

Interviewee: Robert Lewis
Interviewer: Gus Nolan

June 6, 2002
MHP

Robert Lewis

Marist College

Poughkeepsie, NY

Transcribed by Erin Kelly

For the Marist College Archives and Special Collections

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Interviewee: Dr. Robert Paul Lewis

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Marist College Social Aspects

Summary: The following interview occurs with Dr. Robert Paul Lewis, former English professor and Chair of the English Department at Marist College. The interview begins with a brief background of Dr. Robert Lewis's educational years, including his college years at Manhattan College where he majored in English. Dr. Robert Paul Lewis describes his transition to teaching at Marist College upon hearing about the school at a Master's seminar at Columbia University. Dr. Robert Lewis speaks of his teaching career as well as his various other responsibilities at the college such as his being a floor proctor, the Cross Country team coach and also his participation on the Admissions Committee, Academic Affairs Committee, and Library Committee. He also describes his participation as a theses mentor for the Science of Man program initiated by Xavier Ryan. Dr. Robert Lewis also compares the leaderships of the two college Presidents during his time at Marist College, President Linus Foy and Dennis Murray. The interview ends with what he hopes will continue to be the future mission of the college.

“BEGINNING OF INTERVIEW”

Gus Nolan: Good afternoon. Today is June 5th. It's about 2:00 in the afternoon.

Robert Lewis: I think it's the 6th.

John Ansley: It is. You're right.

GN: Today's the 6th? Today is June 6th. [Laughter] It's 2:00 pm in the afternoon and we're interviewing with Dr. Robert Lewis, who is recently retired from the Marist College English faculty and his Chair of the department. This interview is part of the Archive collection which will be stored at Marist College. Good afternoon Bob.

RPL: Hi Gus.

GN: Bob, will you give us your full name please?

RPL: Robert Paul Lewis. Paul is my confirmation name.

GN: Were you named after any member of your family?

RPL: No. No, I wasn't. My brother was.

GN: We'll get to him in a minute. [Laughter] Where and when were you born, Bob?

RPL: Halloween, 1939 in Brooklyn, New York.

GN: Okay. Could you say something about other members of the family? Do you have siblings?

RPL: One brother, Edward, three years younger than I. He's the one who's named after my paternal grandfather who was a New Englander.

GN: And your parents? What were your father's and mother's names and what was your father's occupation?

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RPL: My father's name is Leo. My mother's name is Ruth. My father was an iron worker. I come from a family of iron workers. My father was an iron worker. He got into the business though through my mother's father, who was an iron worker and at least two of his brothers, my grandfather's brothers, were iron workers. For a while, my brother worked as an iron worker so I'm the black sheep in the family. I went into education. It's a real blue-collar union family.

GN: Where did they do the iron work? Any big structures that you're familiar with?

RPL: Oh, well I think my father may have done some bridge work and I know that he worked in the Brooklyn Navy yard around the time of the outbreak of World War II because I think although he wanted to serve, I think he was exempted from service. Because of that... but then he did a lot of sort of small construction, schools and buildings especially in Nassau and Suffolk County, especially in the '40's and '50's and early '60's, you know, as Long Island grew. There was a lot of building going on. He worked for a smaller company that did that kind of construction but I can remember him getting up at 5:00 and 4:00 in the morning, 4:30 to drive to Smithtown.

GN: Oh.

RPL: Or to drive all the way out to... What's the town at the fork at the end of the LIE?

GN: Wading River and going on to...

RPL: Yea, he drove that far...

GN: Yea.

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RPL: To go out on the job.

GN: That's half a day's drive out in those days.

RPL: I think he'd drive two and a half, three hours to get to his job.

GN: What about your early education? Where did you do to school, Bob?

RPL: I went to a Catholic Elementary School in Flatbush. Up until the age of twenty-two, I lived in one or another apartment all in the same neighborhood of Flatbush and so the center of existence was Holy Cross Elementary School, which was run by the Xaverian Brothers.

GN: Alright, and then onto Manhattan after that?

RPL: Then onto St. Augustine's Diocesan High School.

GN: Oh yes, high school.

RPL: Yea, I wanted to go to the Jesuit High School but I did not win the scholarship to go there [Laughter] and my parents didn't have the money for it. So I went to the free Diocesan High School.

GN: I see.

RPL: Which was in downtown Brooklyn on Bergen Street. It since closed. In fact, recently I went to the fortieth reunion. It was my fortieth anniversary but it was the first reunion of St. Augustine's alumni since the school has closed in the late '60's, I think.

GN: The Jesuit School, is that Regis or was there...?

RPL: No, that was Brooklyn Prep.

GN: Okay.

RPL: I didn't get into Regis. That was where I really wanted to go.

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GN: I see.

RPL: That was a scholarship school.

