

Interviewee: Brother Brian Henderson, F.S.C.

Interviewer: Rebecca Oviedo

Date: March 10, 2015

Location: La Salle University Campus, Student Union Building, Room 217

Running Time: 2:46:40

Recording Equipment: Apple iPhone 5c, voice memo app

ABSTRACT:

Brother Brian Henderson was born in 1959 and grew up in Southwest Philadelphia. He graduated from West Catholic High School for Boys in 1977 and La Salle University with a B.A. in Religion and Psychology in 1981, and later earned a Masters Degree in Pastoral Studies in 1992. He has been a De La Salle Christian Brother since 1979, taking final vows in 1987. All of Brother Brian's apostolic assignments have placed him serving inner city youth. His first assignment was as a youth care worker and religion teacher at Saint Gabriel's Hall in Audubon, PA, a residential treatment facility for court referred teenagers. From 1984 to 1988, Brother Brian taught full time and moderated numerous programs at West Catholic High School, his alma mater. He then spent the next 10 years in Baltimore, Maryland, first as a religion teacher and Dean of Students, and then as Assistant Principal at Saint Frances Academy, the oldest African-American Catholic High School in the country. While in Baltimore, he earned a Masters of Education in Administration from Loyola College. In 1998, Brother Brian returned to Saint Gabriel's Hall as Residential Director and Assistant Director, and has recently completed twelve years as Director (2001-2013). He currently serves the Brothers of the Christian Schools within the District of Eastern North America (DENA) in providing accompaniment of Young Lasallian Professionals, hoping to form the next generation of forever Lasallians; both brothers and lay partners, committed to "making this world a more humane, respectful, and dignified place to live."

Brother Brian has also worked with the Lasallian Volunteer Program since 2001, facilitating their annual spring weekend debriefing retreat, and received their Brother John Johnston Faith Award in 2014 for his generous service and support. He has received awards for service from West Catholic, Saint Frances Academy, and the Knights of Columbus, and has served on numerous Catholic school boards throughout his professional career. He currently serves as a member of the Board of Trustees for La Salle University.

In this interview, Brother Brian was very forthright about his early experiences growing up in Philadelphia, and his unique perspective as an African-American Christian Brother. I think this interview will be useful to those interested in the history of Philadelphia neighborhoods, Catholic education and the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, the vocation of De La Salle Christian Brothers, particularly how they have changed or compare to other religious orders in recent years (ca. 1965 to present day), and issues of race and human respect in general.

LOG:

- 00:00 Introductions: Interviewer states names, location, and date of the interview, asks permission to record the interview. Permission granted.
- 00:25 Brother Brian was born on October 25 1959, in North Philadelphia, to Larry and Priscilla Henderson.
- 00:40 Lived in North Philadelphia for a brief period of time from 1959 to 1968, at which point the family moved to Southwest Philadelphia, which is where he typically says he is from when people ask. But for first 9 or 10 years of his life his family lived in a row home in North Philadelphia.
- 01:32 Brother Brian is not exactly sure why his family moved, but his parents may have anticipated or perceived the neighborhood was changing, and it might be good to move to a newer developed area. He learned later, as an adult, that they moved from the first house they lived in, not long after it was paid for. Looking back over history, it probably was a good decision. He says that part of North Philadelphia went through a pretty difficult period with violence and economic distress.
- 02:43 The place they moved to in Southwest Philadelphia was near Lindbergh Boulevard and Island Road, the Korman Corporation's new homes there. It was another row home, and they lived in a cul-de-sac. He has observed that the area has remained peaceable, stable, and safe up to this day, over the last fifty or forty years. He looks at the move as a fortuitous blessing.
- 03:20 His parents still live in the house. It was purchased, fully paid for, and that was a great day. It was a big thing that the house was paid for.
- 04:07 Brother Brian describes the neighborhood in Southwest Philadelphia as very comfortable, with good people. "My parents are not social butterflies as perhaps others would say I am." His father is now 88, and age has slowed him down even though he is still in good health. He used to help by cutting the lawns of some of the other neighbors who couldn't do so as easily, or shoveling snow. So now the neighbors help his parents because they recognize them as very good people, nice, generous people with a very good reputation. People enjoy meeting them.
- 06:35 Brother Brian describes his parents. "There's a lot of ways in which I could describe life with them or what I've learned from them. The older I get the more I appreciate how they navigated life. How they were an influence on how I've come to approach life, relate to people. Reflecting on the times my parents grew up, it causes me to say, if people think miracles do not occur, they clearly do not pay attention to life." His father was born in 1926, in Elkton, Virginia, and

then moved to Williamsburg, Virginia. His mother was born in 1932, in either North or South Carolina. Then they each moved to New York City, where they met. They next moved to Philadelphia. He remembers his father commenting that the pace of New York was a little too much and Philadelphia was a little more comfortable of a pace.

