

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY  
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM  
ROMAN CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF YOUNGSTOWN

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Thomas Tobin  
Interview  
By  
Donna DeBlasio  
On  
November 28, 2000

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY  
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ROMAN CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF YOUNGSTOWN

INTERVIEWEE: Bishop Thomas Tobin

INTERVIEWER: Donna M. DeBlasio

SUBJECT: Roman Catholic Diocese of Youngstown

DATE: November 28, 2000

D: This is an interview with Thomas Tobin for the Youngstown State University Oral History Project on the Diocese of Youngstown. Today is November 28, 2000. This interview is being conducted at the diocese on West Wood Street in Youngstown. My name is Donna DeBlasio.

D: Bishop Tobin, let's just start off by talking a little bit about yourself. Tell me about your family.

T: Well, my family consists of my mom and dad. My dad is deceased. My mom still lives in Pittsburgh. I also have two brothers and a sister. One brother is deceased and the other brother lives in Florida. My sister lives in Pittsburgh. I have ten nieces and nephews and ten great nieces and nephews scattered around this part of the country for the most part.

D: Where were you born?

T: I was born in Pittsburgh.

D: Is it impolite to ask when you were born?

T: That's never impolite. My age is a matter of public record, I suppose. I was born on April 1, 1948.

D: Did you grow up in a particular neighborhood in Pittsburgh?

T: Yes, I grew up in the Ross Township section of Pittsburgh, more particularly the Laurel Gardens section of Pittsburgh. My family moved there just after I was born in 1948. It was a very rural area outside of Pittsburgh. Small farms, some grape arbors and so forth. Now, as time has developed it, it is really part of the Pittsburgh suburbs in the North Hills. It used to be a beautiful little neighborhood. Somewhat secluded from the suburban sprawl that surrounded it, yet very convenient to other parts of the suburbs and also the city of

Pittsburgh itself. It is within ten miles of the city of Pittsburgh.

D: North or south?

T: North.

D: What did your parents do for a living?

T: My mom stayed at home as most mothers did in those days, of course, and raised her family. My dad worked for Sears and Roebuck in Pittsburgh for most of his adult life, about thirty years or so. He retired from there. He retired when he was just fifty-five years old. He and my mom had a great opportunity they did not have before. For almost twenty years, they traveled a lot through the United States, seeing all forty eight continental states and spent a lot of winters in Florida in later years also.

D: Were you educated?

T: I was educated, first of all, in our parish school, St. Teresa Grade school in Perrysville, also in the North Hills in Pittsburgh. After eighth grade, I went to high school seminary, St. Mark's Seminary, in Erie for high school and the first two years of college. Then, I spent the last two years of college at St. Francis Seminary. That's where I graduated from. Then, for my theological studies, I went to Rome where I resided at the North American College. I studied at the Gregorian University for three years, then for the fourth year, at the Liturgical Institute of St. Anselmo. I stayed at the North American College, which is our residence there when we study at Rome University.

D: Why did you decide to enter the priesthood?

T: I suppose that is always the hardest question to answer. It's easier to explain how someone becomes a priest and what a priest does, what the studies are like, and what the work is like and so forth. I think the hardest question is always 'why'. From a human point of view, I am sure I was influenced by the faith of my parents, and certainly the example of priests and religious who served us in our parish at Saint Teresa. I also felt very comfortable in the Church and around the Church. I sang in the choir when I was in grade school. We had good role models. I felt very inclined, even in grade school, to some kind of service in the Church, for reasons which are, I suppose, difficult to describe from the faith perspective. From a theological point of view, we become a priest, and eventually a Bishop, because the Lord has called us to do that. It is not so much something that we have chosen, but what the Lord has chosen us to do. That is where the realm of the mystery enters. Jesus says to his Apostles, "You did not choose me, but I choose you." And we believe that about our priesthood. For some reason, Jesus chose me to become a priest and a Bishop. I am sure there are human factors that make that possible.

D: How did you feel when you were selected to become the Bishop of Youngstown?