GN: Yea.

RPL: And I didn't get admitted.

GN: I think they're sorry now but nevertheless... [Laughter]

RPL: I think that's still in existence but Brooklyn Prep isn't.

GN: Right, and then college? Where did you go to college?

RPL: St. Augustine was a Christian Brothers school and that sort of influenced me to go on to Manhattan College.

GN: Okay, and what were your years at Manhattan from... When do you recall?

RPL: From 1957 to 1961.

GN: And you studied any particular area or you majored in Literature?

RPL: Well, I did from my sophomore year on I guess, majored in English but I regard almost as... More important than my English major, that the general program of liberal studies at Manhattan. They... Manhattan is well known for its Engineering programs. Most people when you say Manhattan College say "Oh, you're an Engineering student." But in the '50's and early '60's maybe, I don't know when they ended it, they had a wonderful liberal arts program where you studied the history of western civilization over four years. So you took History, Fine Arts, a lot of...

GN: Was it a Great Books kind of thing?

RPL: It was like a Great Book program, yea. Not quite the same thing, not all the courses. Some of the courses are textbooks but essentially it was thematics

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so that you studied ancient world, medieval world, modern world and contemporary world and you took courses that were parallel in history. And I think that that was a wonderful program, very challenging, read a lot and I could go, I went from Church Avenue in Brooklyn to 242nd Street on the subway. That was an hour and twenty minutes so I'd get a lot of reading done.

GN: Reading in the subway was not always easy but...

RPL: But I think that program influenced me a lot because I've always thought of myself as being, as not simply being someone who majored in a discipline but as someone who is broadly interested in the whole sweep of culture. And by the time I graduated, I had about twenty-four credits in Philosophy and about another twenty-four credits in Theology so that's part of the reason why I got interested in Lonergan and lots of other Philosophy. It just grows out of that early college experience.

GN: One little piece more about your personal life. When did you meet Rita and when did you get married and will you say something about the children?

RPL: Well, although Rita and I come from Brooklyn and subsequently discovered that we had mutual acquaintances, we didn't meet ever until I was up here for a year or a little less than a year and we met through a colleague's wife. The colleague's wife was Rita's, one of Rita's best friends. So I met Rita in Poughkeepsie although we have a number of mutual friends in Brooklyn.

GN: Poughkeepsie is noted to something then? [Laughter]

RPL: In fact, I went to grammar school with Rita's sister's husband, her first husband.

GN: And the children, how many children do you have now?

RPL: Three children. The oldest, Robert, is thirty-five or thirty-six. Timothy's thirty-three and Emily is twenty-nine.

GN: Okay, and Emily, what is she doing now?

RPL: Emily teaches middle school. She teaches Spanish to grades six through eight I guess roughly and she's married, living in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania where her husband is doing a third of a residency in neurology. And she's longing to escape Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. [Laughter]

GN: And what about Timothy?

RPL: Timothy lives down in Beacon, New York and is working for a company called MetroPool that sort of educates industries to use alternative means of transportation for their employees.

GN: And probably the most interesting with a checkered career would be Robert. [Laughter]

RPL: Yea, Robert's the bachelor in the family. He's currently... He actually carries the title of Assistant Commissioner Police although he doesn't carry a gun and couldn't be trusted to make a citizen's arrest. It's a citizen's appointment but he writes speeches for Raymond Kelly, the commissioner of police.

GN: Okay, let's move on to Marist College. What was the entrée of your coming to Marist? How did you make the connection and who interviewed you?

RPL: Well, the connection's a little bit fuzzy although I'm pretty sure I'm correct when I say that I was... I heard about it through my seminar director at Columbia. I was doing a Master's degree in English at Columbia and the fellow who directed

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the Master's seminar that I was in in Contemporary Literature mentioned to me that they had gotten a call, I guess to the department about there being a position open... and I'm kind of fuzzy. And I came up and I was interviewed up at Coppola's Restaurant in Hyde Park. [Laughter]

GN: Very informal kind of operation.

RPL: I still remember a few of the people who were there, George Summer obviously who hired me and George Hooper and a couple of other faculty.

GN: And you took the job?

RPL: But believe me, the hiring methods were considerably less elaborate and bureaucratic than they are now having run any number of search committees, I know how, you know...

GN: Organized.

RPL: How complex it can be and byzantine, forms to fill out [Laughter] and number of... Ethic orientation, everything else and then it was just I came up, I had lunch, I went back and I was hired.

GN: You were hired to do a number of things. You were not just hired to teach. [Laughter] We had a farm here.

RPL: I don't remember the farm.

GN: Well, okay. Well, we had the dormitory.

RPL: I remember Brother Ambrose's little flower garden.

GN: Yes.