- 08:15 “When I look at those years that they would have grown up, African-American acceptance and tolerance was not good in the US, in the south, nor in the north. Yet, my parents approached people for who they are. If you are a good person, you are a good person regardless of race. And they brought me along the same way, to get along with people.” His friendships are a testament to that openness. He goes on to explain that the friendships he made in Southwest Philadelphia have been lifelong friendships, with best friends who are Irish, Italian, mutt-mixes and everything else.
- 10:32 When they moved to Southwest Philly, it was about 4<sup>th</sup> grade, at the age when kids start establishing friendships that stick a while, and Brother Brian attributes his friendships to his Catholic education, and the Immaculate Heart Sisters that had an elementary school at St. Irenaeus in Southwest Philadelphia.
- 11:36 Asked if his parents ever gave any specific advice on dealing with discrimination or prejudice: “I think it was a blend of observing, following the norms of the household.” He is an only child, a grand total of three in the house. “There were probably conversations, but again they did not revolve around things that I have—in my years of working with kids and families—they did not take on the specific nature of ‘when you’re around white people...’ I don’t have any recollection of that kind of talk. It was like, ‘this is how you deal with people: you are respectful to all people.’ There was not a delineation, as I know some families talk about—minority families, Black and Latino—that when you encounter police, ‘look out, because you’re not white.’ Things like that. That’s not how our conversations went. I don’t ever remember anything like that. It was treat people with respect, and people will treat you with respect.”
- 13:52 Brother Brian’s father is retired from the Post Office. He was a special delivery carrier, messenger. Previous to that he was a yellow cab driver. He was in the Navy. His work with the Post Office was stable work, good respectable work. Brother Brian does not remember a time when his father was ever out of work. He was at the Post Office for probably 25 years or so, and retired at about 65.
- 15:15 His mother was a sewing operator. She worked in a big sewing factory in Philadelphia. She would make the uniforms that students wear, or clothing that would show up in department stores; line work, putting collars on, or sleeves and all that. She was a great sewer, and often made her own clothes. She is very small. “Sometimes my goddaughter—one of my goddaughters—kids me

that I was an adopted child because my parents are—my dad is average size, he is about 5’8” or so and my mom is really short, very small, and by comparison to me, pretty quiet, low key people.”

- 16:48 He describes his parents as very neat in terms of dress and presentation. His mother, in particular, is a “simple, yet elegant, plain yet extraordinary dresser. There wasn’t anything ostentatious about her.” He mentions that his family all converted to Catholicism, and that we will get back to that later. He describes watching people go to mass on Sunday, where women wore big eye-catching hats and attire, and “that’s not my mother. But my mother was probably eye-catching in her neatness and the rather professional way in which she always carried herself.” He goes on to reflect, “a lot of my enthusiastic aura, that energized aura, I’d say comes from my mother. My dad is a very nice man and lower key, but very engaging, great sense of humor.”
- 19:55 Brother Brian returns to describing his family converting to Catholicism: He started kindergarten in a public school; the kids were “unruly.” He says, “I apparently was always wired to be someone who likes order. I don’t do well with chaotic situations, especially if they’re negative. Like, people not being respectful of each other, not being respectful to the teacher. And it was clear to my mother, in particular, and I think my parents, that I was highly disturbed by the prospects of having to go [1<sup>st</sup> through] 8<sup>th</sup> grade [in this school]. So they asked the neighbors—this is North Philly—were there any other schools around. And one of our neighbors, African-American neighbors, who was Catholic, said the Glen Riddle Franciscans. (I didn’t know that at the time, but I figured it out later) there is a group of Sisters who ran a school called St Ludwig’s, at 29<sup>th</sup> and Master. And they run a pretty tight ship up there, and a good school. So we went to check there. Sure enough, it seemed alright; very orderly. So I went there. The Sisters were great; very disciplined, very orderly, which worked well for me.”<sup>1</sup>
- 22:23 He continues: “somewhere between 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, kids were starting to prepare for First Communion. So this is right around, right as we are getting to Vatican II. So I started going to Catholic Masses under the old style of the priest back in the great mystery and aura and all of that. Things were very regimented. When I first started Catholic schools, the sixth day of school was Sunday Mass.” He goes on to describe reconnecting years later with a Sister who had been one of his teachers at St. Ludwig’s. She apparently noticed, “I must have been exuding an interest in maybe becoming Catholic because it was a sense of a belonging process.” He describes the other kids fasting before Mass, and eating Tastykakes as a snack after Mass. This Sister approached his father about

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<sup>1</sup> St. Ludwig Parish was located at 28<sup>th</sup> and Master Street, from 1891-1975. <http://archphila.org/parishes/index.php>  
The school was run by the Sisters of St. Francis of Philadelphia (Glen Riddle Franciscans), who have their Spiritual Center in Aston, PA. <http://www.osfphila.org>

becoming Catholic, and he was open to it. Brother Brian recalls that either his mother or father may have gone to a Methodist church, but had not been fully committed to it.

- 26:00 He recalls Father [Emil C.] Oestreich, a German name. He notes that St. Ludwig's was a German parish, with Irish Catholic Sisters. His family went for instructions with Father Oestreich, and one Sunday afternoon [cannot recall the exact year], after morning Mass, were baptized as a family. He describes his studying habits, doing homework immediately after dinner, and did not watch TV at all during the week. He was able to study and memorize, to catch up, and receive First Communion along with the rest of the class.
- 27:50 "So the Sisters were very—not surprised—but they were kinda like, 'Well, don't worry if you don't get everything, you know, because you're just starting later after everyone else.' Well! [claps] I had that stuff [snaps] down cold!"
- 28:15 Brother Brian recalls that when his family moved to Southwest Philadelphia, they immediately looked for a Catholic parish. St. Irenaeus [2728 S. 73rd Street] was a new parish in the neighborhood they moved to, and was an offshoot of St. Clement's [2220 S. 71st Street], which had gotten so large they were splitting it. St. Irenaeus was projected to be the next large parish. Brother Brian recalls very full attendance for Mass. He states that there was a large lot that was once owned by the church, where there was planned to be a larger church. It was never built, and today a housing development is instead being built there.<sup>2</sup>
- 30:01 St. Irenaeus shared a school with St. Raphael, which was at the time in what was called "the Meadows," toward the Philadelphia International Airport. "And there was a land down there that was—you thought you went to a whole 'nother part—it was farms, literally farms. And there were kids that I went to school with, that were farm kids." St. Irenaeus combined with St. Raphael to become known as SIRS (St. Irenaeus-St. Raphael Schools).
- 31:03 St. Irenaeus was located at 73<sup>rd</sup> and Groves Ave, in Southwest Philadelphia. A bus would take the school children from there to St. Raphael, in the Meadows. Brother Brian explains that much of what used to be the Meadows [Eastwick] has been redeveloped by the Philadelphia Airport. The school no longer exists; there may have been a fire. He thinks there is still a fire station there, which was probably meant to cover the part of Southwest that was built up by Korman, and also to serve the homes and farms that were the Meadows.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Saint Irenaeus Parish was founded in 1966, and was suppressed in 2004. Saint Clement Parish was founded in 1865 and also closed in 2004, when the two parishes, along with Good Shepherd Parish (1925-2004), merged to form the new Divine Mercy Parish, located at the former Good Shepherd site (67<sup>th</sup> St. and Chester Ave).

