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Interview no. 158

Brother M. Paul

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Brother M. Paul

INTERVIEWER: Fletcher Newman

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BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Monk.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Travels in Spain, France, and the United States.

(Part of a paper written by Fletcher Newman)

13 pages.

Brother Paul
by Fletcher Newman
March 18, 1973

Taped Interview with Brother M. Paul, March 18, 1973

[F.N. is the interviewer; B.P. is Brother Paul.]

F.N. What do Carthusians think of abbots, since they don't have them?

B.P. Carthusians don't think much of abbots, that's for sure.

F.N. Don't they respect authority?

B.P. They do. In the last analysis, when the prior comes by, they kiss the hem of his habit and kneel till he finishes speaking, just as other monks kneel and kiss the abbot's ring. But somewhere back in distant history they decided they didn't need abbots. This goes along with their philosophy--that of the solitary. A solitary has no master in this world; he doesn't need a master. At the Carthusian charterhouse of Miraflores they have a big picture of a Carthusian stepping on the mitre and crozier to show their disdain of abbatial authority. Being true solitaries, they don't feel like they should have to call any man "father."

F.N. That reminds me of the Episcopal Charge of sixteenth-century England. I read that "the hermit should make obedience to God alone, because he himself is abbot, prior and prefect in the cloister of his heart."⁵⁷

B.P. Yes, that is the philosophy of the hermit; yet later Church law requires that all religious take a vow of obedience.

F.N. Are Carthusian priors elected for life like an abbot?

B.P. Yes, as I recall. Of course Vatican II has changed all that. The pope now requires that bishops submit their resignations at the age of seventy-five, and this must also apply to other ecclesiastical superiors. The old prior at the charterhouse in Burgos (Miraflores) had been a famous bishop in China--a missionary bishop who decided to retire into the charterhouse. Because of his past administrative ability, and the fact

that he was a bishop, he was elected prior. He was very old when I knew him, but sweet as they come. He was a man who really had an understanding of the quest for solitude. Carthusian priors consider themselves only the first among equals. Let me add this, though: all Carthusians regard their superiors with just a touch of suspicion. This is one peculiar facet of Carthusian life. I can tell you a story on that about Father Richard.

F.N. Please do.

B.P. Father Richard was a young and rather effete Carthusian of about thirty-five years, who came from Parkminster Charterhouse in England. In the time of Henry VIII this house furnished a lot of martyrs. I was told by another Carthusian, an Englishman attached to Miraflores in Spain, never to go to that charterhouse because they were more intellectual than spiritual. Anyway, Father Richard came over as prior of the foundation then in Whitingham, Vermont. He wanted special treatment. He had been an artist before he became a Carthusian. As I said, he was an effete type, very intellectual, but not at all the picture of the ideal monk. I remember that they used to serve beer at the noon meal. In summertime you are not fasting like in the winter, of course, so you have two meals a day, plus a big tin can of tea in the morning. Actually, you have one meal and a light collation at night. But being a typical Englishman, he wanted tea at noon instead of beer. He criticized me, since it was I who took his lunch to his room. He didn't live in a cell at the time. Carthusians have their little hermitages, but because of the peculiarities of a new foundation he was living in a room in this house. He complained to me several times that he didn't

want beer, he wanted a mug of tea. In my old age I can understand him. I want a cup of tea at noon, too. Beer makes a person sleepy, whereas you need something to perk you up. So I took Father Richard's complaint down to Brother Cook, who was a good and typical monk, in fact an ideal monk, very broad and educated, one who had followed all the ascetical teachings. "He doesn't want beer?" Brother Cook asked in astonishment. "The custom in this house is to drink beer at noon, and he will get beer just like everybody else." So the next day when they fixed his tray, they put beer on it. Brother Cook said to me, "Do you want me to take the tray up to him?" I said, "Nope." He said, "All right, you just take it up and plunk it down on his table and leave it." I did that, and naturally Father Richard was never very happy with me after that.

F.N. Is it true that Carthusians move around from monastery to monastery quite a lot? Don't they have a vow of stability?

B.P. Yes, they have a vow of stability just like Trappists, but it works differently. In the Trappists that vow is meant to keep you from being a gyrovague, which St. Benedict was so much against. We used to get them at every monastery I've ever been in, but especially back east. They were vagabonds who would come to a monastery and just hang around and do a little work. But they had no intention of taking up religion seriously. The whole idea of their existence was that they seemed to want to escape responsibility. They wanted to hang around and eat and work as long as they could, and finally they would get sent away, and then they'd haul off and look up some other monastery that would keep them around for a few months. Gyrovagues were not something

just common to St. Benedict's day. Carthusians deliberately send their monks to other houses and they spend two years here and two years there.

