



## Interview with Brother Gary

September 2011



### ***What has been your fondest memory of Roncalli?***

I would say the openness, friendliness, generosity of the students. Not every school is like this, believe me.

### ***How many schools have you taught at?***

Oh well, I've worked in eight states, but I've only worked at [counting] in five schools.

### ***And you and Mr. Olson were together at a school?***

We were at Fargo together, yes.

### ***What advice would you give to current or future students at Roncalli? What kinds of words of wisdom would you like to leave?***

Well, of course, it would be different for students and parents. For students, I would say get involved. Sure, it's a school, but there are so many other opportunities to develop. Develop yourself, spiritually, mentally, whatever. Jump into something, get involved, be a part of more than just coming to class... Because I think you'll find it makes the school year go quicker and it builds relationships that you'll most likely have the rest of your life.

### ***A few days ago, the choir came in and sang to you, what did it make you feel like or what did it make you think of?***

Well, it was very emotional for me, for one thing. That kids would come on a day off on their own without anybody saying, "Why don't you do this?" and, well, I spent a summer teaching in Israel at our university there, and we went into the camps, and we had to be in UN vans, which we couldn't get out of or open the windows in, because the Israeli army was watching us and they had a jeep with a mounted machine gun, and when they (the choir) sang the "Prayer of the Children," I kind of broke down because what flashed through my mind was looking at these kids, and these kids came up to the van, and they looked in, and we couldn't communicate, because the window was up, number one, but the conditions that they were forced to live in, the suffering, you know, that they did. And so that kind of all came together with that song, "The Prayer of the Children." So I think it was probably very meaningful event for me, both them coming and singing and the other memory of being there.

### ***Can you think of any way that Roncalli changed you or helped you grow?***

Well, I think I learned as much from the students as they do from me. Not just the students, but the parents, the faculty... I think that's it's a place that is really very, very special of all the places I'd been. Because I've worked in

8 different states... I've taught kids from second grade up through adults in various catechetical areas, and just the experience of being here at Roncalli... they asked me this once before, a long time ago. I don't know of a school where the kids are friendlier than they are here. It's phenomenal.

***What's the best grade level to teach at?***

Well, for me, you know, I've never taught sophomores here, but eventually I've had the majority of kids. The freshmen were fun. They're still quite young and giddy in life and you can do things with them that are kind of fun. As far as teaching goes, I really like the seniors. They're adult enough where they can hopefully pick up complex ideas and be able to do something with them. I'm very much in favor in teaching of project-centered kinds of things, and I want the kids to decide. So for instance, the final exam time was they could pick a concept, something we talked about and present it, and they could do anything they want. And it was hard for them; probably harder than taking a test because they had to decide what they were going to do and how they were going to get this across. And I just loved... they kept asking me to "give us ideas" and so forth, and I said, "Well, I'll throw a few out, but you're capable people. Show me that you know this stuff, whatever you want to do with it." And I found that it really brought a lot of creativity out and maybe they surprised themselves with, you know, some of the things they presented.

***When did you decide to become a brother? When or how did you hear the call of God?***

Actually, I wanted to do something in the church and as a little kid I was attracted to the priesthood. But then, as time went on, it was not me. My girlfriend, when I was in junior high and high school, was a girl who was very interested in religious life, too. And we had a very well-meaning young Sister, at that time a religious Sister, who thought, well, let's put those two together, because then there's no danger, you know. Well, the more we were together, the more we got to like each other and then she was... you'd say, today you could say we were a couple, we were "going" together and the Sisters that we had... I went to public school there wasn't a Catholic school in town. I grew up in a small, small town in Pennsylvania. We had resident sisters who lived there. We had a center, and a religious ed center, and they, as sisters and brothers and religious do, encourage kids to think, and it's interesting. I wasn't really aware of brothers or what brothers did. And so they kind of put the idea in my head and so we had to make a decision, my girlfriend and I, eventually. And we decided that we would each go and try it out. And if it was not for us, we'd come back, you know. Well, my girlfriend was in the convent for 26-27 years, and she left. She works as a lay missionary kind of down in Tennessee, Alabama, down through there. We felt that was what God wanted us to do, so we did.

***Do you ever hear from her?***

Oh yes, we've kept in touch over the years.

***Through challenging times, has your faith helped you? Can you give an example?***

I can't think of a bigger challenging time than right now in my life... Yes, I just can't imagine what people do without faith. What do you hang on to if you don't have any faith or belief? So I think at challenging times, even lesser ones than this, you know, through your life you have your ups and your downs, I felt that faith and belief in God is something that kind of carries me through.

