastor where I had been a deacon back in Cleveland left so I ended up going back to Cleveland in 1982 and became the pastor of two merged inner-city parishes. One of which I had been at and the other was the next door neighbor and I was there for about five years, a little less than five years. I was there until the end of 1986. I finally arrived at where I wanted to be and I guess what I wasn't ready for was, I mean I was more than ready, I had had a lot of parish experience at this point in many parishes so that part was all fine. I knew that I wanted to do the inner-city work for the longest time and now I was getting my chance to do it. When I was in Chicago, on the exploratory thing, and I got the call, it was funny because (laughs) I was in Chicago and the order was exploring as to where the next black or African American parish was going to be and I was part of the team that went down to Louisiana to look at parish in that diocese it was the diocese of Lafayette, Louisiana and I went with to other priests from the order and we met with the bishop's representatives and we looked at these different parishes and we decided that's where it would be and I presumed that since I was on the exploratory team that this decision had been made; that's where I would go and I was expecting that but when I got the call, they said, "No, we need you to come back to Cleveland" and I said, "Okay, no problem" because I liked Cleveland and I knew that it would be challenging because I would be stepping into a parish that had been merged and whenever you have two parishes that have been merged there's always some push-pull but I knew that and I knew one of them very well because I had been there before. I knew that there was, as part of the combined parish, there was going to be a building campaign to put a new parish structure up and I would be in charge of that and I wasn't wild about that but I knew that that came with the job. The other part of the job, which I guess I was aware of but hadn't thought about very much was that when I went back as the pastor of the parish, (takes a drink of water) because we were a religious community, I would, in a sense have two tasks. I would go back as the pastor of the parish, the merged parish, but I would also be what's called the local superior, in other words I would be in charge of the community of priests and brothers who were there. I guess that was the part that took the much greater toll because even though I knew some of these guys, I had never been in a position of authority before so I was going back to become the pastor of a merged parish which was starting a building program which was going to require a lot of time and attention but I was also going to be in charge of my fellow priests and brothers, most of whom were older than I was, like old enough to be in my parents' generation. I was also vaguely aware that some of them had issues like alcoholism and depression and there were some psycho-sexual problems. I guess I just hadn't counted on what a burden that was going to be because I was so focused on the inner-city and serving and doing the parish. So I arrived there in early '82, overlapped with my predecessor, Randy who was still there from when I was a deacon. When

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Randy's time ended, he moved on and I became the pastor. I was installed as pastor and my family came out for that, it was very nice. I had a half built church that I was in charge of, in terms of dealing with the architect and the engineer and the financial people through the diocese and then I became what's called the local superior of the house and it very quickly became apparent that my time and attention was going to be much more focus on the troubles of these guys than the parish. I mean the parish stuff, not that it was easy, but it was much easier handling the budget and taking care of the masses and the preaching and the sacraments and visiting the sick and overseeing the youth programs I mean that was demanding and busy but it was what I wanted to do; what I was trained for but I was not ready for the scope of the psychological and emotional problems that I began to deal with among these guys. I mean, and it became very, very difficult. I mean one of them was having drinking problems and he was going out and driving the van and taking kids to basketball games and I knew that he was drinking and I had to work with some friends in Cleveland to stage an intervention which was awful. We had to take him away to a rehab center in Michigan. Another one was seriously depressed I mean I thought he was on the verge of suicide and I had to consult with psychologists and people about him. Another one, I mean there were just a whole range of problems that these guys had and I guess the reason I'm focusing on that a bit is because it was that period in my life and as a priest from '82 to '86 I was still a relatively young priest but I guess it was because of the intensity of that environment where in a sense it was exactly what I had wanted and prayed for and I get there and that part of my life is fine and I thoroughly loved the challenges of being a priest for an African American community. The people in that parish, I came to love them; they were wonderful people. Many of them had suffered tremendously, all kinds of things, they had lived through addiction, they had battled poverty, they had dealt with racial injustice in their lives and yet they were generous in giving and serving them was not without challenges but it was a remarkable experience and I was young and of course they knew I was young, but knew I was there for them and I just relished my time with them. My crisis of my vocation started when I was in that environment with my fellow priests and brothers in my own order that in many ways felt like a family but I'm in his situation with them and their going through these struggles and of course I'm looking at men who are twenty or twenty-five years older than I am and I'm beginning to think, they probably started the same way that I was, what is it that's brought them to this point; what is it about this life that has rendered so many of these people to become like this, to be in such a bad situation? Not that I'm thinking I'm going to go down that path but I guess for the first time in my life I really began to question the structure of the whole thing; why is this part going so well where I can function as a priest and I can say mass and I can hear confessions and I can perform funerals and do all these things, why is this going so well? But when I get back into this house at night, I'm dealing with people that are really in bad, bad shape and what is it? I guess what I'm trying to describe is for the first time in a very intense way, I began to question the structure that I was apart of, not so much the sacrament of the priesthood or what that is, but I began to day to myself, "What is it about this life, is it the loneliness factor? Is it the fact that so many of these people, despite having good hearts and clearly, good minds, but are so warped, they seem to be so underdeveloped psychologically or

