

Interview with James M. O'Brien **Author of *Making a Priest in the Fifties***

Reader Views welcomes James M. O'Brien PhD., author of the new book "Making a Priest in the 'Fifties: Memoir of a Nervous Seminarian." James is being interviewed by Juanita Watson, Assistant Editor of Reader Views.

Juanita: Thanks for taking the time to talk with us today James. We are interested in hearing more about your humorous, yet candid memoir, "Making a Priest in the 'Fifties: Memoir of a Nervous Seminarian." First off, would you give us an idea of the story you tell in your book?

James: I showed up on the steps of St. Mary's Seminary and University in Baltimore on a hot day in September, 1957, wearing my "college-boy" sport coat and carrying a tennis racquet. As evidence of my cluelessness, I never noticed that all the other guys were wearing black – suits or cassocks. I had grown up Catholic - grade school, high school, Notre Dame, but I had no idea how a seminary worked. I began to find out in a hurry.

The staff seemed more concerned about my clothing than my worthiness or ability. I felt plenty worried about those items, particularly my shaky knowledge of Latin, but the faculty seemed primarily interested in obedience, measure by following The Rule. I turned out to be a little shaky in that area, too.

In 1957, the Church was on the cusp of huge changes, unsuspected by most of us. It turned out to be a more exciting time than we anticipated. Some of the faculty advocated huge changes in the Church, others stood in opposition. Some faculty seemed to be barely hanging on to their faculties. And we all had to figure out where we stood.

Juanita: What inspired you to write your memoir?

James: I used to tell stories of the eccentric seminary faculty and students to my fellow faculty members. One of them suggested that these might make a better book than the academic stuff I was trying to write. By the time I had about 60,000 words, I began to think there might be a book in there.

Juanita: What initially led to your decision to enter the Catholic priesthood?

James: I think I was a pretty typical Catholic boy; most of us who went to Catholic schools thought of it once in a while. A priest was a big deal in those days, almost as important as a sports coach.

Juanita: How old were you when you entered Seminary school? Would you set the tone of the late 50's for us, in the context of a changing America?

James: I was 23, had finished college and wanted to do something both significant and safe. I sensed the stirrings of discontent and frustration in a lot of the generation just after me, but I was no rebel myself. Unlike James Dean, I HAD a cause. I felt challenged by the ideas of existential philosophy, much in vogue in the fifties, and wanted *engagement total* (complete commitment) to life. Of course, that total commitment put me totally OUT of touch with the world for another four years. I didn't pick up on the irony at the time.

A lot of us thought about the never-ending 'police action' in Korea, rather wound-down in the mid-fifties, but always a threat. As freshman, most of us thought that, if we flunked out of college or even got poor grades, we'd be instantly drafted and find ourselves in the front lines in an Asian country in a military action we didn't really understand.

Juanita: What was happening in the Catholic Church at that time, and how did it affect St. Mary's Seminary and University?

James: Most of the Catholic laity of the fifties, including myself, thought of the Church as solid, unchanging, a monolith of truths and values, a source of security in a world cowering under the nuclear threat, shaken by the fears of McCarthyism. But new ideas were creeping into the seminary curriculum, particularly in Scripture, and in the scriptural notion of what the Church really was, a living, dynamic organization. Our class quickly began to polarize toward the new ideas or clinging to the traditional ideas.

Juanita: Where were these new ideas coming from?

James: A lot of the most challenging ones came from Protestant Scriptural scholarship which took place in Germany in the 19th century. Catholic Bible scholars ran about a hundred years behind, but were catching up fast. Of course, traditionalists felt that these ideas were dangerous to the faith.

Juanita: What things did you find particularly archaic due to the "old way" traditions that were still carried out?

James: Most obvious was Latin. A lot of people liked the SOUND of Latin, and the world-wide use of this language made the Church seem united and universal. The problem? - Almost nobody understood it. Reciting the language of the liturgy was the work of the clergy; the work of the laity was to sit and listen to it. Many of us thought it would be good if the liturgy had MEANING as well as beauty and solemnity.

