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Mary Ward (MW): Today is March 2, 2004 and you have, you were a pastor -- or you were an assistant pastor at St. Augustine's Church in Morrisaina, South Bronx, right?

Jim Sogruue (JS): That's correct. From September 1957 until June of 1964.

MW: Okay, so then did you go from there to Harlem I heard?

JS: Yes I did

MW: Oh you did...

JS: Yes and then I was transferred All Saints in Harlem where I was until June of 1969 and then I resigned.

MW: Okay. And how did you happen to be assigned to that church?

JS: Well I was ordained in June of 1957 and at that time our class they asked us to volunteer to go to Puerto Rico to study Spanish and Spanish culture and then upon return be assigned to a Spanish mission in the Archdiocese of New York. So half our class -- 15-- were sent to the University of Santa Maria Aponte in Puerto Rico. And when I completed my studies there in September I was assigned to St. Augustine's because there was a growing Spanish speaking population in St. Augustine's at the time. A classmate of mine was assigned to St. John Chrysostom which is right next door to the North. And Our Lady of Victory John Carway, a classmate of mine St. Joseph's of Bathgate Avenue, Kevin McKniff, a classmate of mine, Alton Lucas, St. Athanasius, classmate of mine, just South of us at St. Peter and Paul, was Father McManus who had been ordained the year before us who had studied Spanish in Georgetown. So the Diocese was -- had become aware that literally there were thousands upon thousands of Spanish speaking people in certain areas of the city. The Lower East Side also received brand new Spanish speaking priests, though, we didn't speak Spanish all that well but we could get by.

MW: [Laughs] Then the class you are speaking of is -- is this Starlington Seminary. No that's New Jersey.

JS: This is St. Joseph's in Dunwoodie.

MW: St. Joseph's in Dunwoodie.

JS: Yes, Yes.

MW: And that is a New York Archdiocese Seminary --

JS: Right, right.

MW: For Diocesan priests—

JS: Right. So right after St. Augustine's though it was different from the other parishes where my classmates had gone to in the Bronx because we had a significant Afro-American population and a very small Caucasian population. Those who had stayed when their neighbors moved. For the most part that small group of parishioners -- I'd say maybe about 150 people were very loyal to their parish.

MW: What was their ethnic makeup?

JS: Irish American, German American, a few Italian Americans, that for the most part lived to the West of Fulton Avenue. St. Augustine's parish, the church, is on Franklin Avenue and extends right to Fulton Avenue right behind it. It occupies a quarter of a block. Across the street from the church and the rectory is the school. Next to the school was the Brothers' house which was built in 1958 while I was there. And then behind the rectory was a new convent that was refurbished for the Sisters of Charity while I was there. So we had both Christian Brothers teaching in the school as well as Sisters of Charity. And it was a time when -- in the late 50's -- there were some people who had moved from Harlem but there were many who had also come from the South that were living in the neighborhood. And Monsignor Scanlon was the pastor of

St. Augustine's. He had been an assistant in Harlem where I guess 25 years before he was a volunteer to work in Harlem as I had been a Volunteer to work in the South Bronx. And so he brought with him an enthusiasm to welcome African Americans to St. Augustine's Church. Not that the two pastors before him had made them more than welcome as well. We had convent classes in those days where people were invited to become Catholics. They were held three times a year. The classes would run -- that was a long time ago now -- maybe at least three or four -- four months I guess. Three or four months -- there's a slight break between classes and there might be 20 or 30 or 40 adults baptized at the end of their courses. Their children and we had a large CCD program for children in public schools to come for instructions on Wednesdays as well as the school that was [coughs] open to the -- just about everybody in the neighborhood. You didn't necessarily have to be a Catholic to be a student in the school though the vast majority were. Not like now where many of the Black neighborhoods were -- there's a significant population that's not Catholic. Tuition was very very reasonable and could be waived if they couldn't afford it. And the reason for that is the work forces were teaching [coughs] didn't make much money, the Brothers and the Sisters.

MW: Right, right.

JS: And so it was -- it was a great time, an enthusiastic time. The Civil Rights Movement had kind of begun because I remember some young men who belonged to the NAACP. I remember joining at that time, one of them signed me up.

Dr. Mark Naison (MN): Now was this an NAACP chapter in the Morrisania neighborhood or was it the --

JS: It was the Bronx.

MN: It was the Bronx --

JS: Yes. I forget where their office was it wasn't nearby. And they weren't politically active as I recall that you would find say in Yonkers today or some other parts of the nation. When Monsignor Drew -- he was pastor at St. Charles in Harlem which was considered the mother church of the Afro-American mission. That's at 141st or 142nd, I forget now. I know exactly where it is but I don't remember the street -- typical New Yorker. He had been the pastor at St. Augustine's and then he went to St. Charles. And- but he died all the scandal the pastor at St. Augustine's became the pastor at St. Charles in Harlem. And so it was it was just tied to the parishes in Harlem. They also had these the convent classes. They would come to our baptisms when we baptized the adults. It was a joyous time that they could be baptized. Emerson Wall was a young Black student at St. Augustine's at the time. He must have been maybe his first year in college. He later on became an auxiliary bishop in New York.

MW: Oh really?

JS: But I remember. But I remember when his parents were baptized. He had become a Catholic at St. Augustine's when he was about 14. And then his parents became Catholics maybe when he was in his early 20's. There was -- it became evident very quickly for somebody like myself who grew up in a -- in an Irish neighborhood -- simply I grew up on the Upper West side of Manhattan -- and in the apartment house that we lived there was only one family -- forty families lived in our apartment house and one wasn't Irish and that was an Italian family. I remember my mother thinking how remarkable that was that an Italian family would live with all these Irish people. I didn't know any Black or Hispanic or Latino kids growing up.

MW: And where did you grow up exactly?

JS: In on Wadsworth Avenue and between 173rd and 174th in Washington Heights. It's all Dominican Republic now just about.

MW: Now Washington Heights is part of Manhattan right?

MN: There's actually a great article in a book about -- called -- of the Irish of Washington Heights and Inwood in the book - - the Irish in New York which talks about how the neighborhood changed from Irish to Dominican --

JS: Sure.

MN: And I can give you a copy of that before we leave.

JS: As you can see, demographic changes were occurring. My aunts and uncles when they came from Ireland lived in the South Bronx. They went to St. Luke's and St. Jerome Parish. Those parishes became Hispanic, Latino, Puerto Rican in the beginning and now Mexican to a great extent.