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emotionally, what is it about this life that promotes this?" I was in touch with the leadership of the order who I can't say enough good about, they certainly understood what I was up against and I was very frank with them I said, "You know, you sent me here to run this parish and I'm doing that but I'm stuck with these people and it's not that I don't care about them, I do but something is terribly wrong here." It's not that they weren't as supportive as they could be, because they were, and when I would come up with, I would consult with them and try to come up with solutions to how we were going to deal with this, they were never anything but supportive and did everything they could but I guess in the midst of all that, there's still these questions about what is it about this system that we're part of that is so inhibiting or that is causing, of course, people are making mistakes or doing wrong things, it's not to excuse poor judgment or bad decision making, but the questions which were very frightening to me were okay, we can question why the individual is struggling or why the individual is making such poor choices, but we also have to turn the coin around and say, what is it about the system that seems to inhibit the growth of people and not allow people to develop fully as human beings? And I guess that was frightening for me because those questions had never popped up before. I guess coming through the seminary and seeing guys who left or seeing guys who had gotten messed up, I guess I was just too quick to say, "They don't have what it takes" or "Maybe it wasn't for them" or "They just can't hack it." Well now that I was in the middle of a very intense situation for the first time I was turning the question around and I was saying, "Maybe there's something wrong with the system." Excuse me a second, I have to (inaudible).

Stahley: Okay, just to finish up this torture chapter here

Ambrose: (Laughs).

Stahley: Even in the midst of all this, despite the difficulty of the questions and the struggle, as I look back it was a time of great grace because I think it's always a grace filled thing when you're breaking through to new levels of self-understanding and awareness and I was very fortunate, for a number of reasons, but one of which was I had a very, very good spiritual director at this time when I was in Cleveland. He was a fellow priest, not a Missionary Servant, he was a diocesan priest named Paul Rids. I was on the near East side of Cleveland and Paul was in the near West side which was very close to where I was; his parish was St. Malachi's. It was also an inner-city parish although not African American; it was mainly poor, working class whites. I met him early after I had gone back there in 1982. We became friends and then I asked him to be my spiritual director and although that was his title with me, spiritual director, he really functioned much more as psycho-therapist. I mean, I think it was really my first experience of psycho-therapy in that it was done in a spiritual context but Paul, and he was again, he was about the age of my father so the generation before but in his spiritual direction, he had a wonderful way of making me feel very, very comfortable or as comfortable as I could be with the questions that were emerging. He sensed where things were moving in my life and he assured me early on in the process that he was there for me and his love

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and support was going to be with me wherever the journey took me. He wanted me to be at ease with my questions and not afraid of following basically my heart or where things were going because also mixed in with this as you can imagine, was the whole thing about celibacy because now I was questioning that. Interestingly, in and through the process, I can honestly say that I never felt; I never questioned the fact that I felt summoned to the priesthood. I mean, that was there in the midst of all this stuff and it was the separation of the two things that kind of surprised me because in my mind, they had always run together but now I was looking at them separately and I was being forced to ask these kinds of questions and Paul was so good for me because he said, "We just have to let this play itself out and you have to not be afraid of the questions and we have to deal with this as it comes along." So by the time; the way the Missionary Servants did it was I was assigned three years or four years, I forget, three or four years as pastor and then I had been there a little bit before that but when the time was coming up for my term which would automatically be renewed unless I asked for it not to be, with his support and guidance, I told the Missionary Servants that I was not going to accept another term; I needed to step back. I was pretty sure at that point that I was going to resign but I wanted to be very deliberative about it and that's what Paul counseled so I said to the Father General, because of all the things that were going on, I mean the church was completed now and certain things had been stabilized which was my job to do and I had done them, I said, and they knew some of the personal things I was going through with these other guys, I said, "I need to be done here. I want to step back for a while." And they said, "Okay, what would you like to do?" and I was pretty sure where things were going to be moving but I wanted to be very, very deliberative about it so I said, "Well, I think I'd like to do some further studies." Again, the Missionary Servants, they were just so generous and understanding, and they said the deal was you could do that as long as it was something related to the work of the order so they said, "What do you want to do, do you want to get a masters in Sociology or do you want to do Social work?" And I thought about it and I was interested, the subject, I didn't even know what the subject was I was interested in but I knew it was something like Urban Studies or something like that. With Paul's help and he connected me with some people at Cleveland State to help me think this through, it turned out to be something called Community Planning which is like a hybrid between Sociology, Social Work and Urban Studies but there are very few schools that offered it. Cleveland's, I didn't want to stay in Cleveland, Cleveland State had something. The University of Illinois had something that I looked at and I didn't like that. But the University of Maryland at Baltimore had something called Community Planning, which was aligned with their school's Social Work so that's what I wanted to do. The Missionary Servants said, "Fine, apply for admission and if you get in you can move back to the seminary in Silver Spring and commute up there." So I said fine, that's what I wanted. I chose it not just because I was interested in the field but because I knew that I wanted to be out of the Cleveland environment I wanted to be away from the "hot house" and the demands of that life to really think this thing through; if this was really what I wanted to do. That's how it played out. I was accepted. I moved back to Silver Spring. I got a room at the seminary, on the faculty side because I was an ordained priest. The classes were held up in Baltimore and also there were some classes at the University of

1:11:06

Maryland college park which is very close to the seminary. So for that year, 1986 to '87, I was at the seminary and I took a full load of classes, so I was back in graduate school. Most of the students I was with were studying to be social workers; it was nice. I had been corresponding with Lisa ever since I left, I had left West Virginia in '80 and Lisa and I had become friends there. She had wanted instructions on the Catholic faith which I gave her; she was raised a Methodists. One of the last things I did before leaving West Virginia was to bring her into the church. At this point she was eighteen and I was twenty-nine and it was, we just liked each other it was a very nice. We did individualized instructions because we didn't have enough people for classes. So I had gotten to know her over the period of a year and I had been transferred from so many parishes even at that point and I liked the parishes I was at, people seemed to like me and people and so many people would say, "I'm going to write you, that's it I'm going to write you!" and I would say, "Great, okay, write me and I'll write back." Lisa's like one of three people who actually wrote! (Laughs)

Ambrose: (Laughs).