Juanita: What was your stance on the changes happening in the church, and what were your thoughts on the polarity that was happening with the old and new?

James: When I entered St. Mary's, I had no sense that there were "sides" to be taken on these issues. My theology and Scripture classes 'blew my mind' as we used to say in the sixties. I quickly found myself aligning with the liberals who wanted major changes in Catholic life, ministry, liturgy, across the board. The more far-out types even imagined a married clergy (gasp!) or even women priests. (Gasp, GASP.) But I wasn't quite THAT far out.

Juanita: I understand that you use quite a bit of humor to drive your thoughts in "Making a Priest in the 'Fifties." Would you comment on this aspect of your writing, and what made you a "nervous seminarian"?

James: Nervous? Who's nervous? I didn't know Latin well, although I got terrific marks at Notre Dame. I didn't understand the monastic structure of the daily life. I wasn't sure what was expected of me. I thought I was supposed to sort of prove my worthiness, but that really wasn't an issue. What the faculty really looked for was obedience to the rule, but because I was such a late-comer to seminary life, they didn't expect ME to conform to the rule well and, in a word, I didn't. That's kind of funny in itself. Besides, I'm essentially an Irish story-teller, like my father, and I think the human experience is pretty funny, particularly when fallible human beings are trying to be solemn.

Some of the faculty ranked as major eccentrics. Father Miles McAndrews, who had been written in as county dogcatcher in California, and was persuaded against his will to refuse the post. Father Snuffy Nevins, the moral theology teacher, who believed that the Supreme Court, the Railroads and the Communists had concocted a scheme to take over the country. How could you treat this seriously?

And the blunders which occur in solemn situations are intensified by the solemnity. Not so funny to the blunderer, but hilarious to the knowledgeable observer. These laughs saved our sanity, not to say our very humanity. Besides, I was born to be a class clown. I can't help it.

Juanita: It sounds like you thought the serious "to the rule" nature was a little over the top.

James: We were handed a sheet of paper - seven days, fourteen hours, every half hour to be accounted for. On the bottom, the ominous words "He lives for God who lives by rule" - A quote from St. Benedict, written for his Benedictine monks. But WE were not studying to be monks. We knew this kind of rigid rule could not be carried out in parish life. I believed in flexibility, spontaneity, improvisation. I'm a "jazz man" more than just a jazz clarinetist, and I guess it showed.

What the Church wanted from its seminarians: guys who would follow the rules; obey their pastors and particularly their bishops. The Church wanted "company men" and expected the seminary to weed out the oddballs. It didn't always succeed, obviously.

I wanted to be a player, but I wanted to be able to call my own plays. But that only works if you're a quarterback.

Juanita: What are some of the key experiences you had at St. Mary's that you talk about in your book?

James: As one who had felt terrified of public speaking, I discovered that I could stand up in the pulpit and preach, even in front of three hundred plus religious professionals. My cold feet turned to happy feet, so to speak. I felt gratified to be offered a position of student leadership, Head Librarian, even though it's not the position I might have chosen for my self. It's sort of like making the law review for law students, I guess.

Juanita: What was the personality transformation process like for you throughout your four years?

James: I grew in self-confidence. Particularly due to my summer experiences in a kind of sub-priestly experience, I felt I knew as much as possible about my future life as a priest. I worked in a parish, in a steel mill, and in a juvenile prison and it gave me some perspective on people and the priestly ministry. It also taught me a bit about how little I knew about life.

Juanita: Do you feel you were well prepared for life as a priest?

James: St. Mary's prepared us very well to be liturgists. Despite our fear of our Ceremonies teacher, Father Meyer, or maybe because of it, I always felt that I knew what I was doing during ceremonies. As for the non-ceremonial part of the priestly ministry, we had very little preparation. No training in counseling, for example. No training in dealing with adolescents. Or women, for that matter. A fear of women, particularly as a threat to our celibacy, was deeply institutionalized. For many of us, it didn't take. For many others, it took too well.

