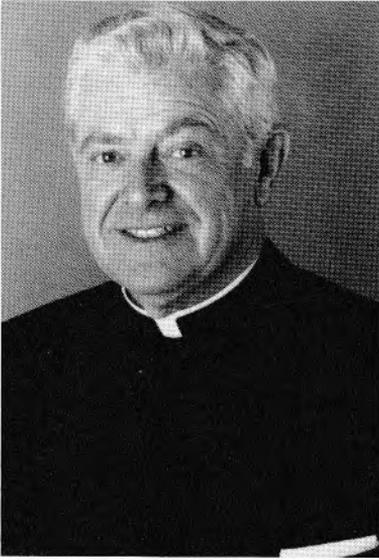


REV. EUGENE J. O'BRIEN, S.J.



Rev. Eugene J. O'Brien, S.J., began his Fordham career as an instructor at Fordham Prep from 1950 to 1953. He served as Headmaster of the Prep from 1960 to 1970, as Headmaster-President from 1970 to 1975, and as President from 1975 to 1979. He led the effort for a new Prep building at Rose Hill and oversaw the separate incorporation of the Prep from the University. On January 13, 1980, the University awarded him the Insignis Medal, an honor previously accorded to such distinguished recipients as Francis Cardinal Spellman, Vincent T. Lombardi, and Rev. Harold Mulqueen, S.J. Father O'Brien returned to Fordham University in 1986 as Assistant to the President. In 1987 he was appointed Vice President for University Relations.

I knew it was an important day when the then President of the

University, Father Michael Walsh, phoned in the fall of 1968 to ask if he could come over to see me at the Prep. He wanted to discuss the legal separation of the Prep from the University. By this time, the Jesuit Community and the University had already been separately incorporated, and Fordham was governed by a lay-majority Board of Trustees. The reason for that change and the thinking behind the suggestion that the Prep also be separately incorporated were the same—the University's anticipated application for state financial aid under the Bundy Law. Mr. Walter Gelhorn, a member of the faculty of Columbia University Law School, who was advising Fordham on the issue of state aid, recommended the moves.

At our meeting, I told Father Walsh that I welcomed the proposal because I felt it was the right move at that time, not only for the University and its financial considerations, but also for the Prep itself. If the Prep was to undertake a major capital campaign for a new building and to secure its long-term financial well-being, it needed its own board of trustees, people who joined its board primarily because they were interested in secondary education. So Father Walsh and I had a very easy meeting of minds, especially because he was one of the most wonderful people in the world to work with.

Father Walsh had consulted

with the Jesuit Provincial of the New York Province before asking me. Subsequently it became clear that Jesuit headquarters in Rome had some concerns since we were effectively creating a new form of governance for our high schools. In July of 1970, while visiting Rome and at the suggestion of our New York Provincial, I took the opportunity to talk with the Superior General of the Order, Father Pedro Arrupe.

I wanted to clear up any misconceptions of how we had reached the decision to incorporate Fordham Prep separately and what it would mean for the School's future. At that time, Rome was still not sure of the change that a good number of the Jesuit universities, including Fordham, had made in moving from a purely religious board of trustees to a board composed of both lay and religious. I assured the General that I saw the arrangement we had made as the only solution for American Jesuit high schools. In one of the more remarkable sentences I have ever heard, Father General said to me, "I have learned much today."

Within six months, he wrote a letter to the entire American Assis­tancy (the Jesuits in the United States), in which he explained some guidelines he wished to see in the future development of Jesuit secondary schools in the United States. One of those guidelines emphasized our "colleagu­ship" with lay men and women, not only as teachers, but

as administrators and policy makers for our schools. That was a landmark document, and I've always had the feeling that maybe the talk we had that day at least facilitated, or possibly expedited, his writing it. We are talking about a piece of history that is today so commonly accepted and understood that all our schools now find themselves with boards of trustees, and they have been their salvation.

For assistance in all of this, on the advice of the Chancellor of the New York State Board of Regents, Mr. Joseph W. McGovern (a graduate of Regis High School, Fordham College, and Fordham Law School), I consulted with Lawrence X. Cusack (also Regis High School, Fordham College, and Fordham Law), senior partner of the firm Cusack and Stiles. His enormous understanding of church-state relationships in American law was immensely helpful to us as we selected a model for the governance of Fordham Prep. He happened also to be a very valued and constantly called-upon legal counsel to Cardinal Spellman and his successor, Terence Cardinal Cooke.

Mr. Cusack suggested a double-tier board in which the owners of the Fordham Prep Corporation would be a group of seven Jesuits, including the executive officer of the Prep and a representative of the Provincial, to be called The Board of Members. They in turn would elect the Board of Trustees, and the trus-

tees would set the policy for governing the School and elect its executive officer, as well as work with the Prep's administration on a regular basis.

The reaction of the Prep alumni to all this was very positive once it was explained. Indeed any problems disappeared once they understood that the move would help the University develop its financial resources, that the Prep was remaining on the campus, that the University had deeded a piece of its property to us, and that we would continue to use some of the University's facilities, such as the Church, Collins Auditorium, and some playing fields. The separate incorporation of the Prep from the University took place in June 1970.

We did succeed in constructing a marvelous new building for the Prep, which opened in September 1972. The cost of the new facility and the need to endow the School, especially in order to provide financial aid to needy students, necessitated a great deal of fund raising. In the spring of 1976, the Board of Trustees decided we needed a major fund-raising event and instructed me to think of one. After a long weekend with my Development Director, John J. Cummings, I came up with nothing, until I opened the Arts and Leisure section of the Sunday *New York Times*. There I read an interview with Bing Crosby, who was asked

why he was still doing benefit concerts at the age of 75. He replied, "There are a lot of nice songs to sing, and lots of nice causes to help."

The next day, I called out to Bellarmine Prep in San Jose, a Jesuit school, where Mr. Crosby's son Harry was then a student. I asked the president for the telephone number of the Crosby home. His initial response was less than trusting, but he agreed to make the call and see if Mr. Crosby would speak with me. He asked me not to ask Bing Crosby for a gift, and I did not. Instead, I asked him to consider doing a concert for us, and the answer was yes. It was that simple.

The concert took place the following December. He had not sung in New York in 45 years. We used Avery Fisher Hall at Lincoln Center and we filled the house, making almost \$200,000 for the Prep. Mr. Crosby died in October of 1977. We later had a second benefit performance by Mr. Crosby's good friend Bob Hope.

The Crosby concert had a tremendous psychological impact on our efforts to retire a debt of nearly \$3 million. The attention given the concert in the newspapers and on television seemed to convince people that if we could stage such a successful event, we could also solve our financial problems. It was right after that that we started the "Burn the Mortgage" campaign. Indeed, under the leadership of Governor

Malcolm Wilson, a triple Fordham graduate, we burned the

mortgage and cleared the Prep of all debt by December 1979.

AS I REMEMBER FORDHAM

*Selections
from the
Sesquicentennial
Oral History Project*



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