<sup>3</sup> St. Raphael's was located at 86<sup>th</sup> St. and Tinicum Ave (1904-1989). <http://archphila.org/parishes/index.php>

- 32:30 St. Irenaeus is now a worship site for Divine Mercy, which has its main church at the old Good Shepherd Parish. Brother Brian remembers a dense population of Catholics and a number of parishes in Southwest Philadelphia while he was growing up: St. Clements, St. Irenaeus, Good Shepherd, St. Barnabas [6300 Buist Ave., founded 1919]. Most Blessed Sacrament [56<sup>th</sup> St. and Chester Ave, 1901-2008], was once the largest parish in the world; “the physical plan of Most Blessed Sacrament was gigantic.” West Catholic, when it opened [in 1916] was one of the largest Catholic high schools in the country, and at one point it annexed buildings of Most Blessed Sacrament in order to accommodate the number of high school students.<sup>4</sup>
- 34:05 Brother Brian remembers Italian-named Catholic parishes in Philadelphia: St. Loreto? [Our Lady of Loreto, at 6214 Grays Ave from 1932-2000], and St. Callistus [6700 Lansdowne Ave, 1921-2013]. “Nowadays all of it has changed.” He comments that Philadelphians in the 50s, 60s, 70s, and probably into the 80s, “would identify where you were from by the parish name. Whether you were Catholic or not, even non-Catholics identified where they lived by the Catholic parish there.”<sup>5</sup>
- 35:16 “West Catholic High School for Boys, where I went to high school, to this day still accounts for the highest number of priests and Brothers that came from that school. So that was like a conveyor belt into religious life.”
- 35:40 St. Irenaeus was a feeder school to West Catholic. Brother Brian talks about public school versus Catholic school. “Public schools already had a very well-established—whether it was justified or not—but established rough, not focused area. The public school in our neighborhood was Bartram. And at West Catholic, you know, all you had to say to someone, ‘if you don’t shape up here – you’ll end up at Bartram.’ Well, that was strong motivation to get yourself together. So Catholic schools were well-run. I had an exceptional educational experience at St. Irenaeus. We had teachers who prepared us very well for high school.” He mentions considering “tensions” in West Philadelphia before attending West Catholic, and also thought about attending La Salle High School (“it was very complicated to get to”), but probably not St. Joe’s Prep (“it was in North Philly, a rough neighborhood”).
- 38:59 “So I went to West Catholic. And I’m glad for it. It was well run, the Brothers—that was my first encounter with the Christian Brothers—very good men. Well-ordered school, but affable too. Got along well with them. And I was very comfortable there. The lay teachers were great. There was good camaraderie in the place. All of my friends from St. Irenaeus went there.” He describes that he

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<sup>4</sup> Parish dates and locations gathered from Archdiocese of Philadelphia <http://archphila.org/parishes/index.php>.

<sup>5</sup> Parish dates and locations gathered from Archdiocese of Philadelphia <http://archphila.org/parishes/index.php>.

lived in the newly developed area of Southwest Philly, and some friends lived in the older World War II-built homes. At West Catholic he met and became friends with people from the larger Southwest Philadelphia area.

41:38 Brother Brian shares that he didn't play any organized sports in school. "We might have pickup games of football or baseball or basketball; handball was like a version of baseball we would play in St. Irenaeus's lot. And a group of kids would come choose up teams." But the main influence was his involvement in the Community Service Corps. Brother James Donovan, who was in charge of the program, ultimately became his sponsor to entering the Brothers. "He was a really good man, kind of a quirky kind of guy, but well respected in the school, and he would do these leadership weekends which were very influential in terms of my leadership development and sense of service, sense of working with others."

42:50 "Community Service Corps gave me a way of relating comfortably with a very diverse mix of people that were wired to getting along with a wide diversity of people. You know, in the 1970s, you could still—there was clearly great divides in opinions—blacks did not date white girls, and vice versa. That would almost cause the world to stop spinning on its axis. But I was able to be friends and friendly with white, black, through this service organization. Everyone was oriented toward what we were learning through the service, working together, and that was the thing that was glue. We were all friends, and we liked each other, because we came from different neighborhoods." The central office was run out of the Archdiocese, on 1213 Clover Street, right behind St. John's Church. The building is still there, but it is not used for youth programs anymore. That was the headquarters for CYO (Catholic Youth Organization) and Community Service Corps. "And Discovery Leadership Institute, which was a program that was developed, seemed to me, to target in particular, minorities. Black kids for leadership." Bishop [Robert Patrick] Maginnis was the head of CYO; "we always called him Maginn." Brother Brian worked in the Department of Youth Activities, Community Service Corps, as a college-aged staff person when he graduated from West Catholic and started at La Salle. He recalls Monsignor [Francis] Schmidt; they called him "GL" for "Glorious Leader."