RPL: And Jerry Weiss I think had a flower garden too. But I signed on as a teacher. This is a little fuzzy. This was 1963, right and at that time we had two-

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credit courses as well as some three-credit courses but we had a number of two-credit courses.

GN: Yes, we did.

RPL: So I think my first semester I taught at least five courses. It added up to twelve but it added up my number of two-credit courses. So maybe I had two three-credit courses and three two-credit courses, something like that.

GN: Yea, I see.

RPL: But I had a lot of courses and a lot of students.

GN: Were you at least teaching in your field?

RPL: Yes, I was unlike some of other people doing [Laughter]... Some of the Brothers doing Theology.

GN: Yea.

RPL: And I was also... I had also because I was single then, signed on to be a floor proctor. I'm not sure what the title was. Again, it wasn't...

GN: This is a dormitory responsibility, right?

RPL: Yea, so I was in charge of the top floor in Leo Hall and I'm not sure, that may have been the first year of Leo opening.

GN: I couldn't...

RPL: I think so. I have someplace a copy of the *Marist Record*. Did you see that?

JA: No.

RPL: I'll get you a copy.

JA: Precursor to *The Circle*?

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RPL: Yes.

JA: Okay, yea.

RPL: This was a copy that Tom Casey gave me and which announces the class of 1963 and I'll show it to you. So I think that was the first year that Leo opened and they were in the process of finishing Champagnat or they were constructing Champagnat so... And there were several Marist Brothers in that. I was there when they... No, I can't swear to that. I may have.

GN: And Kelly comes along in there someplace.

RPL: Well, Tom Casey and I started that same year and Tom was proctor of the first floor of Sheahan and I was on the sixth floor of Leo and Brother Richard LaPietra was one floor below me on the fifth floor. And Kevin Carolan was there and Kelly, what's his first name?

GN: Michael.

RPL: Michael Kelly was the... He was the sort of the boss of the whole building.

GN: I see.

RPL: That's my memory of it. And I was an absolute failure as floor proctor. Well, I mean, probably not absolute. They'd fire me but I didn't relish the job.

GN: Well, you didn't keep order? You didn't have the boys stay in their rooms and study? You didn't have a quiet time? [Laughter]

RPL: Yea, I mean, it wasn't chaotic but I didn't enjoy having people... I'm trying to prepare classes. I've never taught before. I had no teaching experience whatsoever, none. And I'm trying to learn how to teach and people are coming to ask me for toilet paper and...

GN: [Laughter] You did say that.

RPL: And then, you know, and also you probably maybe some of your other...

This is an interesting part of the social history of Marist then but the rules in the dormitory were considerably different from now and every night I think it was between eight and ten, students had to be sitting at their desk with their doors open. So that was part of your function as a proctor. I made sure that was happening and it was quiet as soon as you did. And then at ten o'clock, all hell broke loose [Laughter] as they were free to go get soda and coffee or whatever and I think they had to be sort of quiet in their rooms by eleven or eleven thirty, something like that.

GN: Some of your other responsibilities, were you not a track coach or something of that sort?

RPL: Yea. Joe Sullivan, who was hired at the same time in the English department as I was, had an interest in cross country and he coached the first year, '63, '64 and then he and his wife is the one who knew Rita well. They decided to go in the Peace Corp so he left Marist and I inherited his dog and his cat and his track team [Laughter] and the cat ran away. Mr. Hubbard told me that I could not keep the dog and I bless him to this day because I don't know why I ever agreed to try to keep the dog. I had no interest in it. It was a crazy dog. But then the track team was much more successful. [Laughter] I guess, again, you know, it's a sort of an amateur spirit at Marist then that you didn't necessarily have to have a lot of prior experience in what you were doing. I mean, Tom Wade became a basketball coach. I don't know how much

experience he had had as a coach so Dr. Goldman asked me to do that and I agreed and that... I was sort of a moderator/ driver/ coach. I pretended to know something about coaching but I didn't. I had played basketball in high school but I never presumed to run track. So I would drive them to the meets and we had a very successful four years and as I boasted at the dinner, "I'm the youngest retired NCA coach in the country," [Laughter] my career as a coach was over by the age of twenty-eight I think [Laughter] but I had a winning record.

GN: Oh, well. Then you went onto new accomplishments. Other assignments, do you recall in those early years, committee work? Were you ever responsible...?

RPL: Yea, in the very early years, I remember being on the Admissions Committee. Where the faculty were involved, I don't know when this passed out of existence as a faculty function, but the faculty were kind of involved in the viewing the applications of sort of borderline cases.

GN: Yes.

RPL: Things like that. Dave Flynn was director of Admissions I think then.

GN: Well, later on we have the committee...

RPL: And then I was on the infamous Library Committee.

