

Interview of Brother Daniel Burke FSC

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

April 10-20, 2007

Interview conducted by Christopher A. Thompson

Abstract

Interview with Brother Daniel Burke FSC. Born in Pittsburgh, PA in 1926, Brother Daniel, an Irish-American, went to an all Italian grade school where he emerged as an art student and class valedictorian. His Father fought in World War I and survived. After the war, Brother Daniel's Father, also Daniel Burke, was a automobile sales and repair man, then worked on the staff of the Registrar of Wills, Allegheny County, PA. His mother worked at the newspaper, *the Pittsburgh Press* during the depression. Brother Daniel went to high school at LaSalle Hall in Ammendale Maryland, and College at Catholic University in Washington D.C., where he received his B.A., M.A., and Ph.D in English. Brother Daniel entered the Christian Brotherhood in 1944. He has taught English at West Philadelphia Catholic High School (1949-51,) LaSalle Hall in Ammendale, MD, (1951-52,) and De LaSalle College in Washington D.C. (1952-57.) He arrived at LaSalle College in 1957 as an Assistant professor of English. In 1960, he was appointed as Vice-President for academic affairs. In 1969, he was appointed President of LaSalle College. In 1974, he retired as president. In 1976, Brother Daniel opened the LaSalle Art Museum to the public. He currently (as of April,, 2007) resides of the Christian Brother retiree Community house on LaSalle University's main campus.

The Purpose of the interview with Brother Daniel Burke FSC, was first and foremost to get his thoughts down on a recorded device. The second purpose was to interview him about his early life and the early life of the LaSalle Art Museum. As stated in the field notes, on April 10, Brother Daniel received a list of 153 questions, which he answered in writing and gave back to interviewer. This hand-written question and answer session is Appendix A and is included in the back of this index. Brother Daniel answered many question on his Presidency and the turbulent 1960s years at LaSalle College, and questions on his legacy to the University. This document is valuable to augment the recorded portion of the interview.

*NB: Direct interview questions and answers transcribed are by either *CT*- interviewer (C. Thompson, or *BDB*-narrator (Brother Daniel Burke.)

Compact Disk Table of Contents: Summary

- Session 1a** (April 14): Pre-interview, formal introduction
- Session 1b** (April 14): Early Life, the West Catholic Years, and young Brother Fidelian of Mary (Brother Daniel's original Christian Brother name.)
- Session 2** (April 20): Discussion of Physical aspects of Philadelphia, and LaSalle area and Art.

Table of Contents: Detailed descriptions

Session 1a-b, April 14th, 2007.

Location: Brother Daniel Burke's office, 163 Olney Hall, LaSalle University, Philadelphia, PA.

Time: SESSION 1a- 17 minutes, 26 sec.

Time: SESSION 1b- 54 minutes, 58 sec.

SESSION 1a

Time: a- 17 minutes, 26 sec.

Identifying information: Pre interview

- 00:01 Narrator discusses his Ph.D. Dissertation: *Metrical Roughness in Marden's Prose*. This was an analysis of the philosophy of "rough meter" in 16th Century English poetry, (as opposed to Shakespeare's "sing song" meter,) **BDB** (laughing.): "The critics didn't like it."
- 02:44 Talks about (George) Dennis O'Brian, former president of Bucknell University (1976-1984) and Rochester University (1984-1994,) and the former editor of the *Catholic Commission on Intellectual and Cultural Affairs*, of which Brother Daniel Burke was a member and sometime editor.
- 03:52 Anecdote about Dennis O'Brian's Daughter, gives a good indication of narrator's sense of humor.
- 07:48 Talks about meeting the Secretary of State of Ireland (name forgotten, date not given,) with Dennis O'Brian at a monastery in Dublin, Ireland.
- 11:01 Returns to the subject of the *Catholic Commission*, and the make-up of its members- physicists, English teachers, etc.
- 12:15 Talks about returning the original interview questions to interviewer. Discusses Brother Fidelian of Jesus, his classmate in the Novitiate of Christian Brothers, who was recently stricken with Alzheimer's disease.
- 13:40 Interviewer's explanation of the written legal release form.
- *14:26 Formal introductions
- 15:10 Narrator's Birthday- Oct, 26, 1926, Pittsburgh, PA.

16:24 Talks about father- Daniel Burke, and mother, Mary Stack, born in Pittsburgh, grand parents born in Ireland.

17:08 *CT*: “How has your father influenced your life?”¹

End OF SESSION 1a

¹ This question is answered on 00:01 on Session 1b

SESSION 1b

Time: 54 minutes, 58 sec.