45:49 Brother Brian describes the Community Service Corps as a "wonderful thing," "a major program" run by Monsignor Schmidt and Monsignor Maginnis, who both really related to the kids. He was involved in high school, into college, through when he entered the Brothers. When he returned to West Catholic in 1984 to teach, he at some point also became moderator for the Community Service Corps. He also remembers Brother Richard Kestler, who was Principal of West Catholic when Brother Brian was attending high school [Bro. Richard Kestler is now President of West Catholic], as "an exceptional principal, he acknowledged

all of the kids.” He mentions the phrases, “West is best,” and also, “West has a special spirit, pass it on.”

48:50 Brother Brian describes feeling disappointed that the Community Service Corps and Department of Youth Activities no longer exists. He says someday he would like to see it reorganized, “in my next twenty year plan” because “Brothers don’t retire; there is no vacation from a vocation.” He describes that lots of the events, banquet dinners, and reunions were held at La Salle University, and a lot of the people who were involved in Community Service Corps and DYA, came to La Salle. So when Brother Brian came to La Salle as a student [in 1977], he knew a lot of people. “When I entered the Brothers, going into my junior year here at La Salle, one of the Brothers who was a year ahead of me, in terms of Brothers formation, he kidded me and said, ‘Well if I am the Mayor of the Student Union Building, you must be the Governor’ and that Governor designation stuck with me as a nickname in many circles for a long time. It has dissipated except for a couple of people when I see them they still call me ‘the Gov’ or ‘Governor.’ But it had to do with how many people I knew here at La Salle. And not only just knowing them, I would say, how I got to know, and it was part of—started with my parents, augmented and directed by the Glen Riddle Franciscans, and the Immaculate Heart of Mary Sisters.”

52:23 Brother Brian describes that the Glen Riddle Franciscan Sisters [at St. Ludwig’s] wore a black habit, and the Immaculate Heart Sisters at St. Irenaeus wore blue. He did not know at the time that the color signified their different orders. “I thought the Sisters that I met at St. Irenaeus, their blue was just simply a color change because of Vatican II.” They conducted classes “pretty much the same.” It was a “no nonsense operation, but it provided an environment where I was able to get along with people; very safe environments. And the Brothers at West Catholic were the same thing, and then to get involved in the Community Service Corps, you had like-minded kids and parents who were supportive of being involved.”

54:24 “So even though, throughout my life I have been in predominantly white situations, that’s not necessarily how I look at things.” He reflects on growing older, and becoming more conscious of race relationships, “it’s very interesting how people can complement you—and I probably wouldn’t want to repeat them in today’s world. There was a guy who once wrote in my yearbook—my yearbook would be a good example—I would never let anyone read my high school yearbook alone, because the lines in them... ‘To Brian, the whitest black guy I know.’ Now that on the one hand could sound like a complete car wreck, but what the person meant, was that I got along with everybody.”

55:40 He describes attending an alumni event for West Catholic. “I remember talking with some of my former students who were black. They said, ‘Brother, when you

first came to West, we thought, first of all, wow there is a black Brother'—there's not that many, even in the whole United States—and they were like, 'Great! He's gonna have our backs, but you just went after anybody, you didn't take no guff from anyone—us, the white kids—you were colorblind.' He sates, "I'm very comfortable in mixed company."

57:00 He continues, "I'm not particularly comfortable when people say, 'the white man.' I understand what they're saying in terms of social injustice, but I tend to look at it in terms of, well, people are people. There are people who do disturbing things; there are white people; there are black people." He thinks his worldview has helped him to be a good teacher among students, especially at West Catholic, which was still "mainly a white school" when he was a teacher and a student there.

59:00 He compares that "blacks were in the minority when I first went to St Gabriel's Hall in 1981-1983." And that, "that number changed dramatically by the time I showed up in 1998." He notes, "in terms of how much we incarcerate the people of minorities is very much in evidence. In 1982, it was growing, but it was still a good number of white kids. I mean more black kids than you would have in other Catholic school settings, but yeah."

1:00:30 "But my experience from the grade schools, West Catholic, the Department of Youth Activities, and my parents..., all has converged to yield a person who is pretty comfortable in most circles of people who are of a mind to get along. And people who have carried, what I would call, traditional residual prejudice: people who don't know that they are prejudice, but they are. But they're not locked up in the core of their guts over it. Sometimes I think I can help those people realize. I have had people say to me, 'I didn't realize how I looked at black people in a wrong way, until I met you.' It would be certain people go, I remember one time someone said, 'oh the black guy,' and someone else said, 'that's not a black guy, that's Brian.' You know, that came out weird. But, it was like, you know, all that pejorative stuff, as soon as you automatically heap on to a term, people are like—hold up—this is Brian. And then that helped people, some people that I met, reassess—what are you thinking, what are you saying when you say, someone is black, someone is Hispanic. That's not the person. The person is who they are and they happen to be of African-American descent, Latino descent. I think that has all been a blessing, those experiences."

1:02:36 When asked what kinds of activities he did with the Community Service Corps, Brother Brian responds that they worked with other schools to do service programs in neighborhoods, tutor programs, and worked with the elderly. He also dressed up as a clown. "Oddly enough, I would work at being a silent clown" for kids, or nursing homes.

