

# Primary Sources

*Oral history project preserves Jesuits' first-hand accounts for the future*

*by Peter Feuerherd*

**T**HE YEAR WAS 1975. Fr. Aram Berard, SJ, from Rhode Island, was ministering in a village in Vietnam.

It was not a good time to be an American there. As the Communists were advancing on Saigon, Berard visited his superiors in the city days before its fall and went back to Can Tho, his village, to wrap up business and say goodbye to his parishioners before leaving the country.

But the South Vietnamese government fell and the last Americans left, crowded into helicopters atop the U.S. embassy, the day that Berard was to have returned to Saigon and flown out.

Berard was left behind. A bishop advised him to throw away his U.S. passport and take on the identity of a French priest. All during his trek back to Saigon, he wore a hat, glasses, and

a *soutane*, a French-style cassock. He spoke in the tones of the Sorbonne, where he had studied just a few years before. He invoked the spirit of his French ancestors.

According to Berard, the Communists, after they seized control, wanted no foreigners in the country. It still took him four months, however, to secure permission to fly to Bangkok, where he got a new U.S. passport.

Berard passed away in November, but his story of those eventful years will live on, thanks to an oral history project of the New England Province that began four years ago. Project director Fr. Richard Rousseau, SJ, and assistant Fr. Paul Kenney, SJ, have compiled the stories of scores of other New England Jesuits. Photos, tapes, and transcripts of the interviews are available on line as well as in booklets.

## On tape

So far, about 100 New England Jesuits, at the Campion Health Center as well as at Boston College, Fairfield University in Connecticut, and Boston College High, have shared their life stories, and the project has generated interest: Georgetown University has begun a similar effort.

Rousseau, a former theology professor at the University of Scranton and former director of the university press there, and Kenney, a communications scholar, came well equipped for the task. They both acknowledged the support of Fr. Paul Holland, SJ, rector of Campion, for backing the project, which will preserve stories like Berard's for future generations.

"We are trying to preserve the spirit and accomplishments of men who have been very successful Jesuits," says Rousseau.

Oral history is a standard tool in the process of writing history. Studs Terkel spent his career chronicling the stories of everyday people. Oral history provides a vehicle to examine history through the words of those who directly participated.

Oral histories, says an introduction to the project web site, "are not folklore, gossip, hearsay, or rumor." Rather, they provide "an important historical record whose value increases with the inevitable march of time."

The usual format is an hour or so interview. Subjects are asked about their family lives, what inspired them to become Jesuits, and their studies and ministries. They are also given the opportunity to reflect upon what being a Jesuit has meant to them. Interviews with some who are very ill occasionally take much longer, as they struggle with words and memories.

These interviews are also published



Fr. Aram Berard, SJ (second from right in back), tells in his oral history segment how he posed as a French priest and relied on the help of Vietnamese locals when stuck in Vietnam after the fall of the South in '75.



The oral history project includes Fr. James Morgan, SJ, and his chronicle of life at Bagdad College, a Jesuit school in Iraq, until the Ba'ath party expelled him and fellow Jesuits in '69. His next stop was a Newman Center at a college in Beirut during Lebanon's civil war in the '70s.

in booklet form and are often featured at Jesuit funerals. Rousseau notes that nephews and nieces, who may have known a Jesuit uncle just from family dinners and gatherings, marvel at their accomplishments and adventures, set down for posterity.

The oral histories have also been used as a recruiting tool. Men interested in becoming Jesuits can read these biographies to get a better view of what Jesuit life is like, with its varied pastoral and academic opportunities.

The stories give a flesh-and-blood feel to the rich history of the province. New England Jesuits founded Boston College, College of the Holy Cross, and Fairfield Prep and University, served at parishes throughout New England, and also worked in the Middle East, Brazil, and Jamaica.

Fr. James Morgan, SJ, 88, describes what it was like to teach in Iraq and to be expelled from there when Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath Party overthrew the monarchy. He later ended up in Beirut, where he experienced bombings during Lebanon's civil war.

Fr. Dudley Adams, SJ, 69, tells of being a parish priest in a tough section

of Kingston, Jamaica, his homeland. A Catholic convert, Adams first came to the Jesuits as a brother and then decided to minister to his people as a priest. He realized his dream, but upon returning home he encountered violence that had transformed Jamaica. He even witnessed a murder that took place outside his rectory one night. Yet the support from his parishioners and efforts to stem crime gave him solace.

Now confined to a wheelchair, Adams says, "I believe I love Christ so much that I have learned to accept my suffering in appreciation for what he has done."

Fr. Walter Abbott, SJ, who died last year at age 84, told stories about his work as an ecumenical expert at Vatican II and as an editor at *America* magazine. His interest in ecumenism came from his own family life, he says, divided as it was by his Baptist grandfather's refusal to acknowledge his father's conversion to Catholicism.

"If we could truly focus on the Bible as a common heritage, there would be more hope for Christian unity," says Abbott in his recounting of the ecumenical energy and excitement that swept the Catholic



Fr. Walter Abbott, SJ (on right, above), relates in his oral history contribution how an *America* article he wrote on Christian unity earned him a Vatican appointment to the staff of Cardinal Augustin Bea (on left) in Rome during Pope Paul VI's pontificate.

world during and after Vatican II.

What comes through in the interviews is the reliance these Jesuits had on their faith. Berard, a self-described problem student in high school, says he was inspired to join the Society through the poetry of Jesuit Gerard Manley Hopkins. After leaving Vietnam, he returned to the United States and ministered for many years to Vietnamese in Texas and Hispanics in Pennsylvania.

"I've always journeyed with the Lord," said Berard, taking in his studies in Paris in '68 during the student riots, his long trek to escape from Vietnam, and his work in the United States.

His story, and those of many other Jesuits, can now be shared with the future. **C**



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