Stahley: So she wrote to me when I was in Kentucky, about two or three times a year; a nice long letter

Ambrose: Right.

Stahley: I wrote her back. I went from Kentucky to Chicago; she wrote me when I was there, again one or two letters, a Christmas card. Went to Cleveland, dark night of the soul, she wrote me there a few times, you know. We never talked on the phone, never saw each other. It was 1986 when I came back to Silver Spring now after all, it's only six years but it seemed like six life times, so I'm back in Silver Spring, she's now twenty-four, finished college, got a degree in Social Work from Shepherd College. She was working in a battered women's shelter, I was a priest in school and we had dinner in '86 for the first time in six years and nothing clicked at that point but through my year of studies, we started seeing each other more and I thought she might be the one but I still wanted to take it slow; I really wanted to take it slow. It was a two year program at the University of Maryland. At the end of my first year, I had done all my work and I was fully, one half of the way done. I, in the mode of taking it slow (laughs), I went to the Father General and said I want to take a leave of absence and, it's funny because we were coming up on, the community would have, it was called a Chapter every four years and a Chapter would be like the governing body of the order.

Ambrose: Okay.

Stahley: And the Missionary Servants would elect; the Missionary Servants all told, maybe 150 people, they would elect three delegates to go and the governing body would go and elect the new Father General and all this kind of stuff. This was happening in 1987 (laughs) and I was finishing up on my year of studies. I knew I was going to ask for

1:14:47

a leave of absence and so the community does elections to send delegates to the chapter and I get elected (laughs). And I'm thinking, I'm very complimented but I'm going to ask for a leave of absence. Anyway, so I went to see the Father General. I wasn't, we got along okay, but I wasn't really wild about, his name was Conrad. So I went to see Conrad and he had no idea what I was coming to see him about. He knows I'm elected to the chapter and I said, "Well, this is a little awkward, with the election just being over but I want a leave of absence." Wasn't sure how he'd react but to my great, great surprise, he listened to me and said, "Okay, if that's what you want, we'll get somebody else." I was elected first, there were like thirty-three guys elected and there were two alternates and I was the first alternate but I was formally elected to the alternate so they were going to have to fill that spot because they said, "We'll take care of it if this is what you need to do" and I said, "Thank you." We talked about it and at this point I had been spending so much time in Baltimore for school I had located a job with a little non-profit that served the homeless in the Mid-town area of Baltimore; they needed a program manager. So I found a job and they were going to pay me enough to live and the order was very kind, they said, "Well, we'll give you a car so you can get around and you can keep your health insurance; you take this year to figure it out." So, you know no complaints with the Missionary Servants I said fine. So, I moved to Baltimore. Had my job; in many ways it was like what I was doing in Cleveland

Ambrose: Right.

Stahley: I mean, taking care of homeless people and taking people off the streets and I was running a soup kitchen. I also wanted to keep moving ahead with the degree so I signed up for two or three classes just to keep the momentum going. I think I took Statistics and Social Policy or something like that. I knew that getting that degree would help me career-wise in Baltimore and also, I just can't say enough good about the Missionary Servants because the percentages of guys who take a leave of absence and eventually leave is like 99.9996 percent

Ambrose: (Laughs)

Stahley: So they know, and I knew but it's nice because it's deliberating you're going through it. So I moved to Baltimore and got an apartment. Lisa at that time was living in Martinsburg which is a city in West Virginia; it's near Hagerstown which is an hour and a half from Baltimore. So as soon as I moved to Baltimore, Lisa and I started seeing a whole lot of each other; this was nineteen, you were all of three, this was 1987, '88. So anyway working for the non-profit, seeing a whole lot of Lisa, I'm really enjoying just being away from everything for a while. It was just nice to, I mean I have a nice apartment, not a penthouse, but it was a nice apartment and it was nice. I'm really glad that things went the way that they did. I mean I did it deliberately and I gave myself time but it was only a few months into the leave of absence and I knew that. Technically my leave of absences was going to go from May of '87 to May of '88 and the way that they did it was you could come back and ask for another year. I think you had two years total