***You are so positive about your life at this point. What keeps you upbeat and going?***

Part of that is just my personality. I'm not a moody person. I'm not moody. I'm a person of faith and what's there to be negative about it? You know, we all have to go sometime. I wasn't counting on it being NOW, but I think people can be kind of down with some of this. People will come and my spirits just rise, you know. People say, you look tired and sometimes I am, you know, but I find that people coming in and talking to me really gives me a boost. Kids, parents, faculty... it doesn't make any difference who they are.

***Do you have any idea about what heaven will be like?***

I don't. I thought about it, but nothing really comes to mind. For years I taught scripture. I've read the passages like "in my father's house there are many mansions" and all of these. I've heard stories about people who experience their loved ones after they've died. It just amazes me. I heard a story today – a true story -- about one of our staff members who when they were little had a sister. And the sister was very close to the grandfather who lived with them. And they bonded. And the grandfather died, and one night he came to her, touched her cheek and said, "I'm in a good place, I'm happy." And one of the other children the next day said to the parent, "Were you up late last night?" And the mother said, "Not especially, why?" And the child said, "Well, in the middle of the night, I saw this bright light in the hallway for a short period of time, and I thought somebody was up, but it was a brighter light than we normally have." You know, stories like that are interesting, so I'll have to find out for myself. [Chuckle]

***If you had a story of your life, what would the title be?***

[Laugh] That would be interesting! What would it be? Story of my life... That's a question I've never ever thought of. What would I entitle an autobiography? You know, my mind is a blank with that. I don't really know what I would say.

***Too many possibilities?***

Yeah, there are a lot of possibilities. And you don't, you know, genuinely... I'm amazed at the number of people who have come to see me. And I always think, "Why?" you know... What brings you here to visit with me? I've heard a lot of positive kinds of things, I said I can't really truly think of how I would have affected somebody's life in that way, you know, where they would do that. So I don't know. You never know the effects you're going to have on somebody I guess. You have more, I think everybody has more of an effect on other people than they realize. So that would be a hard one.

***Are there things that students have said that have amazed you?***

Every day, students amaze me. I was thinking more along the lines is there any personal information. People know one side of me, and that's the teacher, you know. But they don't really truly know lots of things about me.

***Tell us some of the interesting things people don't know.***

I'm a collector. One of the things I collect are fire trucks. There's one of them there which I'm giving to Mr. Kraemer. I've lived several times near a fire station, and as a kid, I was so impressed with these big red fire trucks and the sirens and the lights and so forth, you know. I've always been attracted to fire trucks, so I have a collection of those.

I collect miniature furniture. I like antiques, so I like furniture with wood that's all carved and so forth, with the wood all carved.

I like to draw. Really, I wanted to be an art teacher. I thought I could slip that in with my other courses, but I was asked to visit the superior and he said, "We don't want you to be an art teacher." So I had to drop any further art courses. But I have a natural interest in that, so I do a lot of drawing and sketching. I like architecture especially. I like to draw buildings and churches things like that.

I have a collection of books and videos on the White House... again because it's antique furniture and classical kinds of things so I have some really nice books and tapes of the White House. For some reason, I got really interested in the Royal Family so I have... I remember watching the coronation of Queen Elizabeth on television. I think it was 1953. I was fascinated by it, you know. I have books on the Royal Family, and I've been to the White House several times, but I've never been to England. And I have some really neat books on the Vatican treasures. I've been to the Vatican a couple of times and that's quite an impressive place to go.

I like to cook. You know, I don't do real well with desserts. I like desserts, you know, but I like to cook generally anything. When I first joined the brothers, and after initial training and so forth that we had, I went to a cooking school, and I was supposed to be the community cook, so I prepared with some assistants, breakfast, lunch and dinner for anywhere up to 15 brothers every day. And I enjoyed doing that.

But at some point the superior said, well you need to do something... there's going to come a time when we aren't going to need someone to do that. So I went to school, first to work on my catechetical degree to teach religion. So I got a bachelor's degree in religion and eventually a master's degree in religious education. And as I looked around, I thought I should maybe get something other than that because, you don't know, so I got a degree in social science with a minor in communication arts. Then I went back and got a master's degree in school administration.

I was a principal and an assistant principal for a number of years. But you know, it was not for me. I thought I did a good job, but I knew it was not where I really fit. I really wanted to be in the classroom.

I started out teaching in a grade school, St. John's grade school in Marshfield. Sixth grade homeroom, and I taught sixth, seventh and eighth grade kids Social Studies. And I knew after I think I was there two years, this is not for me... these kids, they just hang on you and twenty million questions... So I moved up into the high school division and I went to Pacelli High School and taught religion there. I also taught Social Studies there.