- 1:03:30 Brother Brian describes an Archdiocese-wide program called Bread Basketball, when he was a student at West Catholic, which was a competition among the high schools to bring in the most canned goods for a food shelter (probably taking place in line with the basketball season). “I ended up really championing that.” He relates an occasion where he asked Brother Richard Kestler if he could speak to the faculty. He brought charts, and no doubt his enthusiasm, and persuaded the faculty to get involved. West Catholic “won that trophy each year for I don’t know how many years. We almost convinced the Archdiocese just to retire the trophy at West Catholic.”
- 1:07:44 He continues about the Community Service Corps, and describes the National Training Institute of Leadership and Service, which taught public speaking, how to run a group, how to organize events. He received a human relations award from the Archdiocese in part because of some things he organized. He describes organizing groups to load and unload trucks for relief for the Johnstown flood.<sup>6</sup>
- 1:08:52 Brother Brian describes being in charge of a swim program that took place on Saturday mornings either at Memorial Hall or St. Joe’s Prep.<sup>7</sup> It was an opportunity to learn responsibility. He recalls Brother Jim Donovan, who was very organized, and helped Bro. Brian to develop his own organizational skills.
- 1:10:30 He relates that he came to La Salle University because he was a recipient of a Christian Brothers scholarship, which helped with the tuition, and because he knew about La Salle both from West Catholic and his involvement with the Community Service Corps. He shares that there was a Brother, by the name of Allen Johnson, who taught Religion and English at West Catholic, and that he invited Brother Brian to go on what was called a Discovery Weekend in Adamstown, Maryland, near Frederick.<sup>8</sup> It was an opportunity to learn more about the Brothers, and he started to think about what he might want to do in life. He enjoyed working with people through the Community Service Corps, and he had also enjoyed teaching a CCD class at St. Irenaeus when he was in high school. These experiences led him to choose to major in religion and psychology (“understanding human beings, since you’re gonna work with them”). He started thinking about teaching as a lifestyle.

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<sup>6</sup> The Johnstown Flood was a catastrophic flood which first occurred on May 31, 1889, in Johnstown, Pennsylvania. Subsequent floods occurred, the largest in 1936 and 1977. Brother Brian is referring to the July 19, 1977 flood. He would have just completed his senior year of high school.

<sup>7</sup> Memorial Hall, originally built as the Arts building for Philadelphia’s 1876 Centennial Exposition, was converted to a recreational center and headquarters for Fairmount Park Commission in 1956. The east gallery was converted to a swimming pool in 1962. Memorial Hall is now home to the Please Touch Museum, which moved there in 2008. <http://www.pleasetouchmuseum.org/about-us/memorial-hall/>

<sup>8</sup> Brother Allen Johnson is also African-American.

- 1:13:17 He talks about considering joining the Christian Brothers. “The Brothers struck me as a group of men who enjoy what they’re doing; that community thing seemed to be a really good idea.” He was not as interested in becoming a Priest. “But the other thing was—the Brothers never struck me as being in a panic. An invitation, like, come check it out, try it, if it works great, if it doesn’t, thanks for checking us out.” He saw that it could help with his career interest to be a teacher. He starts to describe what he observed when men chose to leave the Brothers, and that it made a strong impression on him.
- 1:15:17 “Now, again, I entered the Brothers in 1979. The flood out of religious community had slowed down. That was something. From the late 60s, earlier part of the 70s, the number of religious that left religious orders, the Brothers—In its heyday of this district, not all that many years before—probably, around ‘70, I forget the years—but there were in what used to be called the Baltimore District, at one point there was almost 600 Brothers in this area. They were thinking about splitting the Baltimore District again, and didn’t.”<sup>9</sup> He compares this to when his family moved to Southwest, and the parish there was projected to grow. “Hold on, check those numbers again!”
- 1:16:18 When asked, “Why do you think that was?” Brother Brian responds, “Well, Vatican II. The 60s, the late 60s, from the time John F. Kennedy became President and then was assassinated, and then we have Bobby Kennedy, and Martin Luther King assassinated—these were gigantic events. Civil rights movement, the civil rights amendment, laws, and all of that. And then Vatican II. The previous way of living life was like a bowl that fell off the shelf and crashed on the floor. And then this whole unknown, unfamiliar world had broken out. And so religious life, which was highly structured—Like I said, I didn’t know the Glen Riddle Franciscans and the Immaculate Hearts were two different orders. I just thought they decided to change the color of their habits. They behaved the same way.—And as I have learned as a religious, the routine was very regimented. You could literally, at one point in time, before Vatican II changes, you could walk into any Brother’s house, and you knew if you walked into that house at say, 5:30, every house [slams fist on table for emphasis] every house in this province would be in prayer. 6:00 would be dinner. 7:30 would be common time, in the community room. It was prescribed. Same thing in the morning. You walk into any chapel at 6:30. Morning prayer, followed by Mass.” Not today. The strictness is no longer there. “And there’s great debate as to what was lost as a result of that. But I think what was gained is a more human interior growth of one’s relationship with God, of one’s responsibility as a religious.”