1:18:45

to make a decision. It was March of '88 and Lisa and I knew that we wanted to get married. I just wanted to get moving with my life and I knew that I didn't need to wait until May. Now the community's had their election and Father Conrad, the Father General I saw to make my request, he had served two terms so he was out. They assigned him to a mission somewhere. The new Father General came in, his name was Edwin, and he was much more conservative than Conrad. A very smart guy, very caustic sense of humor I mean I didn't know him real well so now he's the Father General. So it's March of 1988 and I just want to get on with life; need to just get moving so I make an appointment to go see Father Edwin. In those days, the General was in Virginia so I drive down from Baltimore and I get there at about 11:30 and he's waiting for me. There were two or three other priests assigned there who ran the council but they were out so it's just Edwin and me. I get there and I don't know what to expect. He greets me, he's very warm and he says, "Why don't we go out to lunch?" I said, "That'd be nice." So we go out to this really nice place not far from; we just had a nice lunch. It was very comfortable and just catching up on some things so then we come back and he says, we're sitting in his office, and he says, "So, why are we here Steve?" I said, "Well, I've made a decision, Edwin," He says, "Okay, you've made a decision about the leave of absence." I said, "I'm going to resign from the Missionary Servants." He said, "Okay, you're going to resign." He says, "So, do you want to hook up with the diocese of Baltimore?" I said, "No." He said, "You're going to get married?" I said, "Yeah, I'm going to get married." And he said, "Congratulations, that's great!" I was very surprised. And he says, "That's great and I know you're a thoughtful guy. I know you've given this a lot of thought. Before you say anything else, I just want to let you know you've been a very good priest and we're really going to miss you because you've served us well." And I was really moved and I'm thinking wow! He says, "You're going to get married. Well, we can really help you with laicization" Laicization is a process in the church where you go through this rather long process where it's through Canon law, you know there's Civil law and then there's Canon law. You go through this Canon law process and your case actually goes before the Pope and the Pope sort of allows you do to this with the blessing of the church. And Edwin says, "We can" and the Missionary Servants had two or three priests who were very capable Canon law lawyers so he says, "So, we can get David and Sean to help you with your laicization case if that's what you've decided." I said, "Edwin, I can't do that, in conscience, I can't do that." And he says, "What do you mean?" (Takes a sip of water) See this was 1988 so Pope John Paul II had been pope for ten years and very, very conservative. I said, "Well Edwin, I can't do that because I know that under Pope John Paul II, they have narrowed the criteria for laicization down to two things. The first thing is, you have to make a case in Canon law that you're leaving the priesthood because you've developed mental health problems. That's not the case; my mental health is better and getting better all the time. That's not true. The second reason is that you have to make a case under Canon law that you never had a vocation to begin with and that's not true. I'm leaving for celibacy but I've never questioned the fact that I have been called to the priesthood." So he's looking at me and I don't know what to expect. I mean I just want this to be nice; I just want this to be friendly. I knew I was taking a chance and he looks at me and he says to me, "You know, do you realize Steve

1:24:27

that you picked the perfect day to come and tell me this.” I said, “What are you talking about?” And he said, “I just got back from Louisiana and there were like five dioceses in Louisiana: New Orleans, Freeport, and three others.” He said that the five bishops of Louisiana came together for their annual retreat and they invited the heads of all the religious orders who have priests serving in their diocese to come and join them. Edwin had gone down because there Missionary Servants serving in Lafayette. The head of the Jesuit provincial was there; they all come together and he said the theme of the retreat was the vocation crisis in the church and they had invited this very old Jesuit to speak to them about the vocation crisis and what they were going to do about the vocation crisis. So Edwin says, “Here I am with the bishops of Louisiana and all my peers, the heads from the different orders and we’re sitting in this conference room.” The priest who was going to give the talk is this eminent theologian, a Jesuit theologian named Futrell, I think his name was. So Edwin says, “Futrell, who is like ninety at this point, comes up to the microphone and says, ‘Most holy bishops and reverend fathers, you’ve asked me to give a talk on the vocation crisis.’” And he says, “I’m a very old man and I’m an old Jesuit which means I can say whatever I want to say. What I’m going to say is very short. You’ve asked me to talk about the vocation crisis. What I’m going to say to you is that I can’t talk about a vocation crisis to you until the church listens to the Holy Spirit about how to solve the priest problem and what the Holy Spirit is clearly saying to the church is there is no vocation crisis if you allow priests to marry, if you allow women to become priests and if you allow married men to become priests. That’s all I have to say” And he walked off the stage. I said to Edwin, “Oh my God, what did you do?” And he said, “We were freaked out! We didn’t know what to do and then after he left the stage we all looked at each other and said, ‘Yeah, he’s probably right.’” So he said, “We just spend the rest of the day, we networked and had a good time; speech was over. Then I get back on a plane and my first appointment is Steve Stahley. You picked a perfect day to come.” I just about passed out!

Ambrose: Yeah.

Stahley: And he said, “So when are you getting married?” and I said “July” and he said “Well, invite me to the wedding, I probably won’t be able to come, but invite me to the wedding.” And then he says, “You’ve been a good priest, what do you need? How can we help you out?” I said, “Well, I’d really like to keep the car I’ve been using.” And he said, “Okay, sounds good. That non-profit you’re working for they’re probably hand to mouth; it’s a little ecumenical thing, they probably can’t give you a pension or anything can they? Okay so let’s think about that. How are you doing with the degree?” and I said, “I’m halfway there.” And he said, “Tell you what, I can’t make the decision myself because the Missionary Servants are very collegial, there’s the Father General and four councilmen. You go back to Baltimore and send me a formal letter saying you’re resigning. I’ve never done this before so just go back and write me a letter saying you’re resigning and send me another letter telling me what you need and price it out for me. Tell me what it’s going to cost you to finish the degree. Put a figure in there about getting an IRA which will go towards your pension because you’ll need to start your pension and

tell me that, just write that you need the car. I will take it and I will advocate for you at the council. Several of those guys are your friends anyway so I don't think it'll be a problem." I did that; they sent me a check for \$9,000.

1:28:43

Ambrose: Wow.

Stahley: It was one of the most profound moments of my life; it was just great. It was very healing in its own way and very affirming and as you've heard me, I can't say enough about this order that I'm still very close to and have good friends in. That was that piece of it and then there was whole thing to work through with family and marrying Lisa and the mixed feelings in the family and you know part of that story anyway. So I resigned in March and of course, I couldn't be married in the church because I hadn't gone through the laicization process but that wasn't important to me. A Lutheran minister who I worked with at the non-profit performed our wedding in 1988. You and Ian were four. Meg was two months, I think

Ambrose: Yeah, she was just born, March.