MW: When they moved out where did they go?

JS: They moved on. They moved up near Fordham Road and then up to Throggs Neck. So the same thing occurred in Harlem except much earlier. As Afro-Americans moved in whites moved out. The difference between New York and many other areas is that if you will -- the urban areas that Afro-Americans lived in Central Harlem was defined so by geographic because its like a valley, Harlem is. And on the heights is Columbia University as you get to the East is the Harlem River. So when the people moved in -- in Harlem there were seven Catholic parishes that were predominantly Afro-American. Resurrected where the Polo Grands had been when I was a kid. South of St. Thomas the Apostle which is the largest geographic parish in the Archdiocese in Manhattan, the largest geographic parish which was closed just a little over a year ago. It is no more because of -- there were only 200 people that go to church on Sunday I guess some declining. Priests and in the course of attending a large place the school had closed some years ago. But in the 1950's all these parishes were booming. But we were well aware of

the fact that we were kind of cut off from –if you will – the mainstream, the mainstream of America, the mainstream of our church, the mainstream that our families enjoyed. Racism was a reality. An example, there was a young woman --Catherine Oliver-- that she applied to become a Sister of Charity at Mount St. Vincent. The day she was supposed to enter --her trunk was already there, but I think she had to provide-- she was turned down. The reason is “because we don’t think that the time is right yet to accept an Afro-American”. [Coughs] When I was in the seminary, the first African American priest for the Archdioceses of New York was ordained. One. Eugene Hicks. He was three years ahead of me. Subsequently there wouldn’t be many after that. I think it’s ironic today that African priests are serving at so many white parishes because of the shortage of priests. But, there was a family before them. [Coughs] Theresa-- I can’t think of the last name at the moment. The oldest boy went to Manhattan College. The next girl was top of her class at Cathedral Girls High School. She applied to go to St. Vincent’s School of Nursing at St. Vincent Hospital on New York. But she was turned down and I remember -- I have two sisters who are Sisters of Charity. [Coughs]. So I called and I asked: “Why I don’t understand this,” and they said: “ Well you know we don’t just judge a girl by the grades she gets in school but by how she looks. So I said: “Well what’s the matter with the way she looks?” And they said: “Well we have a standard and she didn’t meet it,” and they kind of beat around the bush with me for a while. Enda Scanlon, Owens’s younger sister taught with a teacher - -instructor. SO I asked her. And she said: “Jim you should know better. They do not accept,” in those days “Negroe girls.” There would be Monsignor Mooney who was around the Kennedy Center at Harlem some years later who would negotiate with the Sisters of Charity at St. Vincent’s Hospital that they had to accept black and Hispanic students or otherwise they would be in big trouble because they were receiving government money.

MN: Now, what year were these young women turned down? Was this in the 50's?

JS: Well no in the early 60's.

MN: In the early 60's?

JS: Oh sure. Oh yes. Absolutely. Absolutely. Hey you're colleges and universities we'd like to think were eager to open. Fordham University was going to open Lincoln Center and they did not have one Black student to attend for the opening class. So -- but they were very smart [coughs]. They went to Cardinal Cody in Chicago and borrowed Dan Millett who is still a pastor on the south side of Chicago. He is my age. Ordained in '57 for Chicago. And he came and he lived at St. Thomas the Apostle in Harlem and he recruited --

MW: And he was a Black Person?

JS: No.

MW: Oh.

JS: His father was German and his mother was Irish American. He recruited 53 students for that first class at Lincoln Center --African Americans-- and I think 51 finished. I mean the rate of --

MN: Yes.

JS: --they did well. So now this was -- had to be '63.

MN: Yes

MW: So why weren't there any in there? Why did they have to be recruited? They didn't know they would be accepted or -- I don't understand.

JS: I think you'd have to take a look and see how many black students there were at Fordham at the time. [coughs] Fordham here yes. And you take a look at your prep schools like Fordham Prep and Regis and these other places I would think that that there were very few --

MW: If any.

JS: --if any. And very few were going to college in the first place. The schools were doing a terrible job. Still are. Morris High School where Colin Powell went to school which is only a couple of blocks from St. Augustine's-- even way back then had a reputation of being a poor school to go to. I remember I used to go around to different Catholic high schools and really put it to them. They had to give me a scholarship and they'd replace kids at these Catholic high schools at the time.

MW: What kind of leverage did you have to put it to them?

JS: I'd meet-- usually I'd meet with the principal or the one who ran the school. I'd look him right in the eye and ask them to take one of these kids. I said there's no way in heaven that you're going to find yourself in heaven with an all white school. And these poor kids, if they don't get an education with Black and people of color, you are denying them something that you are going to be paying for terribly. Most were rather open. They would. They felt it was more charity than justice I think looking back on it.

MW: Now, you said you got -- the diocese wanted volunteers for the Hispanics. Were there any -- anything from the top down about ministering to or evangelizing to African Americans?

JS: Yes. Going back in history, say 20-25 years before -- I guess it was Cardinal Hayes at the time -- asked for volunteers to go to Harlem. Because some of these parishes had closed [coughs]. St. Aloysius had closed which the Jesuits have now in Harlem, by the way which runs one of the finest grammar schools probably in the nation. I mean, they're just amazing. Father Kent Bowler is the pastor there now who had been the head master at Xavier. So, and the diocese supported the church. The church couldn't pay its bills. St Augustine's couldn't pay its bills so we were on the dols as we used to say. And so what -- the difference before we received at collection [coughs] was made up by the Archdioceses. So they were generous in that sense.

But I think there was one part there should be admission to people and the other side we have all these white people crowding our churches in other areas I don't think we want to tick them off either.

MW: One of my students last week asked me -- we were talking about this-- and they said why wouldn't the, why wouldn't the Bishops -- cause I was saying that the history of the Catholic Bishops in terms of race in this country is very poor --

JS: It's terrible.