T: Well, it came as a great surprise. Keep in mind that the three years previously I had been the

Auxiliary Bishop in Pittsburgh. Once you become a Bishop, that is auxiliary, you realize it is very possible you will not spend the rest of your life in that spot. Bishops move around, they transfer from one place to another. So, I knew in the back of my mind that it was possible that I would not spend the rest of my life in Pittsburgh. But, when I learned that I was coming to Youngstown—which was coincidentally five years yesterday that I got the call from the Apostolic Nuncio in Washington—I was both excited and happy and felt very challenged. I realized it would be good work, a very important work, that there would be a lot of challenges and it was a two edged sword in sense because everything was new to me. I had never lived in Youngstown before. Everything was new the priests, the parishes, the policies, the history of the area, some of the strengths and blessings, some of the needs and problems. Everything was brand new for me, so it was really a learning experience. On the other hand, there is an advantage to coming in to a completely new situation too. You can make a fresh start for yourself, for everyone in the diocese. In that sense I was very excited when I heard I was to be Bishop. And particularly in Youngstown, because it had a reputation of being a good diocese and because it was very close to my home in Pittsburgh too.

D: What excites you most about being the job of being Bishop in Youngstown?

T: I think the most exciting thing is the opportunity to set a vision and try to fulfill that vision. It is really exciting when you see people responding to that vision. That does not happen all that time. It happens in varying degrees of success, I'm sure. But the opportunity of being over here is a wonderful opportunity. It is very challenging, but it is also very exciting to be able to make a difference in the lives of individual people. There are about 260,000 people in six counties with nearly 200 priests, 117 parishes with 44 elementary schools, and six high schools. Who knows what the future holds with all that. Nonetheless, that is a very large family to take care of, a very large flock to try and shepherd. The opportunity of being a leader of this size of the Church and trying to make a difference in terms of creating a vision, and setting a vision, and having people to respond to that as they have done very well, I think, is terribly exciting.

D: What are your least favorite aspects of your position?

T: I can't say anything I don't really enjoy. There are two things I find especially challenging. One is the opposite of what I just spoke about. One of the things that is most challenging is when you do have a vision, and not everybody accepts it. And then the challenge is to try and continue to lead, try to continue sharing this vision without purely imposing it on others, without alienating people. That is the one challenge, to try to continue to lead without losing people if they do not share what you are trying to do. Not everyone always comes from the same point of view in approaching any question. There's one challenge. The second challenge, I think, is simply trying to be present. I think the personal presence is very important. It makes the world of difference in the way people respond to the Bishop and the way they respond to the Church, the works of the Church, the ministry, the service of the Church. The presence of the Bishop is very crucial. At the same time, the Bishop cannot be present in every place, to every person, at all times. So, the Bishop does his very best, and certainly, I do my best to try and be present. There are many things that I would like to

do that are not possible because of the restrictions of time. I would like to be more present to our schools, I would like to be in our parishes every weekend, I would like to spend more time visiting with our priests, visiting with religious leaders; I just can't be present at all times.

D: I am sure every day is different, but would you describe a typical day for yourself?

T: You are correct. Every day is different. My typical day, at least during the week, includes my coming to the office, having a number of meetings, appointments, taking care of daily correspondence, that comes in great volumes, returning phone calls, staying in touch with the members of the staff. And that would happen typically on a weekday. And then, very typically on the weekday, I would be out with some program or activity in the evening, confirmation ceremonies, other parish events, meetings, and pastoral council meetings. That would be somewhat of a typical day. Weekends tend to be filled with other spiritual liturgical activities, visiting parishes, anniversaries of parishes, confirmations, installations of pastors, those kind of activities, diocesan events. You're right. There's no typical day. Those activities would be somewhat typical.

D: For people who open the time capsule, whoever opens this in 2043, what do you want to tell them about the state of the Catholic Church in the world in 2000?