***Is there a certain subject or section of religion that you really liked?***

I really like Old Testament. The Old Testament scriptures are, I find, just very interesting. And the book of Revelation... A lot of people are either afraid of that book or miss it, because it's apocalyptic, you know. And once you understand the meaning behind the symbols, the book just comes alive. You understand it was really about the early church. And what was going on. So I've really enjoyed that... my scripture classes... almost everything I taught, I liked. Some of it was challenging, like world religions was challenging for me because I had to study all these different religions, you know, to know something about them.

***Who are you looking forward to meeting after passing?***

My mother, I think. I have two brothers. They're both older. And one is just two years older than I am. He's coming next week for a week. They're very much the personality of my father. Then there was me. And I had the personality of my mother, very much. She had a great sense of humor, was fun to be around. We had fun together doing crazy things. She was as crazy as I am, I think... some of the things that we did. That's one of my prayers: God, just send my mother to come pick me up. That will be...

I have two brothers who died in infancy who I never knew. I was between the two. I used to say to my mother... She liked the name Martin, so the first one was Martin Bernard. He died, just like, right after he was born. Then there was me and I was named, and I hate to even say this, I was named after Gary Cooper, the actor, which I don't really care for. Then the second one, the one after me that died, was another Martin Bernard. I said to her, "Thank God you didn't name me Martin Bernard. They're all dying." So it would be fun to meet them.

I guess the belief that we have is that when you die as an infant, your soul goes to heaven. There is no age kind of thing. You know, you're not a baby, you're potential, whatever that is. So that will be interesting.

Anything else? You know I did date in high school and all that kind of stuff. Hello sir!

[At this point, Mr. Frank Birr joins the conversation. They talk about what we've covered. Mr. Birr adds:]...and how the band came over here and playing the school song outside his window.

Yes! Mr. Birr and I are really good friends.

### ***How about some stories about both of you here?***

Mr. Birr: He loves it when I rope him into things he doesn't really want to do. Like presiding at vesper services and having to give a talk during Lent.

Brother Gary: Some of our favorite, or at least my favorite times are when he [Frank] was at Schroeders' (department store in Two Rivers), coming over, having a cup of coffee, sitting there and watching the people go past, and the other thing... I can be a little devil sometimes, I can be a big devil, too, and we would prep together a little bit. You might want to share our...

Mr. Birr: Yeah. We'd spend all this time. He'd come over to Schroeder's, sit down and we'd spend a whole 45 minutes going through what we're going to do for religion classes for the next several times because he was my mentor, I'd talk to him about scripture. So I'd come in the morning, ready to go to class, so I'd say, "OK, got the handouts?" And he'd say, "Oh no, I've changed my mind, we're going to do this, this, and this." "Oh no, I was all ready for the other thing!" But he'd change the whole plan overnight. And I should wing it... because he can just walk in and do it.

Brother Gary: He gets so frustrated whenever I do that.

Mr. Birr: I said to him, if this were choir, I could do that, but I'm not as quite off the cuff in religion. YOU could do that... any time.

Yeah, I didn't look too sad though, when I said it. [Laughter from all] In the back of my mind, I knew that Frank was going to have a cat when I tell him we weren't doing anything that we had planned.

Brother Gary: Some of the special times were after vespers. We'd go to their house and have a little wine and dinner. Those were special memories. The Leys came over and brought dinner for us on Saturday night and they bought over some white wine. I must've polished off a whole bottle. Because it was a long evening, you know, and I put a lot of ice with it because really not supposed to indulge in any kind of alcoholic beverage whatsoever. But I tell the doctor, what difference does it make at this point in my life? And he said, you're right. So I kind of ignore it, and feel less guilty. It's half and half. Half water and half wine so at least I have the taste of it all.

I told the Leys, “Frank would die. He’s a real connoisseur of that. If we dumped half a thing of ice in a glass and poured some merlot over it, he’d be, ‘Oh, what are you doing?’!” [We may leave that story out. Laughter.]

We’ve been friends for quite some time, now. Then Tim Schroeder, we added him to our little group. The religion department really was a good department. We had a lot of fun. We would have religion department meetings at Kurtz’s in Two Rivers.

Mr. Birr: Because it was so quiet there.

Brother Gary: Oh, yes!

Mr. Birr: ...to discuss things. And if you get hungry, they have food. You know.

Brother Gary: Well, we had some food, too. Those nacho chips... isn’t that good? That is so good. Good memories. We had a department meeting here earlier last week, so we had the meeting here, in this room.

Mr. Birr: It was a little cozier in here than out on my back patio.

Brother Gary: So those were good memories. I wasn’t feeling real good today, but with all these visitors I feel much better. I’ll be happy to see what you write about.