GN: Oh, speak about that for a while. [Laughter] And who was the librarian? Do you recall?

RPL: Who gets to listen to these? [Laughter] Yea, that was an eye opener. Well, we have had a rather colorful, have you interviewed him yet? But the colorful librarian.

GN: Adrian first.

RPL: Adrian Perreault. In fact, what scares me is I can remember going to the fiftieth birthday party of Adrian Perreault and I think he's sixty-two now. When the library was over in Donnelly but yes, I was a young faculty member, maybe twenty-five years old. I was twenty-three, almost twenty-four when I started. Maybe I was only twenty-four or twenty-five. I forget when my first appointment was and I was attending these rather strange library meetings with this rather strange librarian who was given to, remember, explosive [Laughter] and always very candid comments on other people. And there was some sort of tiff going on between him and Brother...

GN: Joseph, wait ... Oh, Felix Michael?

RPL: No, no. There was a Brother who was on the staff of the library.

GN: Oh.

RPL: Who subsequently left and went to Pace.

GN: Yes. The name slips me. I know well who you mean.

RPL: Yea, it'll come to me too but at any rate, he had some legitimate and reasonable disagreements with Adrian about certain library policies. I can't remember which.

GN: Well, if I recall, speaking in the library was not tolerated. [Laughter] You yourself were bolted out there once.

RPL: Yea, I think so. The other one faculty member was but I do remember that Brother, I can't think of his name, that... Oh, I became the Chair of the Library Committee at some point and it was sort of like Vietnam... That shape of the

table, you know, was somehow trying to get meetings that Adrian and his fellow Marist Brother and fellow worker could... And Adrian, Adrian was trying to schedule the meetings at times when the other guy couldn't make it [Laughter] so that these issues couldn't be brought up but...

GN: Okay, onto other accomplishments of maybe of a more serious nature.

How about your work and participation in the Science of Man program? Can you put that into a perspective for us?

RPL: Well, let me see. That's the Science of Man program probably other people have spoken about. It was initiated by a then Brother, Xavier Ryan, who had come from New Zealand and I guess this would've been the seventies?

GN: Yes.

RPL: Mid to late seventies, the beginnings of it and he recruited me after a couple years to mentor the theses of the students in the program. So I got the students when they were juniors or seniors.

GN: Weren't yet. Yes.

RPL: And worked with them on their theses and so I began to get some feel for what the themes of the program were. I mean, it's a very ambitious and interesting and many ways an important chapter of Marist academic history. I think the graduates of that program have a very fierce loyalty to what was going on here. Then when Xavier left in the early eighties, I can't remember exactly, '80, '80 or '81. They say fools rush in where angels fear to tread. I volunteered to do what he was doing. What he was doing was teaching the actual foundation courses of the program, which were technically Philosophy programs. Now by

that point, I have been doing some... Let's see, about '77 on, I had been reading Lonergan and getting interested in Philosophy and interdisciplinary study. So I kind of felt that maybe I could do this and so for about three, four, five years, I did teach well, my English courses. I taught the equivalent of what today would be called Introduction to Philosophy and Ethics.

GN: Okay, what was... Could you tell us what was the point of the program?

What was the thesis behind Science of Man program? And what was different from the typical...?

RPL: Right. Well, in many ways you could say the Science of Man program was a kind of prototype of what the core Philosophy course today, you know, in a...

GN: But more of an honors program is what it is?

RPL: Yea, the students were selected on the basis of their academic scores in high school and their SAT scores. The presumption was that they were going to be challenged a little bit more. So it was an alternative core but the aim of the program was really to get the students to think about integrating their knowledge.

GN: How to rely on them?

RPL: Instead of having just taking three of this and six of that and three of that and six of that that somehow there would be a theoretical connection, theoretical basis for a connection among their various studies. So they took after Science of Man I and II, where some of the notion of the various ways in which human consciousness approaches the world and organizes the world mythically, scientifically, philosophically, religiously. After that sort of theoretical basis was laid in the first two semesters, then they took Science of Man III, which was a

history course, Western Civilization and Science of Man IV, which Richard LaPietra typically taught which was to give them some feel for the scientific world view. And then they did a thesis and the idea was that they were going to take something that they were very personally interested in that had an academic orientation and they were to apply some of the theory from their various courses to the analysis of the question. In many, sometimes the theses were too loose, too you know, too general or... But when I think about it now, students were doing really serious things. You know, they were taking responsibility for doing something they were personally interested in. And they were doing readings across different interdisciplinary viewpoints so it was really the opposite of specialization. I mean, they were majoring in whatever they happened to major in but the Science of Man program was a way of sort of giving them a larger context in which to see their major.

GN: Wasn't there an attraction or did it ever come with the fortune that they could finish in three years? Did they get more credits for some of those or the thesis was granted and some credits?