T: Well, this is a very broad question. I think the two factors that are guiding the life of the Church right now, the Church Universal, would be we still are responding to and I think implementing the challenge of the Second Vatican Council. Just thirty five years ago, the Vatican Council closed. I think we have been through a time of trial and error. We have made some great progress. There have been some missteps along the way too. It will take generations for the Ecumenical Council such as we experienced in the 1960's, to be really understood and fully implemented. I think we are still in the process of learning what the Council has said to us and trying to implement that as effectively and faithfully as possible. That is one guiding force in the Church right now. Second, and it is coming to a conclusion, has been the celebration this year of the Great Jubilee. The Great Jubilee of the year 2000, which has been a remarkable event for the Universal Church, the Church of the United States, and the Diocese of Youngstown. The opportunity to examine our faith, try to recommit ourselves to our faith and all that that means, we've had some very special opportunities to do that in this Jubilee Year, the year 2000. We do not know what the future holds, but I think we will be a stronger Church, more enlivened because of what we celebrated in this Great Jubilee. That has been directed particularly by the leadership of Pope John Paul II, who has now been Pope for twenty-two years and he has truly left his impression, his mark on the Church. In a general sense I think the leadership of the current Pope, particularly for the Great Jubilee, has had a real influence on the Universal Church.

D: Actually, that was a nice segue for my next question. I did want to ask you about Pope John Paul II, what do you think his greatest accomplishment is to date?

T: Well, I guess I would have to relate that to the Second Vatican Council. He was one of the

participants in the Second Vatican Council. No one knows or understands the Council better than he does. He was there. In fact, I think he has been able to bring the Church to a sure and steady implementation of the Second Vatican Council. I think avoiding some of the abuses of the recent past, he has established some clear guidelines and teachings in some encyclicals and apostolic letters. I think he has brought the Church back to a very solid center. I think his papacy will be one of the greatest papacies in the history of the Church. Certainly it is one of the remarkable events of the twentieth century. His influence will be felt, not just in the Church, but in the secular world as well. I really think he has been a strong and steady influence on the Church at this point in its history. Also through his travels and teachings he has opened the Church to new business, new arenas that we could not have imagined before.

D: What do you think the biggest challenges are that the Church around the world will face in the next forty-three years?

T: Well, it is difficult to speak of the challenges of the Church around the world because the conditions vary so much from place to place. In some places the Church has people, nations just trying to survive. There is still a great deal of poverty, hunger, and homelessness and disease and persecution, political violence and threats of war that affects all of the people of the world and the Church suffers from that too. In some cases, the question of the Church is merely one survival and of trying to respond to material, and physical, and then spiritual needs of the people they're serving. In other parts of the world, such as our own country, we are living in a time of great material prosperity. I think our challenge, in the immediate future, and in the future, will be to maintain a spiritual vision and importance of God, the importance of the spiritual life in the midst of a world that, in our country at least, is increasingly secular and materialistic and in some ways a truly atheistic society, trying to live without God, focusing on secular and the material. I think that the challenge of the Church in our country is to maintain that spiritual God-centered vision of faith and that is the contribution of the Church can make to our nation.

D: Well, you have already mentioned the Vatican II, what other changes have you seen in the Church in the last fifty years?

T: Well, I have lived through most of that period of course. That pretty much coincides with my life, the past fifty years. Certainly I think the predominant changes in the Catholic Church is the result of the Vatican Council, is that it has been more open to the world, more open to dialogue and receiving good things from the rest of the world, and more importantly sharing the Gospel in the world and not trying to see itself only as a city on the mountaintop, secluded in the world, but truly a dialogue, sharing good things and learning from them, being a partner with people as we travel through history. That, I would say is the major change in the Church, as it relates to others. I think internally the greatest change in the Church in the recent years has been the increased role of all people in the Church, in the ministry of the Church. Certainly fifty years ago, the emphasis would have been strongly on the contributions of the priests and religious women, particularly in the life of the Church. Without minimizing the role, now or in the future, that is still essential to the life of the Church, we have been able to, again as a result of the Council to incorporate so

many more people, laity, in our parishes, in our schools, our institutions, in the life and the ministry of the Church. I think that would be one of the fruits of the spirit as we continue to move in to the future. The laity will continue to assume their rightful role in the Church. Not only within the confines of the Church itself, but more importantly, in missioning the laity in taking the Gospel of Jesus Christ with them in the world. That is certainly my hope- that the laity will become more active in taking the vision of Christ, the values of Christ with them in to the market place and the secular world. That is the most profound contribution they can make.