F.N. Are they always attached to a particular charterhouse?

B.P. Yes, they're always attached to the house that they took their vows in. And when they die--very often you read death notices, as you do in every monastery--it said that so-and-so died, but it said also that he was attached to such-and-such charterhouse.

F.N. I suppose that when they go out to make a new foundation, they're still attached to their original monastery?

B.P. They're still attached to their old house. Then they attempt in their new foundation to attract new vocations. Brother Bede, who I assume is still in Vermont, if he hasn't died of old age, will always be attached to Miraflores Charterhouse. There's one good thing about the Carthusian Order. You have a lot more contact with the other houses and other Orders, and you don't become so parochial or provincial like many of the Trappists. The Carthusian is much more adaptable to any place that he's sent. Carthusians learn the business of being a solitary. They know that solitude doesn't consist of a cell and garden; it's the solitude they carry around with them. They are solitaries; they think solitary. Everything they do is towards that end--to be a solitary person, dependent like a sparrow upon God.

F.N. Okay, getting back to Brother Bede, the cook in Vermont--do you remember any other stories he told you, or other monks told you?

B.P. Well, Brother Bede was a very peculiar guy, and for me it was a very providential thing to run in to him. I guess it wasn't all that

coincidental; but just like myself, Brother Bede started out as a Trappist, then he went to the Benedictines, and ended up a Carthusian. We felt very close. But, like most Carthusians, he didn't care much for Trappists and their spirit, because Trappists can be true solitaries, but they're often not. It has to do with basic philosophy. I can remember scores of stories. I was brought up and weaned, you might say, on the stories of people like Brother Jude and the Trappists, and Brother John Joseph. Especially Brother Jude. I always looked upon Brother John Joseph as sort of a newcomer, because he was still simple-professed when I came to the monastery, and simple-professed brothers you don't look upon like a he's-here-to-stay, long-time monk. Brother Jude had been a Trappist nine or ten years, so whatever he said to me was like Scripture. I was naïve enough to believe anything. He was often wrong, I realize now. When you're twenty-one and a man thirty-five, who has been tried in the fire, comes along and tells you something, well, you're just young enough to believe it. Yes, Brother Bede used to tell me stories about Franco and about the monastery during the civil war, and things like that, because Franco headquarters for a while was in Burgos. He was a great visitor and patron of the monastery of Miraflores.

F.N. This was before Franco became dictator?

B.P. Yes, and little by little Brother Bede's story came out. In England he joined the Trappists and Benedictines and couldn't find his vocation. And he had travelled around in Spain. For some reason Englishmen are always going to Spain for their holidays, as they call vacations. He ended up in a Carthusian monastery trying to become a hermit, but life in a cell was too much for him. He used to break out with boils all over

his body. Finally, he found that if he didn't stay in the cell, the boils would go away--which was a very unscientific way of thinking, you know--so he switched over and became a laybrother rather than a priest. But here was a man who had already had about three years of philosophy and a couple of years of theology, and he knew the Gospel of St. John by heart. He wasn't ignorant in spiritual matters, but it never occurred to him to check the mattress. There might have been bedbugs or something there.

F.N. I'm sorry to interrupt in the middle of these stories, but I'd like to know where you went from Vermont.

B.P. Well, I was in France for a couple of weeks, then I went to the Carthusians in Miraflores (founded in the fifteenth century). That's a real charterhouse! There's an air of feudalism that still pervades. They own a vast amount of land, and like many monks, they're out fawning upon the rich. It's a great big place with all sorts of cloisters and passageways.

F.N. Is it "far from the haunts of men?"

B.P. Two or three miles outside the city of Burgos, but that's not so far from the haunts of men. Every morning there, you have all those beggars waiting on the outside for something to eat or some money--whatever they choose to give them. And each community supports a whole bunch of people like that.

F.N. Even the poorer monasteries?

B.P. Yes, even the Hermits of Córdoba, who lived on top of a mountain comparable to a small village. In fact, you could go up on the mountain, and, looking down, the town would look just like El Paso, though much smaller and the

buildings were all whitewashed. I told the taxi driver to take me up there. He drove and drove and drove in a very circuitous route. We passed forests of cork trees, where the peasants were out stripping the cork, tying it upon trucks, and then he left me there. There were a couple of caves lower down the mountain. The monastery was built on top the mountain, as if it were Mt. Franklin. I remember there was one old woman who lived in a cave, and a man who lived in another. Most likely these were people without documentación, as they would say-- without identity cards. They were probably leftover rebels from the civil war. The woman was kind of half out-of-her-head, but the monastery fed and took care of those people.