Stahley: Adrienne was still coming. So we were married and of course Lisa moved to Baltimore by that point. So I just started this whole other chapter of my life. In many ways, playing catch up because at this point; going into the big, wide world with a Theology degree doesn't mean very much because it doesn't carry much. Even though I thought my experience in the priesthood was very impressive, you just have to find your way so I worked very hard to finish the degree which I did in '89. Got a degree, a masters of Community Planning from the University of Maryland which has served me very well. I got a job with the mayor's office, public services around that time. That experience and my pastoral work and then my work with the city of Baltimore helped me get a job in Montgomery County, even though we didn't move there. I ended up working there for nineteen years; starting as a homeless service coordinator and then doing contract work and then as an administrator. I can zip through that period pretty much because so much of what I've done professionally built on what I did in the priesthood, in terms of working among the disadvantaged or marginalized populations. I had learned some very hard lessons about supervision from being a local superior and a pastor because I had a parish staff and then I had to mind my troubled brethren to deal with so many of the skills and experiences I needed to serve in the public sector for both the city of Baltimore and Montgomery County are things that I learned as part of my education and experience in the priesthood. And then, just work-wise, after Montgomery County, I worked there long enough to retire with a pension and health benefits and I was able to leave there and I now work as a consultant for the state of Maryland, working for a person I had worked for in Montgomery County who lost her job as a result of a political change, that's all.

Ambrose: Oh, okay.

Stahley: But now she works for the state and has recently been named the Deputy Director of the Dental Hygiene Administration of Maryland and she brought me on as a consultant so I'm working as a contractor on an hourly basis; do a lot of work from home. I travel to different parts of the state of Maryland working on specific projects like smoking cessation for people who are in mental health programs (phone rings) things like that. But again, so much of what I do (phone rings) is linked back to what I did before. (Phone rings) But, I guess I didn't want to, but I ended up going pretty far down that road.

1:33:33

Ambrose: (Laughs)

Stahley: But, I wanted to tie that all together because I wanted to talk about the other dimension of my life, which was marrying Lisa and then just adjusting to life as a married person or you know, entering a marriage relationship, thinking I knew so much about marriage because I had been a priest and I had done this and I had done that, but very helpful because now you're living with another person. I had heard it said somewhere that when, in some ways a marriage is almost like a death because you've got two people who are living separate lives and then you leave those lives behind and you form, it's like a new thing coming into being in a marriage. I don't want to get too philosophical about it but it's really true; a new thing comes into being, it's not one person and the other person, it's an entity. What a transition that was! I just, I think I'm pretty smart and know a lot but you're just in an entirely different world. Lisa had to adjust herself to my family and I had to adjust myself to her family and very vastly, vastly different in so many different ways. I think that we compliment each others in lots of ways and we built our marriage on a friendship that had developed very gradually over time that required writing and, long distance relationship writing. I just feel fortunate that we had that foundation because every marriage, something new comes into the world and it was just so much to learn and I thought I was so smart. I'm in my thirties; I'm a man of the world; very humbling, very humbling, but very good. It was seven years before we had Thomas so that's a lot of time to get to know each other and work through things and find your strengths and examine your weaknesses. For her, it was a huge transition moving to Baltimore; she's not a city girl, she was basically from a rural area and a small town and to come into Baltimore. We lived in apartments for the first, geez; I guess we were in apartments for the first five years. Then we bought the house where you visited on Kirkwood Road and we were there for about a year and a half before Thomas was born. The experience of having children, especially, when Thomas was born I was forty-three and when Sarah was born I was forty-five. Having children was just beyond anything, I just could have imagined. It was such a momentous thing. The demands of the job were a lot in those days. I was kind of midway through my Montgomery County career in the job that was the most challenging personal wise. Lisa's had some health problems over the years and they were accentuated with the birth of both babies so it was a very challenging time. I mean, it was the best and the worst. These new little lives come in through you and despite all the marvelous sermons I gave about family and parenthood and family life, just being apart of the miracle of children being born is something that

had far surpassed anything I've ever thought. So many unexpected positive things happened and one of the best was that I had this, especially after Sarah was born because Thomas was so little. Lisa was having some health problems and I just remember feeling so much in need of my mother and she was there, she came though. She came down and spent several weeks with us when Sarah was just a newborn and life was challenging for quite awhile but during those first few weeks of Sarah's life, my mother was there for us and it was just so wonderful because she's so, so good with little children. She was so good, she would just take Thomas for hours or she would take Sarah for hours and allow one of us to just sleep for hours because Sarah was a challenging baby and I just remember thinking at the time that here I am, I'm a man in his forties, I'm probably grappling with some things that a lot of men deal with in their twenties or early thirties and I'm really taxed the max and I really need my mommy.

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Ambrose: (Laughs)

Stahley: And here she is. And it was just, not a lot of heavy discussions or

Ambrose: Right.

Stahley: But she was just there and she was able to be there for us and for the children and I so wish that both, I just wish so much with both my mother and my father that they had been able to live longer so that Thomas and Sarah could have gotten to know them. I mean Sarah has no recollection at all of my father and Thomas; it's very vague because he died in November and Thomas turned five that January. My mother, I mean, of course they both have strong recollections of Grammy, but I have just always had this sense that with Sarah, Thomas too but especially with Sarah because my mother was there during that period when it was just so important that somebody hold her for several hours that there was sort of this bond, this connection that was made that's not cognitive at all but this connection that her grandmother on my side was there for her, for us. So, (pause) that's been amazing and the thing with Lisa and with marriage is that (pause) you know you just, I had hoped for this and wished for it although it played itself out in a way that I never could have imagined that this relationship becomes a real school, or a real educational experience of love and of learning how to deal with life, with disappointments, with unexpected kindnesses, with compassion, of understanding, forgiveness; all the things that I was so familiar with conceptually or had studied for so long or had been prepared for in terms of the ministry but then living it and going through it, it's so different and so enriching in so many ways and I just feel, I don't know, I just feel grateful for the way things have gone in my life. I just can't get over so many of the doors that have opened up unexpectedly. (Long pause) Not sure how I went down that path (laughs). Where are we? How am I doing?