D: What do you think are the greatest strengths of the Diocese of Youngstown today?

T: The greatest strengths if the Diocese of Youngstown today are first, of all, a sense of commitment that everybody brings to the work of the Church. I have been really impressed with the willingness, the generosity, the commitment of all people in this Church, starting with the lay people, and all of our parishes and our schools and institutions. We really have very, very good people in this diocese. Strong faith, deep faith, people who want to live that faith to the best of their ability. I'm really impressed by the young people, in our elementary schools, and high schools, and people get involved in campus ministry to some extent. All this commitment, of course, is supplemented and completed by the life and commitment of the religious and the priests. Even though a number of religious and priests is decreasing, their commitment remains very strong and their impact is very important. So, I think that is our strongest gift, asset to this point in history, the willingness of people to serve, to be committed to Christ and the Church. It gives up great hope for the future.

D: What are the greatest challenges facing the Diocese of Youngstown?

T: I think the greatest challenge for the moment is probably for the immediate future, is the need to recruit more people to the religious life and the priesthood. At this point in our history, we have about 190 priests. Fifty-five of our priests have retired, many others have reached retirement age. We have had three ordinations for the priesthood this year. Prior to that, it had been three years since we had any ordinations. We are working very hard throughout the diocese to try to promote vocations to the religious life and priesthood, particularly for this diocese. Despite the increased enrollment and involvement of the laity, the work of the priest is essential to the life of the Church. Because the context for young men to respond to the priesthood call today, we have to work a little harder to encourage them, to call them forward to serve the Church. We have worked very hard. I think that is our greatest challenge for the future. We are starting to make some progress. I hope when people this time capsule in forty-three years, there will still be many priests we are recruiting today, who will be serving the Diocese.

D: How many religious do we have-men and women-currently in the diocese?

T: I don't know the exact number of hand; I know it's a decreasing number. You would have to check our directory for the precise number. It is a smaller number. They are aging. Those who are there, are continuing to serve to the best of their ability.

D: Can you describe some of the Catholic social ministry efforts that we have today?

T: Catholic Charities continues to be a very essential part of the life of the Church of the Diocese of Youngstown. We recently have gone, as you know, through a reorganization process, where we have tried to strengthen relationships between Catholic Charities and the Diocese of Youngstown, in order to make it as strong, as Catholic, as possible. The sense of unity and identity of Catholic Charities is very important. We continue to support Catholic Charities, particularly through the annual Bishop's Appeal, which is a major collection every year at springtime. Through the funds we generate from the Bishop's Appeal, we are able to give that to Catholic Charities. Catholic Charities does its work through the central offices, and that, of course, provided funds for the agencies in each of our six countries. They provide wonderful services, in terms of counseling, services to the poor, needy, ministry to individuals and families, housing programs, educational assistance for people in need. It just crosses the spectrum of trying to respond to the pastoral and material needs of God's people throughout the diocese. Needs change from time to time, place to place. I think our Catholic Charities agencies in every country of the diocese are doing a wonderful job of trying to respond to the needs that they have in the local area.

D: What do you think is the importance of having a Catholic education for the people of the diocese?

T: Our Catholic schools system is terribly important. I think time has shown, the experience has shown, that the most effective way we have in handing our faith to the young people is in elementary school and in the high school, because they are in a Catholic setting, they're in a Catholic context all day, every day. Nothing can replace that. At the same time, as Catholic schools try to hand on the faith to the young people, they do that in three ways. They do that by teaching doctrine, by trying to build community, by trying to motivate young people to service. The three specific goals of a Catholic education are doctrine, community, and service. At the same time, we recognize that that does not happen all by itself. Catholic schools do face challenges today. We have some places with declining enrollment in our schools. Renewed costs continue to rise. We have to do more to try to pay our teachers a rewarding salary. Costs in all of our schools, high school and elementary schools, are increasing. And we have limited resources. We do not get a large amount of state funding, so support for our Catholic schools really comes from the people of the church, the people who use the school in terms of tuition. We have great needs. In some cases, the enrollment is declining. What we need to have strong Catholic schools are three things. We need students. We need material resources. And we need fidelity to mission. Some of those are within our control; some of those are not within our control.