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<sup>9</sup> Today there is a total of 687 Christian Brothers in the whole of North America (RELAN – Lasallian Region of North America). There are 302 Brothers (44% of RELAN) in this district, the District of Eastern North America (DNA). <http://www.lasallian.info/resources/statistics/>

- 1:19:44 “Part of religious life emphasized detachment from the secular world.” Brother Brian explains that before Vatican II, many Brothers would have taken a religious name, and stopped using their family name. “I did not have to take a religious name, it wasn’t even offered as an option.”
- 1:21:24 Brother Brian reflects on the reactions and feedback of his friends when he entered the Brothers. They see him as the same person, and not detached.
- 1:22:28 He gets back to what he observed when men chose to leave the Brothers. The men that left still had a good relationship with the Brothers; they were not viewed as “sinners” as perhaps a priest would be. He remembers a reunion banquet in Ocean City, NJ. There was a banner that read, “Welcome alumni Brothers.” Many former Brothers who had gotten married came to the event with their wives; their sense of fraternal connection was still strong. “In fact, I met women who—more than one—who would say, ‘had it not been for his experience with the Brothers, I don’t think we would have ever gotten married. The Brothers helped his character grow, the type of character that I love.’” He describes the experience as strong motivation to enter the Brothers. “Well, the neat thing was the Brothers were hosting this. Nobody blinked. There was a connection. We’re not Brothers, yet we feel connected by the Brothers. There’s still a group that gets together regularly to celebrate the life that they had lived together, and the influence. So it was like, this is the order for me!” He says that the Brothers were a good fit for the way he relates to people, and that he is the “safest guy among any group of women. Because I am clearly committed to who I am and how I am, and that leaves room for me to have a conversation with just about anybody who walks the earth, and I don’t have to worry about the black card, the white card, or any other card. I’m Brother Brian, and my religious consecration is an easy one for others to either see or have to think about.”
- 1:26:32 When asked, “Do you think people react differently to you if you are wearing a habit or not?” He responds, “It can happen. It certainly happens.” He is very proud to wear the habit because of what it represents as a Brother of the Christian Schools. “The habit is designed in a particular way to emphasize our affinity with the working class and those of poor circumstances. So it has a very long history, it’s distinctive to who we are. It’s the attire of the educator at the time of our founding, but the hooks and the buttons, clearly delineates us with being aligned with the working class and the poor, and opposed to those who are more wealthy who could afford buttons on their clothing.” He continues that Brothers also may wear a collar. He says they are very expensive and the quality is not what they once used to be. He prefers to wear the habit, and tends not to wear the collar.
- 1:28:14 “But here’s the other thing. The thing that makes me a religious Brother is not just wearing the habit. It’s how I approach people. And I’ve become conscious

too, in my time as a Brother, of how people they can respond to someone with a clerical point of view.” He goes on to describe that religious Brothers are laity who live under the context of a religious community that was founded by St. John Batiste de La Salle. They are not ordained priests. He describes the tendency of society to create caste systems, with priests at the top. But he would like to emphasize, “Priests, Brothers, Sisters, married, single, they all have equal value.” He is a regular person. “So if I must be recognized by eyesight immediately as a Brother, I go ahead and wear the robe. Clear. You know what order I belong to. Bang.” He has a Brothers lapel pin that he wears, and a ring which was a gift from his parents that reads “F.S.C.” for Brothers of the Christian Schools in Latin, Fratres Scholarum Christianarum. “I don’t wear crosses; I’m not comfortable with crosses.”

1:32:14 He talks about connecting with people and being able to “de-mystify the religious.” He begins to talk about working with the Lasallian Volunteers, a program hosted by the Christian Brothers. He has enjoyed doing their end of the year retreat for the past fourteen years or so, and is very impressed by how serious about faith, but “well-grounded” Lasallian Volunteers are.

1:34:55 “I like Pope Francis’s point of view: ‘we need shepherds who smell like the sheep.’ And that means, you’re stinky, your hands get dirty, because human life is a gritty kind of thing. You don’t look to dive into the mud pile, but you step into it every once in a while. You have to be able to realize—your shoes, your feet, your leg, your clothes, can get clean—you don’t have to be afraid to get into icky stuff sometimes, because that’s the only way we’re gonna solve things. I think part of our world’s problems—we try to solve things with pure clean hands and thereby exacerbating the mud pile.” “Get dirty. It’ll wash off. But we don’t live life that way all the time.” He feels that “it is an honor that young people feel drawn to our charism, to want to share community with us, share and contribute to our work.” He notes that a number of volunteers have gone on to become educators and administrators in education because of their experience in Lasallian Volunteers. “It is a great privilege for us, a sign for how to be vibrant as a religious community as we move into the future. There may be few of us Brothers, but there is still a vibrancy of what we represent.”

1:37:20 Brother Brian reflects on his past experiences: Sixteen years at St. Gabriel’s Hall (the first two years when he came out of initial formations, from 1981-1983), his time in the novitiate, West Catholic for four years, and “ten wonderful years—a big influential period—in East Baltimore with the Oblate Sisters of Providence, the oldest African-American Catholic high school in the country [Saint Frances Academy]. Now—converse from what I said earlier, [that] I have been in mostly predominantly white settings, never settings where the dominant number were minorities, certainly not African-Americans—now I am in an all African-American high school dealing with boys and girls. A brand-new challenge for me, but a

great learning experience. Probably helped me to grow in the area of being comfortable in my own blackness or African-American nature, and enhance my comfort level in terms of dealing with all people.” He recalls those ten years as a great experience.