Ambrose: (Laughs) No, you're doing great! I have more of a technical question, only out of pure curiosity.

Stahley: Yes.

1:43:06

Ambrose: You had such a, I guess like a peaceful leave from your priesthood.

Stahley: I did.

Ambrose: Did you still have a connection with the Catholic Church in any way? I mean, were you technically excommunicated?

Stahley: You know, Kate, that's a good question. Let me just back up a little bit because I'm glad you asked that question. When I talk about, I'm glad you asked that question because I left something really important out. When I talked about my time in Cleveland and I talked about beginning to question the system; questioning if I had made a mistake or was I in the wrong field, that emerged, but also questioning the system, mainly because a lot of the emotional things that I was going through and that I saw my fellow priests and brothers going through. I was raising the question of, is that how I'm going to end up or what is the system doing to people? There was another piece of that that I left out that your question reminded me of and that's on the intellectual level or on the level of the church as a structure. Something else was going on and that is; earlier you heard me talk so much about Vatican II and the changes that occurred and how when I went through the seminary and as I approached the priesthood, I was kind of on that arch, if you will, trajectory of renewal in the church and change going in a very positive direction. That had begun to change very dramatically also because I was ordained in May of 1978 just a few months after I was ordained, Pope Paul VI passed away. Now Paul VI was not the Pope who began the Second Vatican Council that was Pope John XXIII who was a very expansive, outgoing, joyful person who was elected Pope at a very old age because they just thought that he would be a caretaker for a few years and he ended up just turning over all the apple carts saying, "Let's just get this church in the modern world" and I'm sure they regretted their choice of him, the conservatives but he died after only five years. The Pope who came in behind him was Paul VI who was a very different personality. Paul VI was very scholarly, very quiet, almost withdrawn kind of a person except that he felt that his job as the Pope after John XXIII was to carry through the momentum of this renewal and there's debates about how well he did that but one thing that's not debatable is that he carried through on the reforms regardless about how he felt about it; he felt this was the way the church was going. That's the environment in which I was prepared for the priesthood. Well, I'm ordained and he dies two months later. People, I think everybody, thought the energy is just going to keep going. Well, the Pope that came in after him, seemed like, he just seemed wonderful. He took the name John Paul I. He was an Italian, like his predecessors, because there had been Italian Popes for like four hundred year. Very Gentle man, very wise; he seemed to combine, much like the name he took, he seemed to combine the qualities of both John and Paul and that's the name he took. Well, he's Pope for like thirty-eight days and he dies (takes a sip of water).

Ambrose: Oh!

1:47:16

Stahley: I just remember I had had enough of living history, it was just too much! He seemed like the perfect person to move things forward. Well he dies and at this point, I'm still a very, very new priest and I'm in California and the Cardinals have to come back to Rome and elect a new Pope and it's interrupting football games and all this kind of stuff. Well they pick this guy, Karol Wojtyla, from Poland. I didn't know very much about him. I knew that he had been one of the bishops at Vatican II. He was young, he was good-looking, very athletic and I mean, what was shocking wasn't just that he was young and athletic, but that he was from Poland and I remember thinking, "Oh my God, this is great! Someone not from Italy." Nothing against Italians, but wow, he skis and he was involved in the resistance during the war and I thought, "This is great!" So, in comes John Paul II and he takes John Paul II to follow up John Paul I and for that first year or two, he was just, he was a rock star; he was like Bono

Ambrose: (Laughs)

Stahley: He was like the Dalai Lama. He started traveling the world and I mean personality wise he was wonderful. This is kind of playing itself out on the world stage and I'm thinking, "Great! This guy's young, he's not from Italy" and I kept going back to, wrongly as it turns out, I kept referring back to the fact that he was at the Second Vatican Council so he's up to speed with all of this. Well, as I'm making my little journey through the priesthood here and going here and going there, you're not paying attention a whole lot to what's going on globally because it's so big and you've got so much on your plate but I did follow these things. What began to happen early on in his papacy is that he was coming from a very different place theologically; a very different place. He was, and he leaked some of the advisors that he had. At first, I thought they were great. A guy by the name of Josef Ratzinger, who's the Pope now, had been a theologian in Germany. In fact I remember reading his books as a seminarian and thinking they were great. Well, they were but they had a very different theological agenda and what I came to find out very early on to my dismay was that all the energy in the church was not in the direction of reform. It was not like let's get with it; let's make the changes we have to. I came to find out very quickly that there was a very strong, and as it turns out a very large contingent of bishops at the Second Vatican Council who thought it was too extreme; that they don't agree with this. It was a very determined loyal opposition to this. It became very obvious that John Paul, that's where he was from and then what began to happen, and it touched me personally because like so many of the theologians that I had studied in the seminary who represented what's called Liberation Theology from Mexico and South America; Segundo Galilea, Gustavo Gutierrez, Juan Luis Segundo, I mean I can name them. These were the textbooks I was reading to prepare me for the priesthood. These guys were being hounded out of university positions. Their license to teach theology was being revoked and I am starting to pay attention to this. Shortly after I got to Cleveland, maybe I was in Cleveland for about a year, the Pope made a visit to Nicaragua and there were priests who were very involved

