

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

JOHN HEFFERNAN
MARCH 3, 1999

ANN KAPLAN: OK. This is Ann Kaplan, and I'm talking with Father John Heffern.

JOHN HEFFERNAN: Heffernan.

AK: Oh, I'm sorry.

JH: H-E-F-F-E-R-N-A-N.

AK: I'm sorry I had that wrong. At Immaculata, in Durham, North Carolina.

JH: Actually, this is called Immaculate Conception Church. We call the () Immaculata, but the parish is Immaculate Conception parish.

AK: OK.

[Recorder turned off and on again.]

AK: OK. So maybe we could start with you telling me your full name, when and where you were born.

JH: My name is John Heffernan. I was born in Buffalo, New York, in February, 1951.

AK: And your parents were in what occupation?

JH: My dad's a lawyer and my mother's a homemaker. I was born during the Korean War, went to Catholic schools, to college. I'm a dentist for twenty-some years, then four years later I entered a seminary to become a priest.

AK: So you growing up went to school in Buffalo. And then where did you go to school?

JH: I went to a prep school in Buffalo, a Catholic prep school, then I went to Holy Cross College in Worcester, Massachusetts. I returned to Buffalo to the University

of Buffalo dental school. I went to a seminary in Boston. I went there for two years, and then I became a Franciscan. I entered the Franciscan religious order, and I've done this work now for sixteen years maybe.

AK: And what made you decide to go to dental school? Did you know that you would go into the order after going to dental school?

JH: No. I was in college in the 60s, late 60s, early 70s. That had something to do with it, I'm sure, but I was inclined to service, and I liked sciences. I wanted to be a professional. I liked the health profession of dentistry and the technicality of it. I think a lot of it had to do with wanting to do something that was people-oriented, something to alleviate suffering and help people who were in particular need, financial need, material need. Dentistry seemed like a possibility.

AK: And so, then what were your experiences after going to dental school? You said then you went where?

JH: I participated in a hospital residency program for two years in Virginia. At that time I had considered becoming a priest, but I waited a while. I presumed I'd get married, plus presumed I would be involved in a practice, so I waited a couple of years and was in the practice for two years. Then the second year I was in this private practice, I went to Haiti. I was invited to go to Haiti by a dentist and a physician. I went with them and had a very poignant experience of service in a terribly poor part of the world. And oddly, though I associated becoming a priest with doing just that, I was disappointed [laughs] with the severity of it all. But in the end, the poignancy of that experience was what pushed me over the edge of [laughs] doing another sort of service.

AK: OK. So then, after having this poignant experience, you made the decision to go on?

JH: Yeah, and I entered the seminary at that point and began studying to become a priest.

AK: And where did you study did you say?

JH: I was in the seminary for two years. I'm not sure the complication there is terribly interesting. [Laughs.] I was in the seminary for two years and then at that point decided to become a Franciscan, which it was necessary then in some sense to abandon that seminary experience, which was preparation for a diocesan priesthood. And I'm not a diocesan priest. We have our own school of theology and a slightly different sense of preparation for a religious life, as opposed to simply preparation for the profession of being a priest. It's part of the requirement or part of the necessity, but it's only part. It's a little different.

So when I became a Franciscan, I started to live in a Franciscan community, went to a different school, and had other formation experiences of living in a community, and that's the point. [Laughs.] That's the necessity, to live in community to learn to be part of a religious community, which is a fraternity. It's certainly a specific sort of community as opposed to the larger community of the town or the city.

AK: Being Jewish myself, I'm not completely familiar with the process. So going ahead with the process and then coming to Durham, what was the space of time? How were those decisions made for you to come to Durham? Or maybe you went somewhere else before this. I'm not sure.

JH: Yes. I've only been here three years. This is my third assignment. I was at a parish in New Jersey for seven years. And it was not exactly suburban. It was really more rural. It was a summer community, and it was good. It was a good place where I learned something about helping people be involved themselves in being ministers, and was able to participate in a lot of that. But I wanted to learn how to speak Spanish and work in a place where people only spoke Spanish, because it was clear that the Hispanic population of the United States was growing. So we need to minister to people in Spanish.

So I studied for a little while in Santo Domingo and went to the Bronx, where most of the Hispanic people are Puerto Rican. An awful lot of those people are bilingual. I can't say I learned too much more Spanish at that point in time. I just sort of stalled. But went out of the country one more time, I suppose. But then I was invited to come here. This parish was a new parish that we took on. It's not a new parish, but it was new to us as friars to staff it. So we recognized this as a good place to be. It's a city parish with a diversity of needs and a diversity of peoples who could become involved in each other's lives.

And we recognized that we had something we could contribute here, and there was the potential here. There were already enough things going on here that we thought we could build on, and plenty of people who were interested in doing the sorts of things that we were doing. We could encourage each other. So that's more or less how we landed here.

AK: Since it was new having the position--I'm not sure how you would refer to it--the placement, were you the first then to come into this new relationship?

JH: The first Franciscan? Three of us came here at the same time, three Franciscans.

AK: And what year was that?

JH: That was '96, three years ago this summer.

AK: And how would you characterize the church, the religious community, when you came on board? What was the makeup of the people coming to the church, the community, in terms of backgrounds?

JH: It was said then, and it would be the same now, that a large proportion of the people here are employees at Duke. It seems like a large proportion of those people are employees at the medical center. It's a big employer. And the Research Triangle people have to make up some of the biggest employers around here. The vast majority of those people are Anglos, but an awful lot of the medical people in the parish are Filipinos. There's a pretty good Filipino population. I have no idea in terms of a percentage. And then there's quite a small Vietnamese population.