RPL: You know, I've almost forgotten that stage of things but you're right. Somewhere along the line, that was going to be part of the attraction of it but my impression is that there were very few who actually did it that way. There was an interest in... Peter O'Keefe was involved with this at some point. There was an interest in, I forget what the technical term was... There was an educational term for it where students who are bright would finish college in three years rather than four. So it wasn't just the Science of Man program. There was a larger

interest in doing that but the Science of Man program was going to become a sort of vehicle to justify, you know, that it is more challenging and more ambitious. But my memory is that most students did not do it in three years and that eventually that sort of passed away as the rationale for the program. That wasn't really the deep rationale for the program and in fact, I think usually the students who are more intellectually ambitious kind of sort of need for doing more studies.

GN: You wanted to stay in it anyway?

RPL: Rather than rushing through college.

GN: Yea, right. They enjoyed studying and wanted to stay here and do some more of it.

RPL: But just as a kind of footnote, first of all I think a lot of the success of the program was very much tied to the charisma of Xavier Ryan. He... In addition to being intellectually very exciting and scintillating, he had some of this, sort of this, the personality of a high school, prep school principal/ Marist Brother. In other words, he went after the students. He made them feel part of a...

GN: Paid attention to them all... Yea.

RPL: A cadre, he made them feel they were special.

GN: Yes.

RPL: In fact, he even antagonized some other faculty because he had a way of sort of touting his program and his students.

GN: Was Dr. Belanger involved in this?

RPL: Dr. Belanger was involved. I'm trying... He, well, he was always very close to Xavier. I don't know that he actually... Well, he did get involved in mentoring and supervising some of the theses, especially after I took over...

GN: The running of the program.

RPL: The running of the program. He got involved in some of the theses. But what... I'm just going to say this, that a big change happened in the academic environment, not just at Marist but I think of higher education generally but it was very noticeable at Marist in the early eighties. The early eighties, majors like Computer Science, Communication, Criminal Justice and so on... It became much more popular than the traditional humanistic disciplines. See, a lot of the appeal of the Science of Man program was people who were in the humanities who kind of saw, who had a kind of interdisciplinary vent. So I found it harder and harder to recruit people because their focus was more sort of vocational and they didn't find enough of a payoff as a practical payoff in Science of Man because you know, technically it was never an honors program.

GN: No.

RPL: Informally, it was called an honors program but it never went on their record that this was an honors degree. So, to a certain...

GN: Except their grades were always how or were always in the... They were leaders in their classes wherever they were, by and large.

RPL: Yea, the students became less willing to sort of do the extra work to get the A.

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GN: Yea. Let's talk about the college now more generally and that is the change in the curriculum, the moving from the sixty-sixty to kind of a core program and majors within this, then schools, Divisions and Schools. Can you reflect a little bit about that particular subject?

RPL: Yea, I don't know if I can remember as much as I should but probably my own, well, for sure my own involvement and governers for the years I have is mostly in the academic area. So I was on AAC...

GN: Academic Affairs Committee.

RPL: At least three times and I was involved...

GN: For three year terms, that's almost a decade that you were there.

RPL: Yea and I was the principle writer of at least one core document. You know, I... I'm trying to remember now. We went to sixty-sixty arrangements.

GN: That was during the sixties. That was a disaster.

RPL: During the sixties...

GN: Or the seventies.

RPL: Or the early seventies.

GN: Yea, yea. That was a disaster.

RPL: Yea, yea. I almost don't remember what the program was before that.

GN: Well remember, students could choose sixty credits of anything they wanted.

RPL: Yea.

GN: And the department chose the other sixty and then even with the department choosing the sixty, there was a lot of leeway and the department

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actually took about thirty credits. So they had almost ninety credits so they could take what they wanted to.

RPL: There weren't even any guidelines as to areas in which they were to choose, were there?

GN: No. It was very loose.

RPL: For a while I can remember an experiment with something called the Freshman Seminar. I taught it once or twice in which that was supposed to be... Provided sort of guidance but that was also...

GN: There was a strange name to that and I just can't...

RPL: Freshman Seminar, it was called.

GN: Yes but it was called something else too. Okay, that was part of the growth period of the college.

RPL: Yea, and then I guess it was the mid-seventies, right, when we went... I'm trying to remember the date of the first core, the major core program change, you know, when we went to...

GN: That's John Scileppi I guess, isn't it? Coming in with the...?

RPL: Yes, that's the seventies...

GN: Yea.

RPL: Because I was... I think it was around '77. I think that was when the core came in. And you see, Xavier had been here for a while and the Science of Man had been operating and the Philosophy department was very influenced by those discussions and so we... The first, that core proposal reflects some of that spirit of that program.

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GN: Yes, yes, required six credits in Philosophy.