MW: --in terms of their prophetic stance. Its almost non-existent. And thy said: "Well why" and I said it's because they were afraid of losing money. They were afraid of losing white parishioners. Was that-- does that mean that they're afraid of losing money? Well I suppose it comes down to the same thing. I mean but--

JS: I think most of them were like myself. They grew up in an all white neighborhood, had all white friends, went to an all white seminary, served in all white Parishes and then they become Bishops. Most of them had never walked the streets in Harlem or the South Bronx and so kind of a way to be fair they had no idea -- they were kind of geared to serve those who were Catholic. Now with justice I'm sure they had to see it. I think it was Martin Luther King quite frankly who captured the enthusiasm of all of us. I can remember a time the Selma March -- three of us happened to have a meeting with Cardinal Spellman talking about how we should do more in Harlem and he by all means was delighted to meet with us and invited us to come. And I said -- and it was a gamble -- "we can't go to Selma". He says "What do you mean you can't go to Selma?" "Martin Luther King has asked clergymen from all over to come to Selma". I said "The word is out that we can't go". "You can certainly go. I never stopped anybody from going". So we all went.

MW: Somebody put the word out. That's funny.

JS: But a lot of things were done indirectly.

MN: What was it like walking the streets of Morrisania in the late 50's? How did you – what was the street life like and how did you feel being there?

JS: In the winter time there was nobody. In the summertime when it was nice -- [coughs] – it was great. The people were friendly they'd welcome you. I don't recall – we never had a riot or anything like that. My first Sunday in Harlem there was a riot. It just happened that way.

MN: In 1964.

JS: 1964. They rioted -- a tremendous riot when Martin Luther King was killed. Again, but –

MW: What was the riot in 1964 about?

JS: A policeman shot a kid.

MN: But you are very close to what the place they called McKinley Square. That was where the library was and -- what was-- people I've interviewed in the neighborhood said there was a very rich night life with night clubs and those sort of things. What are your recollections of that whole scene?

JS: I don't recall. We were so busy during the day - - we had classes in the evening - - that my day usually finished around 9 or 10 o'clock. Coming from Bronx Hospital -- on Fulton Avenue [coughs] -- so I'd get called out at night. We took turns. We were good for two calls a week anyhow I'd say - - which was two or three in the morning. Most of the time to baptize a baby or somebody in the emergency room. But I know we had dinners in the church and what always struck me as different -- everybody always came so late. They would come around eleven o'clock at night. Anything that I happened to my family always starts around eight o'clock.

MN: Now what was a typical day like for you?

JS: If you had hospital duty the night before you brought the Eucharist to patients in the hospital right after the 6:30 mass. The 6:30 mass ended about 8:00 or 9:00 I guess.

MW: On weekdays?

JS: Weekdays, yes. And we'd have 30 or 40 people come into church every day and then on Sundays you'd have 1,800. Today there's only about 100.

MN: 1,800 people? And at that percentage what -- of that group -- what percentage were African American would you say?

JS: Well when I first went there it was maybe 75% Afro-American. But then as more and more Spanish speaking people came [coughs] they were in the downstairs church first for mass on Sunday. We just had one mass.

MW: In Spanish you mean.

JS: Spanish. And then we had a mass upstairs for them before I was transferred to Harlem.

MN: When the church was 75% African American were any elements of African American culture incorporated into the mass?

JS: No, no, no. In those days the mass was the same wherever you went. Latinos really began with some of the Spanish songs, the guitars and stuff like that but until the second Vatican Council the just the way the mass was said was the same every place around the world. Latin with the priest's back to the people. That changed dramatically and then that was the beginnings of adapting the liturgy to different groups. Not just -- folk masses for kids in college and high school. And then you had the African American culture becoming part of the liturgy as well.

MN: Did you find yourself -- some people have also spoken about gangs in the neighborhood. Was that something you ever became involved in dealing with -- gang issues or disputes?

JS: There was very little gang activity where we were. We knew of gangs but didn't know any -
- The teenagers that I knew. What began in the early 1960's it had to be about 1961, 1962 was
drugs. And that came across like -- oh man -- I'll never forget the first fifteen year old a mother
brought around to see me -- I was able to get the kid into detox. Monsignor O'Brian who's still
alive and started that work -- then he ran away from detox -- this kid. I remember then bringing-
- I'd meet young people early in the morning and drive them down to -- I can't think of it --
Bernstein Pavilion and that was part of a hospital on the Lower East Side. There would be a
lineup in the morning, early. There would be two or three hundred on line to get in to be de-
toxified. But we knew so little that we thought if you got de-toxed -- which is five or six days --
then you had a chance of kicking it. Not realizing that somebody who is addicted to drugs needs
more than just detox. You need rehab and everything else but--

MW: What kind of drugs? Was this heroin?

JS: Heroin, yes sure. Heroin primarily that you needed the detox poppy was available as well.
There wasn't much pills. It began in the poor neighborhoods and it very quickly spread to the
Scarsdale and other places.

MN: Did you have a youth program aimed as adolescents at the church? Did you have a teen
center or a sports program or anything like that? CYO?

JS: We did but most of the teens seemed to be more involved in the schools, if memory serves
me correct. Morris High School had basketball and a track and all that. We didn't have that
much though the Brothers with the boys had all kinds of sports and activities.

MN: What's the nearest boys' Catholic high school to Cardinal Hayes? Any significant number
of parishioners who went to Cardinal Hayes?

JS: Oh sure they began to. The same with Rice High School [coughs] in Manhattan, Power Memorial, St. Raymond's of the Bronx.

MN: So by the time you left do you think there were many children of your parishioners going to Catholic high schools as public?

JS: I'd say probably half and half. That's still true to this day I think. See you remember now once they started to go to Catholic high school there was tuition. I was able to get one scholarship for one kid. I'd go around to half a dozen schools and then there was great concern for the girls especially. In our mind anyhow we thought they had a tougher time in the public schools than the boys did. The boys were skilled in sports and I think they kind of handled themselves. So we did everything we could to get as many girls into Catholic high school.

MN: Which were the girl's Catholic high schools that --

JS: Well the Mother at the time which is gone that was on this parkway that comes from Fordham.

MN: Pelham?

JS: Pelham Parkway I think. Right.

MW: What was the name?

JS: Mother Butler.

MW: Mother Butler.

JS: They were the same sisters that were at Marymount College and then those Cathedral girls. The Cathedral girls had the top floor of the School at All Saints that I went to. They had an annex which was mostly African American if not just about all.

MN: Where was that located?

JS: 130th Street and Madison Avenue. And that was for the first year of high school. And then they went onto the main building downtown at 50th street.

MN: So what sort of occupations did -- first of all were most of the families -- two parent families in St. Augustine's or more single parent families?

JS: There were many single parent families though there were a significant number of two parents -- often or not maybe the father was not a Catholic. The mother would be the Catholic and the kids would be Catholic.