F.N. What do the monks in Spain drink with their meals?

B.P. I was surprised to hear that in Spain all brothers got wine with their meals. Brother Bede saw nothing strange about this. He was an Englishman from Nottingham. He used to joke about it. He said, "My gracious, you don't expect those men to go to work in the fields on lemonade, do you?" It's true, the ones that did the hard work in the fields always got a full liter of wine a day. As for those who worked inside the monastery, only a half bottle was served, and it was very poor wine. In Vermont we drank cider or beer. During the apple season, they would take and grind them up, put them in a press, and make cider--hard cider. I recall the first day I was there. We drank out of tin cans, larger than beer cans-- about like a peach can. They had soldered tin handles on them.

F.N. Did you ever get high on the cider?

B.P. I got loaded the first day. But monks aren't drunkards, as some people would have you believe. If you're going to find excesses of gluttony,

you'll find it among the secular Orders, not in monasteries. In Vermont, poor Brother Bede was addicted to castor oil. Apparently he had some kind of a hang-up.

F.N. Let's call it intestinal trouble.

B.P. Yes, but anyway, he had to take castor oil. He was a great believer in it. On top of this, he used to inflict it upon the whole monastery, since he was the cook. He would put some in the morning tea without telling anyone. He would just do it on his own. And you could see that oil floating on the top; that was a penance in itself! There were some complaints about it, but it kept everybody regular!

F.N. What exciting adventures did you experience among the Hermits of Córdoba? You've already told me something about the place.

B.P. Well, they've gone out of existence now. It's too bad in a way. Their monastery reminded me of a Mexican hacienda. The Mexican style came from southern, not northern, Spain. Everything is painted in white or some nice azulejo, and there's tile all over the place. All you had there to light your room by after dark was an oil lamp, like an Aladdin's lamp (a candil). This place had been established by the Domecq family, or the Soto family. The Domecqs are a very wealthy and noble family in southern Spain. They're counts, and marquises, you know.

F.N. Did these hermits belong to any order?

B.P. No, this is one of those monasteries that was established around the fifteenth or sixteenth century. They used to have the skull of the founder in a glass case in the passage that leads to the chapel.

F.N. Was he a canonized saint?

B.P. No, possibly he was beatified, but not canonized. But how I learned of

the Hermits of Córdoba is a long story.

F.N. Let's make it as short as possible without leaving out the interesting parts.

B.P. Okay. When it became obvious that the Carthusians weren't going to let me hang around, I talked it over with Dom Pedro Soto Y Domecq, a former count, a very humble, good, and saintly monk. He told me stories about how he had been the first secretary to the Spanish ambassador to the United States, and he told me stories of hunting and of his experiences on the Vanderbilt estate here in the U.S. He'd been a wild aristocratic type, and had sowed his wild oats here and there. But when he became a monk, he had to give up his title; so he gave it to his nephew. His mother was a Domecq; his father was a Soto. But they were connected with the big Domecq distilleries, makers of some of the best sherry and cognac. Well, Dom Pedro encouraged me to go to his brother in Minorca, who owned half the island, he said, and I could become a hermit there. This was my whole ambition. I was trying to reach the greatest possible solitude that one can achieve. I wanted to become an anchorite. Well, there was this Carthusian monastery in Valencia of Regina Coeli, and it had a nice little hermitage up there on the hill not very far from it. So Dom Agustín, the Prior of Miraflores, gave me my choice of becoming an anchorite in this hermitage or of staying there in Miraflores and becoming a brother there. Well, I didn't want to stay at the monastery; I wanted to be an anchorite. So he said, "Well, we can get you a dispensation from the Pope."

F.N. Why did you need a dispensation?

B.P. Because the Church, since way back yonder, does not allow pure anchorites,

anymore. They've done away with them; even the Carthusians are required to take a Sunday walk together. The Pope himself gave the order, you know, because, how can you tell your good monks from your bad monks, your crazy monks from your sane monks? Or how can anybody stay sane unless he has some contact with his fellow man? So they're not pure hermits; the Carthusians never were pure hermits. But the whole idea is that they all wanted to be anchorites. They all had this as an ideal. I was a young idealist at the time. I was twenty-six years old. Anyway, Dom Agustín figured that I could get a dispensation so that I could live in this anchorhold, but near Regina Coeli on monastery property. They showed me a picture and a map of the place, and they figured I could take whatever money I had and put it into a trust fund; then, off the interest, I could sit up there and live in my anchorhold. Dom Pedro Soto y Domecq was all for this, and he encouraged me. Dom Agustín also encouraged me. Meantime, though, politics entered in. I don't care how simple and humble and Nathaniel-like [without guile] you are, there's always politics. The prior of the monastery in Jerez de la Frontera, in Spain, where I had originally intended to go, was against me. Now, this may sound paranoid, but it's not. I had had trouble with Father Richard in Vermont. Remember the beer incident? Father Richard found out where I was going to go from Brother Bede. Immediately he wrote to the superior of Jerez de la Frontera saying, "You'd better not accept this brother," because he was afraid, possibly, that I might tell about his eccentricities. At this time there was some big meeting at a charterhouse in Zaragoza, Spain. So the prior from Jerez de la Frontera, in the south of Spain--the very tip end where I had intended to go--