RPL: Right. They were called foundation courses and I was appointed as the first director of the writing program in '77 when Zuccarello was doing that. And that's when we reinstated writing requirements and then formal testing and so on.

GN: So we had faculty reading the essays and putting them into categories, A, B and C?

RPL: Yea. Yea, and not only faculty in English but also...

GN: All across the board, yea.

RPL: Faculty outside of English. Students wrote essays again. And then I was also on the Academic Affairs Committee in, I think it was '85 when the core was expanded. In other words, we went to six credits in Science, six in Math, six okay. The number of credits required in core liberal studies was expanded in '85 and that's the committee that I served on where I wrote, pretty much wrote the documents.

GN: Right, right.

RPL: That was generated.

GN: Right.

RPL: The other core involvement I had too was in that I was... I wrote the statement for the integrative major in core and I was involved in the committee that developed that program and Julianne Maher was here as director of Continuing Ed.

GN: Yes.

RPL: And I can't remember the years. [Laughter] So my own involvements have tended... I've always been interested in general education.

GN: Yes.

RPL: So with the AAC, the integrative major, the Science of Man and the writing program, I tend to have a lot of involvement with things that...

GN: And one last document that you wrote I really feel that you should bring up is the minor in Catholic Studies. You were principle in constructing that.

RPL: Right, yea, the proposal that was passed by the faculty I guess three years ago now. Yea, I felt it was desirable given, you know...

GN: The background of the college.

RPL: The background of the college, the history, the heritage and the fact that still the largest majority of students come from that tradition that there should be some academic resources here for them to study if they wish to.

GN: Now, let's change the focus a little bit. You lived under two different presidents. Linus Foy was a president when you first came I believe and then subsequently, Dennis Murray. Could you comment on your experiences as a teacher with those two individuals at the helm in terms of freedom and encouragement and opportunities from an academic or from a faculty point of view?

RPL: Well, of course the college was so much smaller when Linus was President. There were 1,100 students here in 1963 and the college had just expanded. Well, first of all I think Linus was very different from any college president you'd see today because he was much more physically accessible to

faculty on a daily basis. I don't mean to say the faculty went to his office but he would go to lunch with faculty. You'd meet him for lunch or you'd meet him on the pathway.

GN: But there was no great faculty lunchroom.

RPL: There was no great faculty lunchroom [Laughter] and I don't remember where exactly we'd eat but he was around and you know...

GN: Well, there was the Ratskellar.

RPL: The Ratskellar, yea. Well, there was in 1963, '64, there was a cafeteria on the bottom of Donnelly where the science labs are now.

GN: Yea, yea.

RPL: And you would meet and of course he was still part of a religious community. The other thing is that he, I mean, there's a sense in which he was sort of learning to be a president and everybody was learning what a college was. I mean, we didn't even have a Promotion and Tenure Committee when I started in 1963. I got tenure sort of by a letter saying...

GN: You were here long enough to get it?

RPL: Yea, and we'd be in violation of AAUP if we didn't give you tenure.

[Laughter] So we were all sort of constructing a college and I think Linus's spirit was to sort of entrust people and trust them to build the place. So his management style was very decentralized, at least from my perception and he was himself, you might say a working president, a very academically oriented president because he was a mathematician, he taught classes. He'd just as

soon talk to you about teaching as he would about fundraising. I'm not sure. My suspicion is he wasn't terribly interested in fundraising.

GN: Right.

RPL: He wasn't the kind of person to glad-handle. He'd rather... I remember he once told me that he had had the ambition to read all the books in the college library. Of course, we didn't have a very good college library but that was his point in other words. [Laughter]

GN: Yea.

RPL: I bet that that is no longer possible.

GN: And Dennis Murray, what's your perception now of Dennis Murray after twenty years? Almost, in fact, longer than Linus.

RPL: Longer than Linus, yea, yea. Well, he's a very different person in a very different time. I mean, Dennis is... Again, you know, I don't work directly for Dennis so it's just a matter of my perception. I don't answer to him. My involvement is that of a tenured faculty member. It tends to be very nice for tenured faculty. You know, not much you can do about us anyway but fire us. [Laughter] But I think Dennis has done some wonderful things and I think they're some wonderful talents and abilities but it's very strikingly different, his style. Linus is... Dennis obviously is immensely more concerned with public relations than Linus ever was. I mean, I was very young, very focused on my own teaching when Linus was President so I don't know what Linus did. I have a much better sense now of what Dennis does but my sense would be that Linus was very much focused on, you know, the day to day operations of the college

whereas you may not see Dennis for long stretches of time he's off but that's probably typical of a lot of them.

GN: A lot of years with him, yea.

RPL: A lot of presidents now so I don't know that Dennis is terribly different in that respect.