MN: Right.

JS: Hard working, mostly laborers I would say.

MN: What sort of work did the fathers do? Did they work in -- when you say laborers did they work in the Bronx in factories or --

JS: Some did. Some would be in maintenance and cleaning. City jobs were hard to come by. Only those who had a connection or some education would work in the subway for example a subway conductor. I remember when I went to All Saints we discovered that you couldn't become a sanitation worker unless you were a high school graduate for the city of New York. So, we discovered that if you were a matriculated student in college you were automatically a high school graduate. So at that time -- this was now in Harlem -- we established a Malcolm -King Community College. We got professors from Fordham, Marymount, Mount St. Vincent -- forget where else -- Oh, Manhattanville. They came and taught their course same standards but they brought their precious credits with them. So we had adults who took a course, they were matriculated and we brought them up to high school graduate.

MW: Even though they hadn't graduated from high school?

JS: That was the law in Albany at the time.

MW: Oh!

MN: I remember Malcolm King. It was going on when I first came to Fordham in 1970.

JS: But the students did fantastic. The professors would tell me. They couldn't get over the fact how much work the students did. They were worried. You don't want to water down the course one bit. Not only did they do well, they were doing better than some of their students they were teaching. Many went on to college -- completed college. Some even went on to Graduate school.

MN: Now did the -- when your -- did the mothers work most of them or were they --

JS: Many did.

MN: What sort of occupation?

JS: Cleaning, hotel work, hospital work. I'd say generally speaking very few were on welfare that we knew. Most were hard working with many mothers working part time -- full time.

Latino mothers for the most part didn't seem to be working as much. I think the problem was that they didn't speak English and it was rather difficult for them ad they were taking care of the children at home which was typical of the Latino culture at the time.

MW: It would be less likely for the man to feel comfortable for the woman working.

JS: That's right.

MN: Okay -- you hear now?

JS: You know a guy you should interview is Father Gerald Ryan he was the pastor of St. Luke's. He spent 55 years -- 59 years in the South Bronx.

MW: Oh.

MN: Now, so we'll get his information. St. Luke's is on what street?

JS: 138th street. But he was at St. Anthony of Padua's which is right next to [crosstalk]

MN: Oh yes and he was there at the same time you were there?

JS: Exactly.

MN: I should definitely interview him because St. Anthony of Padua's was very important in this community. The Chantelles came out of St. Anthony of Padua's. This singing group and many other people. So I'm going leave you two but I'll be here.

MW: A question that I had was of the core African American Catholics at St. Augustine's, were they born Catholics? Were they West Indian?

JS: Yes. There was a mix. There were more American born Afro- Americans than there were West Indians. Though there were West Indians. The West Indians are both Roman Catholic and Episcopal. So I got to know many in the neighborhood who were Episcopal. The other thing too is that many African Americans at the time would travel to the church they wanted to go to. [Coughs]. So many would travel down to Harlem to the Baptist Churches or they would also travel to the Episcopal church or even back to Harlem to the Catholic church.

MW: Oh.

Did you have a sense of the background of the African American Catholics. Were they from the South or were they --

JS: Some were from the South. Some were born in New York City. Some had moved from Harlem.

MW: Had they been Catholic for many generations or were they converts?

JS: Some were. Some were Catholics for generations. A significant number though were converts - - had become Catholics in Harlem and now they'd move to the Bronx and continued or they'd became Catholics at St. Augustine's and they were part of our parish. I mean we were baptizing maybe 70 or 90 adults a year.

MW: From 1957 you say --

JS: To 1964. So people of course were moving for better housing. Housing was like the key. They tried to escape the cycle at the time. If you had poor housing it's because you have a poor job. Poor housing your kids are going to a poor school. So if you get a better job you get better housing and then your kids go to a better school. There was a significant difference between public schools in a very poor neighborhood and a public school say in lower- middle class or middle class neighborhood.

MW: What do you think was the attraction to Catholicism for these converts?

JS: I think it was a sense of belonging to a community that took their kids into the school or provided religious education for their kids. I think it was an outreach. I mean we went out and knocked on doors and invited people to come, oh sure. Big sign in the church outside you know you're welcome to come. I think they were impressed people who couldn't help but be impressed. Our school was mostly Afro- American and Latino. The kids wore a distinctive uniform at the time. So you'd see them after school scattered all over the neighborhood. If you couldn't afford it, no problem. And I think they knew the local Catholic church was a caring place. And I think like most parents they wanted what was best for their kids. Those who became Catholics I think were -- looking back on it would be those who would be the more socially mobile people too. They saw more than just what I have today, they were really looking the future for their children. Exactly like our parents had done. So it was a different time.

MW: Were there any spiritual -- was there a spiritual attraction. You kind of listed some of the social attractions.

JS: Oh sure, yes. Very, very much so. The people really worked hard, studied -- stay in the faith [coughs] kept -- I found that they really cared about getting to heaven. It reminded me often

of my parents. My mother was born in Ireland and I think to them as kids life was so tough that everything would be alright in Heaven. There was that kind of philosophy of life as well. But also they wanted their kids to be good and honest, caring people. That was overall for those especially who sacrificed to send their kids to Catholic school. They wanted more than just the child being able to read and write and do basic math. They wanted the kid to be a decent, decent person. And that was probably said also too the school was safe. It was a safe place to send your children. But these were good people, very good people. The caricatures of people in the poor neighborhoods being - - belonging to gangs and stealing from one another and that was not true. It's just not true. These were good hard working decent people. After a while you couldn't help it. I couldn't help it to identify that they were very much like the people that I grew up with.

MW: We spoke to a woman over at the St. Augustine's Senior Center. She was about 90 and she was one of the first blacks to enter that neighborhood. Her husband owned a Laundromat. He died I think maybe when he was only in his 40's. She had like 3 kids. I can't think of her name now. And she said she really had a tough time. She was one of the first blacks to enter the neighborhood. With a lot of the Italian kids leaving she spoke about who were beating up her kids. On the way to mass they'd beat up her kid right in front of her.

JS: Right, right.

MW: And somehow they got this idea that was the right thing to do and then the mothers came to her and - - because the little girl kicked one of the boys in the shins. And she said how could your little girl do this? So she said well your boys have been beating up my boy for all this time and they became good friends then. And they started the children playing together and she was really a pioneer in the neighborhood and I think it was well before you got there. It must have been the 1930's--

JS: Oh sure. There was an established black community when I got there.