came through there and stopped at the charterhouse on the way. He said, "I had already left orders for this brother not to be received at Jerez de la Frontera," because I had written to him telling him that I was coming. Meantime, he said he had received a letter from Father Richard and wouldn't even discuss my case. Anyway, Dom Agustín thought I was a saint and hero for escaping the Protestant United States to come to Spain. He was all for me. When the prior of Jerez de la Frontera stopped again at Miraflores, they convinced him that he should have a talk with me. Well, the first thing he told me was that he'd been a marquis in secular life, and this was very important for him to tell me. He had been placed in his job because of his aristocratic background, but he didn't strike me as a good superior or effective administrator. Anyway, he left, and I was called in again, and they said, "Have you made up your mind? Do you want to stay here at Miraflores as a brother and be accepted by us, or do you want to go to Regina Coeli and become an anchorite?" Then they sent me out of the room. There was a whole council of monks: Dom Pedro Soto y Domecq and Dom Agustín all sitting there together. So I went out of the room with Brother Eugene, and I said, "Now point out the hermitage." I looked at the picture and the map of Regina Coeli again, and I went back into the chamber. They asked, "Have you decided what you want to do?" And I said, "Yes. Get me a dispensation from the Pope and send me as a hermit to Regina Coeli." Dom Agustín said, "I was prepared to do that, but after consulting with the Prior of Jerez de la Frontera, he has convinced me that I would be criticized within the Order for sending you there. Because I am in my eighties now, they'll say, 'He's becoming a senile old man.' I understand

your feeling and desire to be a hermit, but I can't send you there and retain my own position. Besides, the cellarer of Regina Coeli is not a very spiritual man. He's a very hard-nosed type, as most cellarers tend to be. He will never consent to this. He will have influence, and he will speak against me. So, obviously, you don't have a vocation to stay here, but you have a vocation to become an anchorite." Dom Pedro Soto y Domecq spoke up, "Well, one of my illustrious ancestors founded the Hermits of Córdoba. You go there, and I'll write them a letter to consider you." So I took off, as I said, for the Hermits of Córdoba. I went there, and when they heard that there was a possibility that I might go blind, they panicked. After a week they said no, and after a week I knew that it was no place for me. Except for the chaplain (a secular priest) and the Brother Superior, they were very ignorant. None of them were priests. And they sure were poor. I didn't want to go to an intellectual group in the first place, but I wanted (if I had to live with others) a group of spiritual people. I met each of the hermits, and the only ones who knew anything about the spiritual life were the superior and, possibly, the chaplain.

F.N. Tell me how they lived.

B.P. Each hermit had his own little hut, you might say, away from the central house, where the chapel and refectory were. They met together for one meal--supper. The hermitages were in an olive grove. I believe they wore alpargatas, the kind of slipper that the poor people of Spain wear. On Fridays they would take the discipline, as they do in most Orders. They would go into the chapel and darken the windows so that it was pitch dark. Then they would pull up their robes and give themselves

the discipline on their backs--not like the Trappists, who apply it to the shoulders. For about twenty minutes: whack, whack! I suppose they thought they were going to frighten me. They were a weird bunch, and as I said, very very poor. They used to eat gazpacho every night and only half-cured olives. Gazpacho is just vinegar and oil with bread, and maybe a few tomatoes or onions thrown in, and, naturally, garlic--nothing is complete in Spain without garlic, not even the spiritual life.

F.N. After you left the Hermits of Córdoba, what did you do?

B.P. Well, I tried to get into a Carmelite desert (where they have their hermitages), but then decided against it, because Carmelite hermits are never assured that they can remain hermits. The superior might command a brother to leave his hermitage and start taking up collections in some parish church. So then I went and discussed my vocation with a Jesuit priest in Madrid. He advised me: "Make your own life. You're a solitary. You don't need anybody, so get married." And I got married, and here I am. Believe me, that's one permanent state of affairs!