GN: If you stand back from what the college was in 1963 to where it is now in 2002, together they have really done a significant piece of work in developing this real estate, not only in terms of the buildings but the academic aspect of it certainly is one that that I think would be sacred. They, as the leaders of the college, even though a lot of work is done by people like yourself.

RPL: Yea, yea. The other thing is when you're at one place for such a long time, you tend to become very hypercritical, you know, so I mean, part of me will say I think academics is not as strong as it used to be but then I'll talk to people from other colleges and they'll tell me, you know, just horror stories that make Marist sound like Harvard or Oxford.

GN: Are there any changes that you look back on now that were really significant that made Marist to be a better place? What in that area would you say? Was it the bringing of women on the campus? Was it the hiring of faculty?

RPL: Well, I mean I think it is a better place in some ways. This will be the tremendously hard job of a real historian. I don't think history is, you know, a unidirectional thing, sort of nineteenth century myth of progress, things always get better. Marist is bigger and in some ways it's better but I don't know if it's better in all ways. So certainly, the coming of women was inevitable and we all

here remember that we all met in Adrian to vote on whether we should have a nursing program and someone said "Well, we can't handle if we should have a nursing program because we're no co-ed yet" so we didn't vote on it. Then a couple months later, we voted on having women.

GN: Yes.

RPL: But it wasn't even a vote. It was like "Come on, wake up." Of course you've got to have women here and I'm sure that made it better. But you know some things are problematic. I mean, I think the whole legal change, going from Marist going into the lay Board of Trustees, the separation from the Catholic past. In some ways it's good. In some ways it's problematic.

GN: And the aegis changed. We've become much more legalistic. You've made reference of that before.

RPL: Yea.

GN: In the hiring practices, we have a much more consistent with all of the laws and that, minorities and...

RPL: Yea, for example, Marist was very much community-spirited, student focused. Now in many respects it still is but there's much more of an emphasis now upon sort of meeting external criteria of excellence in certification, professional standards, etcetera, etcetera and while that's good in some ways, it's not good in all ways because you can see it in the faculty now. There's less of a focus upon service. There's less participation in the whole operation and one of the things I'm thankful for is that I've had a career in which I was always a part of what was going on in the whole college. But people are getting so

satellized by school and building now and that's a function of size so you could say, "Isn't that a great thing that Marist has grown like this?" Yea, it's a great thing it's growing like this but in the process of growing like this, certain other things are beginning to happen. Isn't it a great thing that Marist went from being a sort of a parochial Catholic college to being open to all? Well, yea, it is a great thing but there's also a danger that the heritage that it built on will become so dissipated that we won't be any different from Quinnipiac or Boulder or anyplace else so that's... So I'm very reluctant to say things get better, you know [Laughter]...

GN: Not necessarily.

RPL: That's not necessarily it and not in all ways.

GN: Right.

RPL: Now, just like it was inevitable that we had to have women, maybe it was inevitable that we also had to get state aid and you know, become non-sectarian.

GN: Yes, it did...

RPL: But that's why I have an interest in the Catholic Studies minor. This is my way of sort of saying well, let's at least hold onto a part of the heritage but even there, I'm not sure.

GN: We're on the difficult question. Can you look back and say who were some of the more significant personalities that affected you, that worked with you, that you associated with and they enlivened your own participation here? For our Archive reasons we'd like to see if we could focus on some of these people.

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RPL: Well, it's a good question. I'm not sure. Although I didn't always agree with him and I found him a very difficult man in some ways, I'd say Xavier was an important person. He prodded me to study and think in certain ways and he wasn't a fan of Lonergan but because of my involvement in that program, I got interested in a lot his thought. I would say he was an interesting guy, certainly a very fascinating personality. I could think of any number of colorful personalities. [Laughter] I don't know if they inspired me. George Sommer was an interesting guy and Roscoe Balch.

GN: He is, yes.

RPL: In fact I think that one of the differences today is, you know, you go to a plannery session today and it's pretty much cut and dry business but the plannery sessions back then...

GN: There's no color.

RPL: Were colorful. They were filled with people giving colorful speeches, sometimes gloated speeches. Well, I think Linus was an inspiring guy. You know, I mean I kind of... He seemed to incarnate a lot of what was best in the Marist tradition, someone who was devoted to the intellectual life and to students and he had a kind of down-to-earth egalitarian way. I'm thinking of the early people.

GN: And more recently you have the loss of some friends like Tom Casey.

RPL: Tom and I started together in 1963, yea. I used to go down to classes with Foy with him. And you can remind me of some of them.

GN: LeWinter? [Laughter] Dr...

RPL: Probably Milton Teichman in the English department for sure.

GN: George Hooper, some of the areas where we interacted during the schooling.