MW: So I guess it pretty much changed by then. But the once -- I'm sorry you did mention to me that the Irish the ones that were left there weren't very many Italians left?

JS: There were some.

MW: Some?

JS: Some. Not many as a group.

MW: Did they go also North? I guess they did. North Bronx and --

JS: Sure. Yes. Once upon a time when the neighborhood began to change as they said, everybody moved. So then it changed even more quickly. Chicago I guess was the place where whole neighborhoods would change in a week or two. Because it's all small housing at the time; it was easier for people to move.

MW: Well in the end insurance companies were red lining, the banks got involved, the brokers. Some of it systematic.

JS: Sure, sure.

MW: One week. In the parish I studied at Queen of Angels in Newark I saw a woman, Joyce Carter. Joyce Smith Carter. Her husband Cliff used to come up to St. Augustine's; does that sound familiar to you, those names?

JS: It doesn't, no.

MW: They were black people who -- Queen of Angels was the first black Catholic church in --

JS: In Newark.

MW: --in Newark that was established especially for Black people.

JS: Right. I worked for the United Parcel Service and we had a center in Newark. That's much later. I went to Jersey in 1976 and we were losing volume steadily every year. That means less

drivers, less economic activity in the City of Newark during those years. It was like a ghost town at night. Nobody around. Desperately poor, some of those areas.

MW: As a priest working in the African American community and Latino, did you feel – when you said earlier that you felt cut off did, you feel cut off from your fellow priests?

JS: Sure I'll give you an example. Every year they had a class dinner because we lived together for six years and then you're spread all over. You don't see each other any more. And I ran into a fellow who was a year ahead of me. His classmate happened to have a black classmate, Father Harold Sabbot who eventually became the pastor of St. Charles and who also resigned. But he said to me, "where are you going to have your class dinner?" I said, "I don't know. I don't know whether they are arranging it," he said, "Well you cant go to the Westchester Country Club?" No he said, "Well you can go to the Westchester Country Club. We couldn't." I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "They wouldn't let us bring Harry Sabbot to the Westchester Country Club." I said, "You have got to be kidding me". So our class was going to have our dinner at the Westchester Country Club but three or four of us objected. If they wouldn't let Harry Sabot in, how can we go?" This was wrong. Some were bent out of shape that we were -- that there was that -- The New York Athletic Club -- Monsignor Drew brought Harry Sabbot there for lunch and insisted on going in. And they put him in a corner and served him but then they got a hold of Monsignor Drew later on and told him that if he ever did that again that they would revoke his membership and he wouldn't be allowed into the club -- that they did not allow black people into the New York Athletic Club.

MW: Wow.

JS: Now this was 1958. So when they were in Georgetown starting Spanish [Recorder Malfunction] Does that mean you need another tape?

MW: No I think I shouldn't have moved this -- touched this connection. It -- although it is getting long.

JS: And the father said they went to a movie one night as they were purchasing the tickets the ticket vendor said "You can't come into this theater," to Harry Sabbot. So, the story goes there was another classmate who happened to be Italian American. "He can't go in here? How come?" He said, "He's negro". "He is? He never told me," In any case they didn't go to the movies - - but I think its hard for people in 2004 to understand there was a time even in these Northern cities where blacks, Afro- Americans as well as Latinos to some extent if they looked dark -- were not welcome. And it could be restaurants in the city, hotels, clubs like the Westchester Country Club or New York Athletic Club, schools, or even within schools certain departments where African Americans were not welcome. People could get away with it. Religious communities, parishes. I went to St. Barnabas Parish one Sunday, they were short for priests and so they called and said could we help out. I said sure. When I went up to say mass it was crowded, it was jammed.

MW: Hold on a second.

JS: Sure.

MW: Actually I think I'm going to do, I'm going to turn this over now.

[END TAPE ONE, SIDE ONE; BEGIN TAPE ONE SIDE TWO]

JS: I went to St. Barnabas in the Bronx to say mass on Sunday and I was just struck immediately about how white the congregation was. I mean it was remarkable I mean everybody. And I said that to them. I said, "You know, hopefully when we get to heaven when we look out we're going to find out that there are not as many white people as we thought there were," and there is really something wrong with a society when you consider as they said, that going to church on Sunday

is the most segregated hour in America. People called the chancery office and complained. I got a call that said what I said had insulted people. The Pastor called and the pastor said we don't want that guy here again. And of course my pastor said, "Come on, you've got to be kidding me." But they were fearful, they were fearful that -- I'd say more than once I've heard it -- "where I live they ruined the neighborhood. I don't want them coming in and ruining my neighborhood." Not recognizing that people don't ruin the neighborhood, it's these old buildings had been used and used and used and then finally the last people that get there -- because the building is old and beat up, its their fault. But also through the crowding that takes place. The way they built these projects with two elevators in the middle and thirteen or fourteen floors. And no restrooms on the lobby floor. So little kids now have to go up on an elevator to go to the bathroom in their own apartment. They wonder why people keep urinating in the elevator. Once that starts the hallways -- then the incinerator gets jammed and then people leave garbage there and kids kick it around. The whole lack of planning on how these projects were to be built for families with lots of kids -- they pointed at a large building in downtown New York and said, "well look how clean this is," And its very few children and all kinds of maintenance staff including a doorman to make sure that everything is kept proper.

MW: And the garbage is probably picked up more often.

JS: Oh sure. As a result, new projects are now are built much, much different - - really more careful with it. There was an attitude towards the poor that pervaded American society. That the poor were lazy, that the poor didn't - - if they worked hard they could ahead. This was a great country and you could get ahead but these people would say "My mother and father came here and they did well. I can't understand why these people can't do well?" That they drug ridden that they were all on welfare and you can see these exaggerations all the time. That sense of

being cut off. People just don't understand. So slowly but surely you just don't associate with - - most of your associations are with priests would serve in the same kind of work. But I think that's true in all walks of life. You tend to have -- spend more time with people who share the same kind experience and the same kind of experience that you have.

MW: But you felt a direct support from the diocese though for your work.

JS: Oh sure, absolutely. Though we used to kid - - this is later on when we were in Harlem, we'd say well what can they do, send us to Harlem? And then we found out they'd sent us to Scarsdale. The labor's changing dramatically.

MW: Was that a bad thing to be sent to Scarsdale?