- 1:39:34 He talks about his return to St. Gabriel’s Hall in 1998, starting as the Residential Director, “kind of like the Assistant Director to, at the time was the first lay Director of St. Gabriel’s Hall” since its inception in 1898. He states, “we were not well-prepared for the transition” from a Brother to a lay person. “There was a lot of struggle.” After about two years, the then-Director received an attractive opportunity, and left St. Gabriel’s. The Archdiocese then asked Brother Brian to take on the directorship in 2001.
- 1:41:28 Brother Brian explains that all of his administrative positions—Dean of Students and Assistant Principal at Saint Frances Academy, Residential Director and then Director at St. Gabriel’s—none of them were as a result of his interviewing for a position. He relates a story about when he arrived at Saint Frances Academy, and he asked one of the Sisters in the school office why it would be a good idea for him to be involved in administration when “I just walked in the door?” She replied, “well, because of what you’ve done here today. You came to see what this experience was. I’ve heard of the questions that you’re asking. They are the very questions we need to have on the table, and you recognize you need everyone’s help to do this, that’s why we need you and you would be good for this job.” When he finished his Masters in education at Loyola, he was offered the position of Assistant Principal.
- 1:44:35 He describes being asked to return to St. Gabriel’s Hall. “Many things about the program had changed since I was there the first time.” The program was more sophisticated, and more people were working on therapeutic interventions. “It was a much more robust intent to help the kids and families.”
- 1:46:00 Brother Brian talks about his transition into the position of Director. He wanted to outline his vision of leadership, and see if people were comfortable with it. When asked if he wanted to be Director, he said, “I don’t see it as what I want to do, it has more to do with if people feel that entrusting this responsibility to me, gives them a sense of confidence and comfort that they will be supported and that their good work would be acknowledged—and thereby their work be helped in that way—then that’s what I would want, and I think I could accept that.”
- 1:48:35 When talking to those desiring leadership positions, “I always say, first of all, I am the worst person to ask for advice—‘how do you get an administrative job?’—because all of my interviews have been prompted by me asking the question, ‘don’t you think it would be better if you got someone else to do this?’ Secondly, if you really want to do it, don’t do it! Because if you lust after it, or go

after it, you end up with a bullseye on your back. The thing that I've been blessed by is my journey to my administrative posts, have been as a consequence of making it clear that I need everybody's help." He continues, "My job is to help encourage and coordinate the people who know what they are doing."

1:52:44 "When people would introduce me as, 'Here's Brother Brian, he runs St. Gabriel's Hall,' I would say, 'No, I do not run St. Gabriel's Hall. It's the people who are with the kids, working and struggling with the kids, they run the Hall.'" He relays how he would often ask during a presentation for new hires, "who is the least important person at St. Gabriel's Hall?" He explains his correct answer, "my position is the least important because I am furthest from the kids. The people closest to the kids, the youth care workers, the teachers, the clinical therapists; followed by the people who keep the infrastructure in place, maintenance, food services, secretaries, support staff; then you have the supervisors who help support them, and directors who support the supervisors; then you get to the director of the building—me. Now rest assured, I didn't say, 'what I say isn't important,' but put in context, my position is the least important."

1:56:08 "That is part of what was at play when I left St. Gabe's." He explains economic pressures, and the demand to make cuts to the program. Eventually he thought, "well, I've always said my position is the least important." When the whole supervisory structure had to change so much, he realized, "it's time to let it go." He laments that, "we know more now than at any other time in the history of St. Gabriel's Hall [about educating children]—we know more of what to do and how to do it. The unfortunate thing with our society is—the cost for knowing what to do and how to do it is, we will not pay to get it done." He recognizes this as motivation for his current service with Young Lasallian Professionals. "We need more warriors for the war with ignorance."

1:59:40 "I don't have a title. My business card indicates the verb that I live. I aim to live the verb 'accompanying' Young Lasallian Professionals." He explains his aim to introduce Lasallian charism and to help young professionals, "embrace it as their own, become the net casters to others of this charism that is focused on sense of faith, faith in God, faith in each other, faith in the children we work with, faith of service, developing a relationship of growth with each other, and those we are charged to care and nurture, and then community. Obviously we do all this together. I used to say to my staff at St Gabriel's Hall, never do anything alone. When in doubt, ask someone."

2:02:25 He continues about the importance of working with children. "I am an admirer of the work that the adults do with the kids, and what the kids are able to achieve once the adults help the children discover their goodness, appreciate their goodness, and build on that goodness. And that is a miracle that happens

frequently that we don't pay enough attention to." He describes that people would go to St. Gabriel's Hall and comment on how quiet it was, that it sounds like a monastery. He explains that the place does occupy a lot of the same characteristics. "We are a place where you can retreat, reflect, reassess, what are you doing, how are you doing in life, and then refocus. It is the same type of thing people do when they go to a monastery. So yes, we have to have a sense of quiet, a sense of serenity, a sense of gentleness, a sense of gravity about being respected and respectful human beings." He shares what he would say to the kids at St. Gabe's, explaining that he is not angry with them, but with their bad behavior. He would tell them, "You are a good person, but I am frustrated by your choice to behave in a way that does not reflect your goodness."