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in the revolution in Nicaragua, I'm not saying they were right about everything but they had overthrown a brutal dictator and the Pope is going to Nicaragua scolding them; telling them to get out of politics. He's backing extremely conservative bishops; he's putting them in positions of power. In this country, people that were theologians I had studied under are being investigated; they're being called over to Rome and it's kind of like the toothpaste is going back in the tube and I'm thinking, "Wait a minute! The energy is supposed to be going this way and it's going this way!" The thing that (laughs) really capped it for me was when I was at Catholic University. I was taught Moral Theology by one of the loveliest and, I think, one of the holiest priests that I had ever met, a guy named of Charlie Curran. He was a diocesan priest from Rochester who was an academic and he was kind of loaned by his bishop to Catholic University and he taught us Moral Theology. I will never forget, he was kind of a cutting edge Theologian. He was challenging the church on things like birth control; he was certainly, he was against abortion, but he was questioning the way the church approached abortion. He was writing and publishing on end of life issues you know, dealing with euthanasia, things like that. What I remember, because I had him for two classes, and whereas I loved him he was probably the most demanding teacher I ever had because he came into class and he said, we were all male seminarians, and he said, "Gentlemen, this semester is fifteen weeks. For the first fourteen weeks, I'm going to teach you and I'm going to make you learn the history of these issues in the church and moral theology. That's what I want you to learn. I don't care about your opinions; I'm preparing you to be priests. You're going to learn over the first fourteen weeks why the church teaches what it does; where the doctrine came from, who the various, blah, blah, blah. The final three classes, I'm going to share with you, where my investigations are taking me. I'm going to give you the rationale for what I'm doing in terms of my theological research. I'm going to explain to you, you all know I'm controversial but I'm going to explain to you why I've gone down this path. When I give you that final examination, I'm telling you right now, it'll be one of the hardest you'll ever take. When I give that to you I'm not interested in you giving me my opinion, as Charles Curran, I don't want your opinion; I want you to show me you understand." And boy was he serious!

Ambrose: (Laughs).

Stahley: But his teaching, I remember one time he came in (takes a sip of water); I had him for two classes. This might have been 1976; maybe a year or two before I was ordained. He came into class one day and he said, "I need to tell you a story. When I was ordained a priest in 1955; in those days we were prepared to be answer men. We studied in the seminary Canon law and we studied scripture. When we were ordained in 1955 the way the church was, we were the answer men. We had all the answers for the people all the time. We told the people what to do, we told the people what to believe. In confession we told the people what was wrong, what was right and we were the answer men. Thank God things are different now. I'm teaching you to learn what you need to be to be good parish priests (takes a sip of water). I am preparing you to go out into a very complicated world and I'm going to tell you right now, you are not being trained to be answer men.

1:56:17

When you are out serving God's people and they come to you with these awful, wrenching questions of morals, you will listen before you talk. You will understand their pain. You will get on your knees and you will pray with them for the right answer. You will help form your consciences and their consciences. Together with God's grace, you will seek the answers, but you are not the answer men." I just remember, clearly that stuck with me after all these years. This is the man who prepared me to go out as a young priest and to have the right of set of ideas and beliefs to go out and serve and for me to see eight years later, him being called over to Rome and raked over the coals to see if he's "Catholic enough" or if he's "good enough" or "loyal enough" to the church; this was part of the crisis. This was part of my dark night of the soul; my issue. But anyway, having said all that, when I decided to leave and left the way that I did, with the support and understanding that I got from the Missionary Servants; it sounds strange to say but I never questioned or doubted the fact that I was a Catholic and a Catholic priest and proud to be a Catholic priest and that whereas I didn't fit within the rules or the boxes anymore that I was just going to leave that to God. I wasn't going to be bothered by that and that even though I had these issues with the church and even though I was moving off in my own way, this is how I was going to do it and I was going to leave the defining to other people or I wasn't going to worry about it. I married Lisa in the Lutheran Church (laughs) and even though there were some years, I always kept the connection with the Missionary Servants. My prayer life changed but it certainly didn't stop. My love for Catholicism never weaned. I would somehow always find my way back to some kind of community even though I don't get down to the inner-city parish in Baltimore where the pastor knows who I am; we've become good friends, it's an inner-city parish much like the one I served in Cleveland. I go there. I feel perfectly at home. I sit in the pew. I like being there with him. Things just kind of went the way that they did so all these years later, I find myself back in the vestments saying mass for Dignity⁴ which I've done; I did it last Sunday. I did it Ash Wednesday, you know. Kate, I don't know how it all hangs together but it sort of does and I've never thought of myself as anything other than Catholic. I guess I don't find myself worrying about the legalities of it and somehow just going where the path seems to follow. Not much of an answer but I guess the answer is yes, I don't know.

Ambrose: No, yeah, that's good. So, I guess one final question and then we're done. This is kind of an all encompassing question and kind of more of a hypothetical more than anything else. Based on your education at LaSalle, your education as a priest, and, of course, I'm sure you've heard about the scandal in Philadelphia that was just uncovered this past week, would you ever consider sending your children to a Catholic school or to receive a Catholic education?

Stahley: Oh LaSalle, I wouldn't hesitate, I don't think we could afford it but I have such respect for LaSalle. Interesting about the Catholic education, we actually tried that with the children in Baltimore and it was such a profoundly negative experience for them that

⁴ Dignity USA is an organization for Catholic members of the LGBT community fighting to be accepted by the Catholic Church as full members. They have been in operation since 1998.