JS: It was very difficult.

MW: Really?

JS: Very, very difficult. Yeah, sure. You were with white middle class people that you didn't know anymore. There's other priests, but years in Harlem -- I really felt like a fish out of water. He said to me, "Somebody's got a problem? They are making \$200,000 a year and they are worked about paying their bills. You know I can't relate to it." [Coughs] And we were out of sorts between the peace movement, the Civil Rights Movement unfortunately our church did not play a major role, really didn't provide much leadership --

MW: In the Civil Rights Movement. Is that what you are saying?

JS: Yes. Same as the peace movement. With Cardinal Spellman, it was my country right or wrong my country. The bodies were coming back to the poor parishes. They weren't coming back to the Scarsdale -- the white upper class parishes from Vietnam for the most part. And there was a grinding poverty. Many of us recognized that we really couldn't change anything. There became a sense of hopelessness. Where I was in All Saints had the highest infant

mortality rate in the nation. Drug addiction and alcoholism was wide spread. Housing was shot. The church was irrelevant with the community at large. There had been no upper classes at that parish. There had been no welcoming of Afro-Americans. And as a result, just an empty building on the corner. There were Afro-Americans and Latinos coming into the church. But they came because of their faith and there wasn't a sense of a community as there had been at St. Augustine's. And there was a -- change was taking place also in these communities. The church became less important. Those who were socially mobile moved away. And they weren't being replaced at the same rate. Sisters and Brothers left the schools, the schools now became expensive -- \$2,000 dollars a year in tuition [coughs] a poor family couldn't afford or can't afford. The diocese, strapped for money, could no longer support some of these parishes. So they had to make do on their own. As a result, less and less services can be offered to the community at large. The shortage of clergy means that there are less clergy and religious to be involved in different things in the community. So -- at present day, there is a good chance that the St. Augustine's parish will be closed. There's about 100 people going to church there on Sunday. St. Thomas the Apostle Parish they were thought to leave a little chapel for the people who were there. There's a genuine concern about meeting the needs of large middle class parishes especially in the suburbs. And you can't blame them. But somehow I think it's all coming home to roost. The church did not genuinely care about the poor; never involved its white congregations with the poor. There was no sense of sacrifice, they become so impersonal in contributing to a the cardinal's appeal. Rather asking people to meet one another. Adopting children to get an education even though they stayed with their own parents. Integrating the schools, have some sense of peace in what that means in this world in and in our communities. Our people haven't got a clue. I don't see it changing in this crisis that the church is in at this

time. I think if somebody were to take a good hard look going back we'd recognize that there was a crisis and we didn't know it. And I think, and I can speak for myself, many of us became so uncomfortable as officials if you will, of the structure. I know I came to believe that I could make a greater contribution to society in a profit institution than I can in a non-profit. There seemed to be more and more that a non-profit institution is worried about its own institution than the people it serves. So I went to work for United Parcel Service and very quickly I had the opportunity to hire an awful lot of people and we opened in Texas. I hired the very first drivers who made as much money as the Governor of the state. They still do in many places. And I made sure that I hired women and I hired Afro Americans and Latinos. They won't ever need Affirmative Action in some of these places. It was good. I still tried to stay Catholic. I had close ties to some of them. Soon the priests were in poor parishes. But you know what I think Gerald Ryan, Father Ryan, get him before he gets sick -- he's in his 80's, he's 59 years in the South Bronx. Maybe 20 years in St. Anthony of Padua's which is right next to St. Augustine's school. You could walk it was so close. I often walked over there.

MW: This was the priest you mentioned earlier?

JS: Right and they had an outreach for Afro-Americans probably before St. Augustine's. They had Mary Knoll Sisters there at the time.

MW: Oh?

JS: It was a real mission church. The pastor was Bernard Russell who had been one of the volunteers in Harlem.

MW: Oh.

JS: Years before. And they had the large convert classes too.

MW: Oh. Bernard Russell.

JS: You want to take a look in archives at the Archdiocese too.

MW: Oh yeah. Where is that?

JS: They keep it at St. Joseph's seminary in Dunwoodie.

MW: Oh, really?

JS: Yes.

MW: Oh, okay.

JS: I went to the New School for social research. while I was at All Saint's in Harlem. And I wrote a paper on the parish, how it had changed and Father Harry Brown -- Henry Brown was the archivist at the time and I was able to compare All Saints' with [inaudible] All Saints '64 or '65.

MW: Oh. Do you still have that paper?

JS: I don't know, let me look. After I left -- I went to Harvard for the summer just to get accustomed to white people -- it might sound strange -- anything that was important to me I had in my car and my car was stolen.

MW: Oh. At Harvard.

JS: At Harvard. I lived in poor neighborhoods all my life and nobody ever stole my car. It was an old car anyhow.

MW: You never got the contents back, you never got the car? It happened to me I had archives from a priest that I was interviewing my car was stolen but I found my car and I-- the stuff was still in it.

JS: Oh you were lucky.

MW: It was irreplaceable material.

JS: Sure.

MW: Stupid me.

JS: Most of the priests from those days are dead. Gerry Ryan would be very knowledgeable about - - he was the very first priest to study Spanish on his own as well - - extraordinary man.

The other thing, the Handmaids of Mary, they'd be well aware of what was happening in various parishes I would think.

MW: This is a religious order?

JS: This is a religious order of black sisters, you know because the sisters couldn't go into white communities, they established their own. And then the Sisters of Charity from Mount St Vincent, they also had a mission down in the Bahamas, Bahamian catholic women who wanted to join their community, so they established a black community for them, wouldn't take them into their own community. It was in the 60's that that community was dissolved, I guess it was concerned about where it was going, small Bahamian group, so they were given the choice to go to any community that they wanted to. Only two opted to join the Sisters of Charity and those two came to St Augustine's in the Bronx, from the Bahamas to the Bronx - - can you imagine? Why the hell are they leaving the Bahamas, I wish they knew - - two Bahamian Sisters and I don't know what happened to them, they were there but I left and went to Harlem.

MW: So the time you were there, the Christian Brothers were there teaching - -

JS: And the Sisters of Charity.

MW: And the Sisters of Charity, in the same school?

JS: Yes.

MW: Did they teach girls and boys?