- 2:06:20 He believes that working with new, young professionals is key for the future. "The whole community has to embrace and celebrate the idea that this Lasallian community is a great contributor, not only to the Catholic Church, but to our society in general." He emphasizes that the Christian Brothers are an international order, which respects other religions around the world. He mentions Bethlehem University [Palestine] as doing outstanding work in bringing all people together in a safe place to learn together. "My ministry now is hoping to form the next generation of forever Lasallians—both brothers and partners. I have a great belief that vocation—we can still be blessed by, but if in the mean time, our lay colleagues clearly can carry forth this great gift and charisma that God has entrusted."
- 2:10:00 Brother Brian reflects on his experience with Community Service Corps and working with Young Lasallian Professionals today. He would be very happy if he is able to successfully inspire them, and offer the formative leadership and development opportunities that he experienced in high school and college.
- 2:11:20 When asked to give his thoughts on the recent announcement of La Salle University's next President, the first female, and the first lay person, he says, "I think the choice and the whole direction this is going is tremendous." He mentions her experience, and continues, "for the Brothers, we have long since realized that we don't have enough men and enough talent and experience options to continue to fill each role, but we have also not been blind to the talent of our colleagues and partners, and that with the right accompaniment of formation and support—there lies great competence with the new President Elect." He says what is most important for the Brothers is what will be best for the students, and "will help La Salle stay to its principal of quality education based on a quality community experience, and having students who have a firm influence of realizing, you have a role of making this world a more humane, respectful, dignified place to live."

2:14:54

“I think it’s great that the Board had the courage to go this way and as well as the Brothers to support it. I have great confidence in the new President Elect’s capability—and in the community’s ability. This is going to be a great opportunity for the La Salle University community to really grow and let shine the Lasallian charism that is here. I think sometimes many of our ministries—not only here at La Salle—you know, [people think] as long as there is a Brother there, it will be Lasallian because of the Brothers—that is a false thing. Just because a Brother is there, that is only one man, or however many men. We have to remember we are passing every day further and further out of and away from a period where our lay partners and colleagues got the spirit because they were surrounded by us Brothers. It would be like a massive herd—a cattle herd.” “Now the herd is down to one or two Brothers here and there. People need to have their own compass to know where they are walking and how to walk. The Brothers are 5% of the work force in the world.<sup>10</sup> So our colleagues, many of whom have said, their experience of this Lasallian community and Lasallian charism has changed how they are as a person, has made them better people, has given them access to their sense of faith, sense of religious practice, regardless of if they are Catholic or not. I am heartened by the number of people who have said, ‘I am not Catholic, but I feel so at home, I feel such a sense of belonging, a sense of respect and appreciation for who I am, including my faith.’ People who don’t hesitate to participate in Catholic Mass or prayers because their sense of belonging and welcome and being honored is so strong.” “And that is God’s grace at work. I think there is tremendous opportunity here at La Salle to be all the more authentically Lasallian. And what I am looking forward to is our new President will be the woman’s voice among our universities that are conducted by the Brothers. We have a number of them that have already gone to lay leadership. Maybe just one university—two?—of course one Brother is getting ready to finish—in fairly short order we will be down to perhaps only one Brother, maybe no Brothers, who will be in the role of the President.<sup>11</sup> But the leadership is not just the one office, it’s the whole place.”

2:19:00

He continues about Lasallian schools as leadership institutions. “Every man, woman, and child in this place is involved in leadership.” He feels it is the job of the chief administrator, the coordinating leader, to learn what is happening in the place, and to make it known. He says that many places have things backwards: if finances and money is the primary, central, thing of discussion, then that is a poorly run place. At the center ought to be the people, and the money should follow. “There are people who could support St. Gabe’s, who

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<sup>10</sup> Brother Brian probably means that Christian Brothers make up roughly 5% of the work force (faculty/staff/administrators) within Lasallian institutions worldwide. <http://www.lasallian.info/resources/statistics/>

<sup>11</sup> There are seven Lasallian colleges and universities in RELAN (six in the United States, one in Bethlehem, Palestine). There are currently three Christian Brothers serving as President (two in the United States: Lewis University, and Saint Mary’s University of Minnesota) and four lay men. Colleen Hanycz, Ph.D. will replace La Salle University’s Interim President, James P. Gallagher, Ph.D in 2015. <https://www.lasallian.info/resources/statistics/>.

wouldn't come to St. Gabe's because they were afraid of what they would see. I'm not talking about being afraid of seeing something terrible, they're afraid to see something effective."

- 2:23:45 Brother Brian considers changing public perception of St. Gabriel's. "I do what I can to help nudge people, influence people, to look at things differently, or to see things in a way that will ultimately be helpful to our ministries that are doing the work."
- 2:29:28 When asked if he has any regrets in life, Brother Brian asserts that regrets are unproductive. He comments that people are often too quick to judge or look for blame. It is important to be reflective, to think before you act.
- 2:34:40 He reflects on dealing with a difficult situation, and finding "the middle of the woods." When faced with the difficulty of implementing layoffs at St. Gabriel's, he reflects on the importance of taking the time to be sensitive, respectful, and help the person to enter a transitional period. "It takes time. I am flummoxed by how often human service organizations, including the Catholic Church, layoff people within a matter of days, hours, weeks." He relays one particularly difficult incident. He made sure to take time to listen, to be respectful, because caring for people takes time.
- 2:45:10 "I used to say to people all the time, especially with the kids at St. Gabe's— [affecting an angry voice] 'the kid was with you for eight months, how come he's not better?'—This is not a car shop! You take your car in the morning at 7:30, you say something is wrong. They call you at about 10 or 11 and say, 'you need a new manifold, a new exhaust pipe, you need the belts tightened,' and then at 5:30 you can pick it up, the belts have been changed, the new exhaust system put in, you're set to go. Human beings are not wired like that. Human beings are human beings. Working with human beings is a highly inexact science, and when you forget it, then you need to stop because you will mess it up. Because you're gonna start treating human beings like cars, and they are clearly not cars."
- 2:46:07 Conclusion. Interviewer observes that Brother Brian's passion and commitment to human relationships and Lasallian mission is clear, thanks him for his time and for the great interview.