RPL: George got me interested in fly fishing. [Laughter]

GN: Yes. Okay, coming to the close, there are a few things that we just would like to ask about. Where do you think Marist will be in twenty years from now? Do you think this technology's going to move us ahead or is it holding us back? Do you think the advantage of Marist is its location? It's going to make it a permanent success story or what's your feeling about down the road?

RPL: I'm probably a worse prophet than I am a historian. Well, I hope and I think Marist has the ingredients for remaining a success and sort of a guess as to what some elements of that mix to a pitch in terms of exploiting the location we have, the beauty, the natural beauty, the physical facilities and so on. And also, legitimately exploiting the technology. I don't mean exploiting in a bad sense. I mean...

GN: Capitalizing on it, using it?

RPL: By the way, you know, I think this is part of a Marist tradition. It's not just as... I can remember attending a group that Linus called together in like 1969 and '70 and the theme of it, of the conference of faculty, and we all were taught that it was learning to live in a technological age. That was 1970 before computers but there was always this sort of assumption that, you know, you shouldn't be kind of unreflectively tied to the past and to tradition. You should embrace what's new critically but openly. So I think it's a good thing that we...

But I don't think Marist, that the mission of Marist is essentially having to do with technology. It has to do with the person, the whole person and educating the whole person. That's what the mission talks about and at one time, by the way, there's another thing that I wrote. At one time, I wrote the mission statement or a draft of the mission statement sometime back in the early eighties maybe.

GN: This is for a Middle States visitation, no doubt.

RPL: Yea. So you know, I think technology is not going to make us successful. What's going to make us successful is having a coherent philosophy of education, of which technology is a part. So that's what one of my last pieces of service was. I served on the Mission and Goals Committee just this past year. I held a chair in it and I think we have to go back to the mission statement and talk seriously about the themes in it. We can't rely on tricks and fads, you know? And I hope there's enough philosophical agreement within the faculty about what educating the whole person means because it does mean educating the spirit as well as the mind and I'm hoping that there's still the openness to that. Even though we don't have the connection to the Catholic past again. So somehow negotiating our connection to that, what was really valuable in that past, you know. In the light of altered circumstances, it's what's important. But I can't predict [Laughter] where we'll be in twenty years. Oh, I think we'll still be in existence. I just hope it'll be a place where we'll like to be.

GN: Yea. I mean, I hear about distant education, that that will be a part of it. I think Marist will remain forever a campus where the interaction will be on the level of interpersonal communication as well as...

RPL: Yea.

GN: Other kinds of things. And lastly, is there anything we didn't ask you that you would like to put on the table as a closing comment of this? In terms of your own experience, as you retire now, are there some things you're very happy you were associated with? Are there some things that didn't happen that you wish happened?

RPL: Well, I wish I had gotten my Ph.D. earlier than I did [Laughter] but I'm very happy to have gotten it and I'm very happy to have had a flourishing scholar life since then and I'm looking forward to in the next couple of years to still teaching at Marist, to having more time for some of the scholarly interests that I've had to sort of wedge in between. You know, I think when you say of things, I mean, Marist is a place where a lot of people made very heavy commitments to teaching and service. So there are people who sacrificed certain kinds of achievements and writing and scholarship that they might have been capable of doing because they gave so much of their time to the college. I mean, I'm not regretful of that but I mean it think that's... You make choices and that's one of the choices that some people made and I think the college is shifting over and wanting more of that now. And that's another choice that they're going to have to sort of face. You know, you can't have everything.

GN: But now comparatively on age, you have a future ahead of you that would allow the teaching that you mentioned could continue and the writing. And would you be interested in going someplace else to... If Boston College invited you, would you accept such an invitation?

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RPL: Well, I might consider that or teaching a course down at Dunwoodie in religion and literature or something like that, yea. I could do some sort of specialty teaching in certain places. Not full-time but a course here...

GN: No, I understand.

RPL: Or a course there, yea.

GN: Just to keep stimulated.

RPL: Yea.

GN: And keep yourself free.

RPL: Oh yea. I still enjoy teaching but there's certain parts of me that are getting a little tired. [Laughter] Not tired of talking in front of the classroom.

GN: It's the corrections of the papers. [Laughter]

RPL: Corrections of the papers and...

GN: The marking and the grades.

RPL: Arguing about things. You didn't really ask me too much about my perception of how students have changed but... And it may be the students haven't changed as much as I think they've changed or that I've changed. But I certainly know that I've changed and that I'm less resilient about... I'm less willing to try to persuade people to like things that they don't like and I'm less willing to argue about grades. [Laughter]

GN: Yea.

RPL: And students seem to be more preoccupied by that.

GN: Well thank you very much Bob.

RPL: Okay.

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GN: It was nice talking to you.

“END OF INTERVIEW”