JS: Brothers had the middle school boys and the sisters had the first four grades plus the middle school girls. The Brothers also taught at Immaculate Conception at 149th St so the two groups of

Brothers lived together. There were eight grades, and thinking that there must have been 500 kids in the school. Now all those records are available there, you should take a look, look at graduation pictures, grammar school, they save all of those and you'll notice them - - all black faces. Father Jeffers, he's retired and lives in St. Margaret Mary in the Bronx, he was in St. Augustine's for maybe 20 years.

MW: I think that's the other name that I have and I don't have his phone number. That's the priest that Joyce knew, Father Jeffers because I think she would have come much later than you.

JS: I think Jeffers went there I want to say in the late 60's.

MW: She probably was involved in the 70's.

JS: He had been a Trappist and then came to New York and then became pastor at St. Augustine's.

MW: Wow.

JS: It was after my time, but I think we're about the same age.

MW: I tend to think that there must have been a lot of social affairs at the church - - you know with black people.

JS: Sure, yes. We had dinners on a Sunday afternoon maybe three or four times a year and then there were dances, a fashion show I remember one time.

MW: How about bid whist parties or card parties or - -

JS: No I don't remember those. We had a fair, it was like three days.

MW: An annual fair? Street fair?

JS: No it was inside the school. Maybe Friday night, Saturday, Sunday kind of thing, you know for chances - - it was a fund raiser but it was a lot of fun. There were boy scouts, girl scouts, there were - -

MW: How about Holy Name Society?

JS: Oh sure.

MW: Sodality? Rosary Society?

JS: Yes it was a Rosary Society that's what it was. It just seemed that every season had something.

MW: Were the men and women equally involved in these things or would you see more women?

JS: Men were the ushers. Men were involved very much so, women took care of the altar, the decorations, all that kind of thing. There were more women in the convert classes than men, but there were always some men.

MW: Did you have any kind of trustee or parish council?

JS: There weren't in those days. Every parish had two trustees, which meant he just signed the financial report, I think once a year. It was an honorary thing. The pastor really ran the show in those days. He was the ultimate authority for the school as well as everything to do with the parish. Over at Scanlon, the pastor was there for five years, I was for five years with him - - he was a very open person who would talk with people at any level, there would be no bones about it, if you need money why, and here's how much we can get from the diocese or the diocese will help us and so on. We were painting the church and we could have painted about ten - - and people draw the equation and as the money came, in fact he moved around the church because we knew the diocese wouldn't give us money for painting the church at the time. I think the people really had a sense that we were there to serve them, none of the authority stuff, I think, like you'd see in a big white middle class parish in those days where the pastor ruled. There was a genuine equality kind of amongst everybody. The Sisters stayed - - they were very - - followed

a routine. After school they really didn't mingle with people and the Brothers were the same way with their sports activities and so on, but you'd never see them walking around the parish. All those reforms hadn't come yet that would come to religious communities and then of course as Sisters and Brothers left, the communities withdrew from the schools. There were many instances where they withdrew from poor schools because there were less Catholics.

MW: The Latin mass did not prove as an obstacle to African Americans in terms of worshipping?

JS: It was very difficult, sure it was. It was difficult for anybody. It became more a mystery thing that took place. Emphasis was placed on praying during mass, somehow to get involved in prayer, to kind of join that way you didn't - - they had missals and so on but they never really worked. The work, you listen to the gospel, then the sermon and you were aware of the gifts and then you would receive the Eucharist. But I think that was pretty much true every place.

MW: Queen of Angels had the dialogue mass, did you ever hear about that? It was a 50's movement with the Benedictines and the Benedictine parish in Newark, the Father of Benedict translated the mass into little booklets. But then they also had a man in the parish stand up and say it in English what the priest was saying in Latin.

JS: We had singing instead.

MW: What kind of singing did you have, the - -

JS: Conventional singing.

MW: Did they sing?

JS: Oh sure. But see even the baptism of the kids was in Latin, everything was in Latin, anointing of the sick was in Latin, just kind of taking for granted.

MW: If you look at the African American Baptist-Methodist traditions it's very much involved -
-well it depends what church you go to - - so do you think that they were sacrificing that for
other reasons or did they find a real spirituality?

JS: I think they'd find a real spirituality. I think that attending class for the three months, kind
of gave another - - many went to the Baptist church and really weren't all that fluent with the
bible as we think people are, and most of it for many, they just enjoyed the singing and so on. I
think those - - the vast majority of the people didn't become Catholics. I think there might have
been 40,000 people living in the boundaries of St. Augustine's at the time. Here we're talking
about everybody and this Brother - - maybe about 1,800 you know coming to this parish, better
than 38,000 out there. And I would say in those days the vast majority didn't go to any church.
Simply because I think life was very difficult with the way people were working and so on. Plus,
unlike Harlem, the South Bronx didn't seem to have as many churches, that was the first thing
that struck me but I never go to Harlem. Until this day, there's churches on every block, little
store fronts, private homes, the old stone churches that had belonged to somebody else and now
had been passed down and were now Baptist churches, those that were built. There was just a - -
I mean if you're there you're a churchgoing person. The majority seemed to me must go to
churches but who knows. I think it took a good while to get used to being a Catholic. It wasn't
so much the worship, but it was also these rules, like no meat on Friday and fasting during Lent,
which I think was new for somebody who had been southern Baptist. But I think too that they
found that they were genuinely welcomed, more so that they welcomed one another. They
referred their friends, they referred their neighbors to become Catholic. So it was kind of a
special group.

MW: And they did some of the evangelizing as well.

JS: Oh absolutely. They used to have these little cards, just give a us a name, you don't have to tell the person you gave us the name - - we wish you would, but if you don't, just give us the name, we'll contact the person, we'll go see them. I remember one time, the number that was coming to the classes had fallen and we were concerned that typically after Christmas we'd each get a week off, and so that year we agreed that we'd still have our week off, but that we'd spend a week visiting and knocking on doors. We did that the three of us. We had a big class that started, we started the class in February.

MW: So it was really effective.

JS: It was effective. Yes. And that was the end - - it was nice to walk the neighborhood because everybody and his brother would be saying hello to you. We knew a lot of people, or a lot of people knew us. I think there might have been a certain amount of pride to belong to St.

Augustine's parish on the part of many of the people that felt that. They're proud of the fact that the big church on the corner - - we belong there.

MW: Did you have any - - provide food for people?