D: How is the Catholic Church in the Diocese of Youngstown involved with social justice within the community?

T: A lot of that happens, first of all, with Catholic Charities. Certainly the work of Catholic Charities is serving the poor, in bringing groups together and advocating for social change, just legislation, and just social policies, economic policies and human life policies and laws. Through Catholic Charities and social action in particular, we are trying our best to do those



three things. To serve the poor, to convene people around those issues, try to advocate for civil government with just laws and just programs. I think the other thing we need to do is to educate our own people about these issues. That is one of the primary works of the Church, of course; to educate people about the teachings of the Church, the Gospel of Christ. Those needs perhaps change place to place, and time to time, but the Gospel of Christ remains constant. The work of the Church is to try to take the Gospel of Jesus and apply it to the people of this time at this place. The great issues of our time, the human life issue, the terrible questions of abortion, euthanasia, assisted suicide, capital punishment, death sentences. These are all human life issues that are current right now that we are trying to struggle against. I am sure there will be other new changes we cannot even begin to imagine at this point in history. But, the sanctity and dignity of human life, the dignity of each person, racial equality, sharing our material resources, these are all on going challenges in the Church right now and will continue to challenge is in the future.

D: How is the Catholic Church of Youngstown involved in pro-life activities?

T: I think that is the greatest moral challenge of our time: threats against human life, the greatest moral challenge of our particular time. I mentioned the sins of abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment; that's what the Church is facing at this time. How do we respond to those? Again, we try to educate people. We try to motivate people. We try to bring the Gospel of Life to bear in our current context. We try to promote legislation to guarantee and defend the sanctity of human life. We try to be involved in active ways in the community to try to encourage those who have difficulties in this area- eliminate sins of violence against human life. It has many dimensions, not just the three I mentioned. Domestic abuse, and crime and violence in our streets, questions of abuse of migrant workers and immigrants, gun violence. All of these things are sins against life too. I think that is the greatest moral challenge in all those ways and trying to respond to that.

D: How is the Catholic Church of the Diocese of Youngstown involved in health care?

T: We have our three Catholic hospitals throughout the diocese in Canton, Youngstown, and Warren, not directly owned by the diocese, but by sponsoring the religious communities. But the Diocese of Youngstown is closely involved with health care ministries. In particular, to try to lend our encouragement and support, to try to remain faithful in our Catholic identity, our religious institutions well within the context of the Church. And along with that, of course, we have a number of nursing homes and assisted living facilities and residences. Health care goes beyond just a great hospital, the great primary institution at this point. Certainly from the diocesan point of view, we try to give the encouragement and guidance that we can. Certainly in our own work of spiritual support, to the work of our chaplains and so forth in all of our health care institutions, trying to bring the word of God and the sacraments to the people who are in the health care facilities, that is a very important contribution of the Church, contributions in the health care system itself. As we speak, it is a rapidly changing scenario with so many hospitals going through mergers, and new affiliations, and new corporations. It's a time, in the last several years, of rapid change in health care ministry. And I think that will continue to be true in the future. These changes in the structure of health care sometimes can change your mission and your identity. This is

very likely true.

D: Why is the year 2043 picked as the date to open the time capsule?

T: In designing the time capsule this year for the Great Jubilee, we wanted to choose a significant date. We chose the year 2043 because that would be the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of the Youngstown Diocese. In the year 2043, we no idea what the Youngstown Diocese will look like, or for that matter, if the Youngstown Diocese will even be here. It may be formed into another diocese or we could be joined with another diocese, or merge two of those. Who knows? But there are no indications at present. Forty-three years is a long time. But, that is the reason we chose that particular date because it will be the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of the Youngstown Diocese, when it was formed from the Cleveland Diocese in 1943. This room we're sitting in has the instrument establishing the Youngstown Diocese in 1943.

D: When they open the time capsule, what do you hope you will be best remembered for?