Identifying Information: early life, discussion of parents, Great Depression, Life of a Christian Brother at West Philadelphia Catholic High School for Boys, and at LaSalle College 1957-1970s

- 00:05 Discusses parents, their characteristics and their influence on his life. Father's Army training (WWI) began with aviation and developed into a love of mechanics in general. Post war, father had automobile sale and repair business. His mother was "a model of persistence."
- 02:05 Impact of Great Depression
- 02:24 After the great crash of 1929, His father's partner in Automobile business fled with the money, and tools², and ruined the family.
- 02:58 Father goes into "politics" and works on the staff of the Registrar of Wills, Allegheny County, PA.
- 04:09 The look of the city of Pittsburgh, PA in the 1930s³
- 4:53 It smelled like smoke
- 4:57 **BDB**: "Out side on the windowstill [in the mornings] there would be a ¼ inch of dust [smoke] that had accumulated."
- 05:44 Discusses the public parks of the Pittsburgh, PA of his youth.
- 6:09 Memories of the look of Highland Park, Pittsburgh, PA with its waterworks and swimming pool.
- 7:22 Discusses being an Irish American in an all Italian Grade School. Discusses going to Art classes at the Carnegie Museum in the eighth grade, which stimulated his love of Art.
- 8:53 Once again, discussion of impact of the great depression. Mother had to work in the depression
- 10:01 **CT** : "was it a shock for your mother to work?"
BDB: "yes it was"

² In Session 1b, Brother Daniel does not mention tools. However, on the short unrecorded talk before the interview, he jokingly mentioned his parents talking about the "mysterious" disappearance of the partner and the tools .

³ At this point in the interview, narrator refers to written questions to refresh memory.

- 10:15 Mother worked for newspaper Pittsburgh Press
- 11:26 Discussion of the depression-era in Pittsburgh. “Villages of shantytowns of poor people.” Comparable to imagery of the *Grapes of Wrath*.
- 14:01 Discussion of FDR’s New Deal policies. **BDB**: [the New Deal,] “was a success, it certainly helped a lot of people.”
- 16:37 After father lost car business, father had to go live with his sister, the children and mother lived with the maternal grandmother.
- 18:18 Discussion of religiosity from a young age (four years old.)
- 19:40 Narrator’s brother was a Christian Brother until 1941, when America entered WWII. Narrator’s brother enlisted in Navy, never to return to brotherhood.
- 20:42 Discussion of the three vows of the Christian Brotherhood- poverty, chastity and obedience.
- 21:48 The life of a typical Christian Brother in the 1950s: Awake at 6:00 am; 6:30 mass, then teach (at West Philadelphia Catholic High School⁴) four or five classes.
- 23:27 60 Christian Brothers at West Catholic when Narrator stated teaching there (1949-1951.)
- 25:08 Discussion of the daily “advertisement of defects⁵,” whereas Christian Brothers would confess and be told of their minor infractions and sins, in a group setting.
- 27:22 Significance of narrator’s original Christian Brother name of Brother Fidelian of Mary: **BDB**: [there were] no more names left on the list.
- 28:30 Discussion of World War II, the impact of Fascism on narrator, on the brother hood, on the U.S.
- 29:38 **CT**: [on talking about the image of fascism the mid 1930s]“How aware was everybody of the bad things to come?”
Answer: Narrator had German friends in the 1930s, narrator asked friends’ fathers’ about German treatment of Jews, narrator states, [the answers were] “a mass of contradictions from one house to the other.”

⁴ West Philadelphia Catholic High School for Boys (1916-1990) will hereby be referred to as West Catholic. **West Philadelphia Catholic High School for Boys combined with West Philadelphia Catholic High School for Girls in 1990 to form West Philadelphia Catholic High School.

⁵ Session 1b: 25:08-27:30; Another great example of narrator’s sense of humor.