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it turned them against, they were so, not so much Sarah, but Thomas is was so profoundly negative and they were treated in such, well Thomas anyway, was treated in such a cruel way by teachers and other students and we were only too happy to leave there. It coincided with us moving out of Baltimore and coming here but it was so profoundly negative that we wouldn't have even thought for a second about sending him to the Catholic school here. Part of it is related to the fact that that particular Catholic school that we sent them to, Saint Agnes, is unfortunately one of those Catholic schools that decided that the way to maintain its Catholic identity was to reach back to the Catholicism of the fifties with all that kind of strictness and harshness and black and white kind of things. I should have researched the school better before I sent them there but I want Thomas and Sarah to understand the importance of the Christian tradition and I want them to understand why Catholicism is so important to me; what it means to me. They've been exposed to that; they understand that. I also know they are separate people; they have their own, and now their teenagers so there's that heightened, so they have their own concerns. Where I'd like them to be when they reach the cusp of adulthood is an understanding of what's out there in terms of the choices you can make for a spiritual/religious tradition and make a choice that will serve them really well. Maybe there's a chance that that could be Catholicism. You mentioned the scandal in Philadelphia and the proportions it's reaching and I have this strong sense that this might be the big tsunami that's hitting that's showing how brutal and corrupt the system is. It was pieces of that that I was experiencing long ago in Cleveland when some of these things that are in place just shouldn't be there because they're not good for people. I mean, I think that, for instance, something like celibacy should be maintained as an option for certain orders or perhaps certain priests but it can't be enforced; it can't be made a condition of ministry because we're seeing what happens now when you do that. I mean I was only dealing with the tip of the iceberg with what I saw. The thing that's erupting in Philadelphia now, the first, if that's the tsunami hitting the shore, the first rumblings of this crisis were happening in the mid eighties because I remember hearing about it when I was in Cleveland. The first rumblings were coming from Louisiana and Minnesota. By the time I left Cleveland in '86 it was already starting to pop up there and other places around the country and as far back as '86, which is twenty-five, twenty-six years ago. The leaders of the church, the bishops, knew something was amiss and they were faced with, I'm not saying it was an easy choice, but they were faced with a very important choice as to whether you're going to deal with this honestly and address this issue or you're going to play games and move people around and pretend it's not really as bad as people are saying it is and we know the choice they made. I think the structure is shaking and I don't know where it's going to go but I think what's happening needs to happen. I think what I've been fortunate enough to be involved in like with Dignity in Washington is an example of how things are going to go where you have that group of people who have been treated so badly by the church. They've been treated with such contempt by homophobic, hierarchy people many of whom are gay themselves, I mean it's incredible but you have this group of people that you saw, Dignity, who I'm now associated with as one of nine or ten priests who serve them. These are good people who love their Catholicism and are going to practice it and are not going to be denied the full experience

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of Catholicism despite what the Pope and the bishops say and God bless them! What a joy it is to serve them. I mean, I think this is an example of how things are going to develop and I'm just glad to be apart of it. I'm hoping that by the time Thomas and Sarah have reached their adulthood, there may be some options for them. They are smart kids and they can't quite figure out my interest in this still but they're getting to the point when they're asking more questions, "Why did you do this?" and "Why is this important?" You know the more and more you can talk to them as young adults and you can talk about these things in a way where you're not telling them what they had to do or what they have to believe but what the choices are and why something like this can help them in terms of living a full adult life. You can deal with the mystery of life and death and why are we here. This is a safe place to do that and there's support and there's a way of worshiping this God that we don't always understand but we believe loves us and express his or her presence through Jesus. I forget what the question was, but I believe the answer is yes.

Ambrose: (Laughs). Okay, well my questions are finished.

Stahley: Wow!

Ambrose: Unless there's anything that you'd like to add

Stahley: Maybe Lisa could add something.

Ambrose: I can safely say that we have concluded.

Lisa Stahley: I don't want to add anything to your history; it's your oral history, right?

Stahley: Well it is but you've seen it for the last twenty-four years, twenty-five years.

Lisa Stahley: Well, I've known you for thirty years.

Stahley: Since '80, no, before, since '79

Lisa Stahley: Yeah, I was in the eleventh grade when I met you.

Stahley: '79

Lisa Stahley: And I was scared of you because you seemed so smart

Ambrose: (Laughs).

Lisa Stahley: (Laughs) But he was so nice; I thought he was just the nicest adult that I had ever met.

Stahley: Then you found out! Who I really was

2:10:11

Lisa Stahley: I called to make an appointment for class and I asked for the old guy, Father Stack, because I thought well he's been there the longest, he probably knows how to do this process better; not that I had no faith in you.

Stahley: But he was out

Lisa Stahley: So Steve answered the phone. It was one of those things were if he hadn't answered the phone, my life would have certainly, your life might not have been that different, but my sure would have been different.

Stahley: You might have married Lambert! (laughs) I don't think so.

Ambrose: (Laughs)

Lisa Stahley: I'd be a widow

Stahley: Yeah, Lambert was a little bit older

Lisa Stahley: Yeah, I wouldn't have had Thomas and Sarah

Stahley: That's true

Lisa Stahley: It's just one of those things, that's how are lives are; kind of funny to think.

Stahley: Yeah, the ball takes a funny bounce.

Lisa Stahley: That one little thing, one tiny thing changes everything. Oh you're so good. I heard tiny bits of it

2:11:22 – End of Interview.

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