T: Again, 43 years is a long time. I guess my first hope is that I will be remembered at all 43 years from now. [Laughter] that would be my fondest hope. But, beyond that, I hope that I would be thought of as a bishop who did his very, very best to serve the Church, to work hard and faithfully, to build up the Church of the Diocese of Youngstown, to give it a strong spiritual and material base so that the Gospel of Christ can be carried on. I don't know if any of the particular works that we have done will be carried on in the future, only God knows that. But I hope I will be thought of as a Bishop who was here in a time of transition as we celebrate the Great Jubilee and moved into a new century, a new millennium, and all that that involved. I feel that we are living, right now, in a time of rapid change in the Church, and the world around us. The Church gives some stability to the world. If I will be remembered at all, I hope it will be as a Bishop who did his very best and worked very hard.

D: What advice would you like to give to whoever is Pope in the year 2043?

T: Gosh, it would very presumptuous of me to try to give any advice to any Pope. But, all I would say to the Pope, or any spiritual leader is, first of all to be faithful to the tradition he has received and to be open to the guidance of the Spirit. It is very hard to get to a vision, to imagine what the Church will be like in 43 years. It is a very risky proposition, but what I would say to the Pope, to my successor, or to any other spiritual leader, is to be faithful to the what the work of the Church is, what is handed you from our generation, and previous generations. And to be open to the gratitude from the Spirit, and have the Spirit moving constantly through in our lives, leading us to the future.

D: Is there any advice you would like to give us specifically to the Bishop of Youngstown in 2043?

T: No, I would say the same thing I just said to the Pope. I hope the future Bishop will be able to build well on what we provided. I hope we have provided a solid foundation for the work of the Church for the future. I hope the Bishop will be able to build upon that. I hope that

the new Bishop will be able to forgive whatever mistakes or missteps that we have made at this point in history without knowing it. I hope the Bishop will be faithful to what he has received, to the work of the Church, and hope the Spirit guides him and that he will do his very best.

D: What about the laity? What would you like to say to the laity of the Diocese of Youngstown in 2043?

T: I would like to encourage them to support the Church with not only their material resources, but also with their time, and their talent, and personal gifts, and the gifts of their faith, the gift of their hope, and the gift of their love. I hope they will continue to be very active in the support of the Church. I hope they will derive good things from their relationship with the Church and that they can take that with them in the world, to their families, to their place of work, home, the neighborhood. That, I think, is the perennial task of the Church—to take the Gospel of Christ in to the world. I can't begin to predict what the world will be like in 2043, but hopefully, the basic task will remain the same—to be involved in the life of the Church, to love the Church, to help to support the Church, to take the Gospel of Christ with them into the world.

D: What role do you foresee the Catholic Church having in the community of the Diocese of Youngstown in 2043?

T: It goes back to the basic commission of Christ to go forth and preach the gospel. Among my favorite scriptures is "Jesus said to his disciples: 'Be the salt of the earth, the light of the world.'" I think that is the challenge of the Church in Youngstown in the year 2043. To continue to be the leaven, to make a difference in the world around you. To take the Gospel of Christ and the vision of Jesus, the values of Christ, which are valid in every age, and to take that into the circumstances in which you find yourself here and now. I can't imagine what that would be. But, the work is still the same – to make a difference to the world, to proclaim the Kingdom of God. That has been true for two thousand years and I presume it will be true in forty-three.

D: If this message could be beamed around the world in 2043, what would you like to say to the people of Earth?

T: I guess I would echo what has been the predominant message of Pope John Paul II in the last twenty years. He stated his pontificate twenty-two years ago, with the predominant theme of "be not afraid, there is nothing to fear." Even though you might have challenges, problems, maybe even significant problems and challenges, we believe that destiny of the world is in the hands of God that made us, who loves us very much. We really believe in God. We believe in His Divine Providence, and his destiny. We can live with both. There is nothing to fear. There is nothing you are conquering right now in the world, in your nation, in your own personal life that is stronger than God.

D: Is there anything you would like to add to this interview?

T: No, just certainly as I approach almost five years of my service here in Youngstown, it has been a privilege and honor for me to serve as Bishop of the Diocese of Youngstown and for those who will be reading this in 43 years, I extend my prayers and my best wishes. I don't know where I will be in 43 years. I will probably be in heaven, I hope. I will be praying for all the people in the Diocese of Youngstown in my place, wherever that might be.

D: Thank you very much for your time.