- 33:41 Discussion of the culture of West Catholic in the 1940s-1950s- Discussion of the parades down Chestnut Street before football games. BDB: [the West Catholic culture was] “high pitched [and] joyous.” Discussion of the stop of corporal punishment at West Catholic. **BDB**: “With 60 Christian Brothers, [West Catholic’s Christian Brothers were] rather crowded in the dining room.”
- 37:24 Narrator lived at Christian Brother Community House at 49th and Chestnut Streets, Philadelphia, PA, (directly across from High School.)
- 38:03 Discussion of the “social life” of a Christian Brother at LaSalle College. (Narrator first taught at LaSalle College in 1957.)
- 39:07 The atmosphere at LaSalle, and the life of a typical Christian Brother teaching at the College level.
- 39:58 Students in the 1950s-1960s were primarily Korean War vets, and some WWII veterans, along with the younger traditional age college students.
- 41:19 Impact of the G.I. Bill on Colleges and Universities in America, with LaSalle in particular.
- 42:58 Discussion of narrator as moderator of the *LaSalle Collegian* (LaSalle College’s on campus newspaper.) Narrator discusses the main cartoonist of the *Collegian*, who worked on the cartoon *O’Henry* with its creator before coming to LaSale College as a student.
- 46:19 Discussion of the Dominican (Priestly) Order that taught at LaSalle College, discussion of the Dominican Father Heath, an Annapolis graduate and WWII veteran, the head of the Dominican Order at LaSalle College. By 1974, all of the Dominican priests had left LaSalle.
- 53: 20 Discussion of the death of John F. Kennedy, narrator gets visibly upset, good time to stop interview.

END OF SESSION 1b

Session 2, April 20th 2007.

Location: Sitting room of the Christian Brother Retiree Community House, on LaSalle University main campus, LaSalle University, Philadelphia, PA.

Time: SESSION 2: 53 minutes, 35 sec.

Identifying information: Discussion of physical aspects of Philadelphia and LaSalle area and Art.

- 00:19 Formal introductions for interview Session 2
- 00:47 Physical memories of LaSalle College in 1957. Discussion of estate of Charles Wilson Peale, (now part of LaSalle University's main campus.) Discussion of Peale's Philadelphia museum. Peale's coming to the "suburbs" of Philadelphia by the prompting of President Thomas Jefferson. Discussion of Yellow Fever epidemic that struck Philadelphia in 1826. Relationship of C.W. Peale with George Washington.
- 07:00 Once again, the Physical characteristics of LaSalle in 1957. Opening of new Science Building in 1960. New Library (now offices, having been replaced by new Library.)
- 8:13 Racial makeup of Philadelphia north of City Hall from the early 19th Century until the 1950s. Discussion of Wister Family Farm, the many mansions that once graced Broad Street all the way North to Chestnut Hill.
- 14:28 Forth, fifth, and sixth prompting by narrator for interviewer to read biography of C. W. Peale. Discussion of early history of LaSalle College.
- 19:41 In the 19th Century Philadelphia North of City Hall was primarily a racial mix of Italian, Irish, German, and Jew, by the 1950s and early 1960s blacks moved in and the former mixed European "white" citizens moved out en masse.
- 23:29 Discussion of narrator's English Teaching Philosophy: literary theory and "why some poetry was better than others... What made the great poets so... beautiful in the work and poetry."
- 28:24 *CT*: "How did you work art into the English curriculum?"
BDB: "It was there from the beginning."
- 29:22 Impetus of Art Museum and its early beginnings. Narrator wanted to use actual painting and art for the then new Undergraduate degree program in Art History.

- 31:58 Discussion of the great collector and LaSalle Art museum benefactor Leslie Rosenwald.
- 34:17 Narrator started Art Museum with \$3000.00, Discusses the uphill battle he fought to gain good, collectable art worthy of the Art History Program as well as to display.
- 36:56 First piece in collection was two “lonely” wings of Medieval triptych⁶ in which the centerpiece had disappeared. It was all narrator could afford with \$3000.00.
- 37:43 Narrator went to Christie’s and Sotheby’s auction houses to get his paintings, there he made life long connections in the art world. The friends he made at the auction houses and with museum curators helped him procure art and gave narrator great advice on the acquisition of art.
- 40:38 **BDB**: “Collectors [also] gave art and money,” in particular, Benjamin Bernstein. Bernstein distributed free art to colleges from his collection. Narrator was invited to Bernstein’s house and got to pick from the collection before the art was given away. Burstein has continued to contribute privately to LaSalle Art Museum. Another Artist (name not remembered,) started a fund for LaSalle Art Museum’s Print and Drawing collections.
- 46:24 Discussion of H.O. Tanner’s “La Sainte Marie,” narrator’s favorite piece in LaSalle Art Museum. The Painter, H.O. Tanner was an African American Philadelphia who studied under Thomas Akins. Akins sent Tanner to the prestigious *Ecole Des Beaux Arts* in Paris, France. Discussion of narrator’s article on Tanner’s work for Smithsonian Magazine in 1988.
- 53:07 END OF INTERVIEW

⁶ Altar piece and collectable object D’art that has two wings and a centerpiece, usually displaying biblical themed art.