Juanita: Why do you think there was such an emphasis on liturgy, and a very little attention paid to actually ministering to the people?

James: The one thing a priest must do well: celebrate the liturgy. Theological reasons for this. Celebration of the liturgy does not depend on the gifts or character of the celebrant. Ministry does, and in the parish setting, widely different expectations exist on the parts of the pastors. For example, skill in preaching is a key part of the Protestant ministry. In the Catholic Church, it isn't. In the "old Church," people felt that the sermons were part of their penance for sins. If a good preacher showed up, it was an unexpected blessing.

Juanita: How has your spirituality changed since those long ago days?

James: Well, sure, very much so, particularly during my later years as a priest. But I'd like to leave the details of that for Volume II of the memoirs, which I'm currently calling Priesting the Sixties. I'm better than half finished, so I don't want to give away any of the staggering revelations contained therein.

Juanita: James, I know readers will be happy to hear that you are writing the follow-up to your 50's experiences. "Making a Priest in the 'Fifties" also has relevance to current concerns in the priesthood. What thoughts do you share on contemporary issues, such as sex and celibacy, hierarchy, and clerical ambition?

James: As I mentioned above, sexuality, particularly homosexual sexuality, rarely got mentioned, and then almost by mistake. The basic position on sex was negative; the negation intensified by fear. By the way, that was roughly the attitude I experienced throughout my whole twenty years of Catholic education, so it didn't come as much of a shock. As to hierarchy, everyone in the seminary had a precise place in the hierarchy, and that place understood to be of high importance. We moved up the ranks in that hierarchy, and were encouraged to do so, although at the same time, we were not to be ambitious. It smacks of pride! Nonetheless, I discovered to my surprise that I WAS ambitious. I wanted to be noticed, particularly by my bishop, and I GOT myself noticed. But that story is another memoir.

Juanita: As time brings more wisdom to the experiences of one's youth, do you think the humorous way in which you view your life in seminary school has increased, or was it always a little bizarre to you?

James: Despite my humorous take on seminary life, I approached my priestly preparation with deep seriousness. I think that's clear in the ending of the last chapter. Humor adds perspective to the human experience. It acknowledges limitations, which are inevitable. I worry about people who take themselves too seriously. They're missing something. Whenever I took myself too seriously, I was cruising for a bruising, as we used to say.

Juanita: James, what do you hope readers ultimately understand by reading your memoir?

James: Seminarians, and the priests they would become, are very very human, not magical people in any way. Most of the guys I seminared with are senior pastors, if they haven't left. Maybe my memoir might give them and their flock a glimpse of a process that shaped them in a profound way. Or not.

Juanita: Your memoir ends once you finish your training. For interested readers that are left wondering what happened to the budding priest, would you give them a little update?

James: I was ordained for the Rockford diocese in 1961, served as parish priest, newspaper editor, high school teacher, Media director for the diocese, and chaplain to a Motherhouse for the School Sisters of Notre Dame. I, like many others, requested and received a leave of absence in 1969, completed my Ph.D., taught at the University of Miami and the College of New Rochelle, a Catholic women's college, by the way, till my retirement to Madison in 1999.

Juanita: James, how can readers find out more about your book?

James: Best way for interested viewers to get a peek would be to check out iUniverse.com, look up recent publications and then the book under the title. They'd get to read the foreword and the first (and funniest) chapter. It's also on bn.com, Amazon, and all the other internet sources.

Juanita: James, we have certainly enjoyed talking with you today. Your book sounds incredibly interesting and great fun to read. Before we let you go, do you have any last thoughts for your readers today?

James: "Thanks fer yer support." And, as Ariyasu would say, "remember Pahl Haba."