JS: We had a St. Vincent De Paul Society. It was an old white guy that was in charge, Riley, and Riley would check out, you had to write the name in the book, like I'd write Mary Walsh and your address and I gave you two dollars and we had these coupons for the A&P and then he'd check and he'd come back and say "There's no Mary Walsh at that address, you shouldn't be giving to strangers you don't know." So I used to kid him, I'd say "Do you think Jesus used to do it that way?" He'd say "He'd know already." [Laughs] But for the most part, that's what he did.

MW: So people would come from the neighborhood for this, it wasn't strictly for parishioners?

JS: No. From the neighborhood I'm sure. You'd try. You'd try to help when you could. You help pay the rent sometimes when somebody got behind so they wouldn't be dispossessed or - - but no, we didn't have the food pantry as they do now and the clothes as they do now. That would have been smart but it just never occurred to us. Yes I think that would have been another thing to manage. In those days we tended to almost do everything.

MW: Right the priests were doing everything, because the sisters were only educating, they weren't involved in the social activities.

JS: No. They really weren't allowed to, nor were the Brothers - - so there were three of us. There were three priests in the place. Plus a Spanish priest came to help and since he spoke Spanish so much better than I did for the most part, he had the mass on Sunday.

MW: Now when you say they weren't allowed to, their order didn't allow them or the diocese not allow them?

JS: No, the structure of their order. See they taught all day in the classroom, then they had their own chores to do at home, they had studying to do, classes to prepare. So they wouldn't have - - their superior - - smart enough but wouldn't let them do anything else. Same thing went for the brothers. Their lives were pretty much very structured so we were the ones that could be up late at night, go off to the hospital or whatever.

MW: Did you ever notice that most of the work done with African Americans is usually done with ordered priests?

JS: That's not true. That's not necessarily true. What happened in time, take central Harlem for example. Resurrection was with the volunteers for Harlem the years before.

MW: By that you mean the volunteers the Diocesan priests - -

JS: The Diocesan priests, St Charles was diocesan, St L's was diocesan, St. Thomas the Apostle was diocesan, St. Joseph's was diocesan, and All Saints was diocesan, so there were no order priests in central Harlem. There were no ordered priests except for St Anselm's as Benedictine in the South Bronx. There were all diocesan priests.

MW: But that's because these parishes changed from white to black and diocese priests were there so they - -

JS: Oh no they were closed - - Scanlon reopened --Walter McCann reopened St. Aloysius see so - - Father Chairs came in and took over these big old places. Some stayed - - the Diocese of priests - - as diocese of priests changed, ordered priests were brought into these poor places. The diocese of priests kept the white middle class places. Now the turn around that has happened is that Indian priests and African priests are now with white middle class parishes as well - - certainly as assistants, not necessarily as pastors. There's more than three hundred foreign priests in the Archdiocese of New York today serving in parishes from India, Spain - - a few from Spain but mostly India and Africa. And a rich diocese can afford it. And a priest who comes from Africa, whose family is making eleven dollars a week, so a couple hundred dollars he makes a month here can make a big difference to his family back home. The whole system is rocky.

MW: And the diocese is paying for these priests or the parish?

JS: The parish does.

MW: OK right.

JS: So central Harlem was all diocesan priests and then over time it changed. So Resurrection is now a chapel at St Charles at mass on Sunday. The Jesuits took St. Aloysius from north to south. St. Thomas the Apostle, the largest geographic parish in Manhattan, is closed. Nothing was

there. St. Josephs on the west side, I think there might be an order there. Most recently Franciscans have taken All Saints where I used to be but they'll only be there temporarily. And oh yes, the Holy Ghost Fathers have always been - - well the Trinitarians they call them now - - at St Mark's in Harlem I forgot about that. They were the Trinitarians were a mission outfit. So they were there - -

MW: Specifically for African Americans.

JS: Yes. All Saints would not accept black kids into their school. And Father Lucas, who was a year behind me, his mother would walk him right by All Saints where they wouldn't accept him, up to St Marks to go to school.

MW: I was just going to ask you about Father Lucas if you knew him.

JS: Sure. You did?

MW: I talked to him on the phone; I never got a chance to see him. He was working in the prisons at that time, I guess he still - -

JS: Still is. I think he lives in Our Lady of Lourdes which is on the west side around 140th St - - not Harlem, it's over by Broadway.

MW: Did you feel camaraderie with Father Lucas?

JS: I liked Larry, yes.

MW: He wrote that book "Black Priest, White Church?"

JS: I think - - I've never read it. But I've hear that Father John Curry - - who was with me - - and myself, we'd come out - - I don't know if its favorable, certainly we're not very unfavorable, he kind of thought we were alright I guess, but I think Larry had his own difficulties. He carries a gun. So he used to threaten the kids with it I think. But he's never used it to my knowledge but still. He's got so many guns - - he's a gun dealer. You have to be a licensed gun dealer if

you own more than two guns in New York. Larry - - to well understand him, I think went through a very angry period too. My god, I mean the way these guys were treated - - I've often thought that if the Afro Americans were Irish, the revolution would come sooner.

MW: Probably. Well I guess - - is there anything else? I might call you or something.

JS: Sure by all means, any time. I think it's good of you to do this.

[BREAK IN TAPE]

MW: So you were saying that looking at the baptismal records - -

JS: Yes Tom [Inaudible] recently was looking at the baptismal records at St Augustine's and he noted that there were about 400 baptisms a year in the late 50's and early 60's. And he thought that was remarkable and I pointed out to him that we didn't think it was remarkable. Keep in mind there were Latinos coming into the parish at the time. I mean to this day it's not at all unusual - - say at St Jerome's in the Bronx - - that they baptize 25-30 babies at a time still. And still, at big white Irish parishes, they'd be baptizing at least that many and many, many more so I think it's significant that this new study that's being done about what parishes will remain open and which ones will close and they're counting baptisms and the number of people who come to masses on Sundays and weekdays and the number of marriages and funerals and so on - - A statistical approach whether a church should be in a community, it just strikes me as - - I can't imagine St Paul and the apostles doing it that but anyhow - - It just - - they don't have nowhere near as many I guess at this time. Which is another indication that the demographics have come to play again and the Catholics have moved away from these parishes. But the same thing is happening to Afro Americans as is happening to the Irish Americans or Italian Americans, is that their children or grandchildren are not going to church as their grandparents did. And that's totally other question, is what has happened that the church has become irrelevant to many

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“Catholics” is because I think is the inability to change for changing times and to be meaningful

for so many people.

[END OF INTERVIEW]