The former pastor had been interested in Vietnamese people and I'm pretty sure it was he that spearheaded the program. There were host families here when we came. But the program had kind of ended. I'm not really sure how it worked, but a host family I think invited a family into their home. They lived there for a while until they got jobs and had enough resources to establish an apartment and keep going, and then they moved out of their homes. There may have been a hundred families settled, which is substantial, and I suspect that most of them are still involved in the parish, the Vietnamese families.

But I'm pretty sure it's about a hundred Filipino families. There might be three hundred, four hundred. I really don't know. The Filipino population is pretty big. At

that point in time, I don't know that there were any number of African families, new African immigrants. I don't mean African-Americans. Almost no African-Americans. A rare African-American person. There might have been an African or two families. That was it. One or two Europeans who were medical center staff when we came.

AK: And the Latino community? Did you find that there were many families coming when you first were here?

JH: Only if they were bilingual or if they were again professional staff at the hospital or something and spoke English. I don't know that there were many. Probably a couple of Puerto Rican families. But when we came here, as I say, I spoke a tiny bit of Spanish, and we presumed that we would begin to become involved in Hispanic ministry. When we started we were thinking, well, at some point we might offer a bilingual Mass, but we didn't know what the need was.

Then suddenly, by November of that year, the parish that had been hosting a bilingual Mass couldn't anymore. There was a different priest there from the one who was bilingual. This new priest was not at all bilingual, which was part of the difficulty for him, and the church there is very, very small. I don't know how they held people. I'm sure the size of the church was an inhibition to the community itself. So then we started to have a Mass here, and it was just a small crowd at first, but the number of people that come now could never have fit in the other church.

That didn't take very long, I suppose. But I don't know that that part of the community continues to grow here exactly. We've hit a point. I think it's a significant amount of people, but it doesn't continue to grow.

AK: Right. Sort of plateaued a little bit?

JH: I think so, which probably reflects the growth of the community itself.

AK: So when did you begin to offer the Spanish services?

JH: That was just over two years ago, in January.

AK: And what are the days and times of those services?

JH: Well, every Sunday at five o'clock, there's a Mass that is bilingual. And then for Christmas and Easter, the schedule's a little bit different, and for some of the holy days. We chose to celebrate a bilingual Mass for a couple of reasons. When we arrived, there was not a five o'clock Sunday afternoon liturgy. There was no Sunday afternoon liturgy, which is a fairly common thing to do and we presumed it would be an opportunity for some people who worked weekends whether at the hospital or wherever to celebrate Mass. So we started a Mass at five-thirty on Sunday. There's one at five-thirty Saturday. There were four on Sunday morning as it was. So we started one Sunday afternoon.

So we had just done that. It was just starting to have a following, and we thought that was the only possibility for a time to have a liturgy in Spanish. People said it might have been the best time of day. It's hard to say. It's a time of day when some people start working, a time of day when some people just get off of work. I don't know. It's mixed. It's a time of day that I find a lot of people say it's time to relax and start to have dinner or get their kids ready for school the next day. So it's not the best time of day, but anyway, it seems to work well in many respects.

But we wanted this to be an opportunity for different sections of the parish to come together and we as a staff hoped that we would not be putting our Hispanic brothers and sisters in a corner away from everybody else. And maintain an opportunity for

people for whom that was the only time of day to come, to be able to come, whatever language they spoke. So we did that. And it's working well. It's hard. It's hard for us as presiders because you have to fiddle, go back and forth. It's longer. We were afraid it irritates people, [laughs] frustrates people. But few people complain. We only hear comments that, "Well, would that it were another way." I think it could be a better celebration if it were all in one language, but on the other hand, we'd lose something. We'd lose the opportunity for people to come together.

So it's hard. There's not a perfect solution, so we start there. Well, here we are. There's no perfect solution. Let's try this. So that's why we do what we do. [Laughs.]

AK: And those are the comments you get from people? Or you imagine that people--?

JH: Well, that's kind of the wisdom out here. But I can think of one person that's made the comment, "I wish we had a whole Spanish mass." But he doesn't know of a perfect solution either. [Laughs.] It's hard. But it's good. I think it's good. I think people are pleased enough.

AK: When you first started the bilingual Mass, between that point, just over two years ago, and now, what have been the changes? Has it been the growth of the families that are coming, or the growth of the number of families?

JH: You mean into Durham or into the parish?

AK: Both, actually. That's a good question.

JH: Well, I think the community surely has grown. I think there are more Hispanics on this side of town now than there were two years ago. The majority of Hispanics used to be on the east side of town. And if that's the reason or not, I don't

know, but this neighborhood is safer now than it was two years ago. There was considerably more violence around here then than there is now. So some of it I think is people have found us, and some of it is that the community has grown.

There are other things we do. We'll get to this question eventually, I'm sure, too, but there are some sacramental preparation classes. It was a bigger jump for our faith formation program to accommodate children who tend to be bilingual, but their parents tend to be only Spanish speaking. To involve the children and involve their parents, to help the parents understand how we do faith formation here, and religious education, and to get teachers who were bilingual, people who could communicate--that was a big job for faith formation. It's one thing to say Mass. That's easy. People just show up when they want to. But faith formation, to have it organized and all that, was kind of hard.

We did have help from some very good people who were doing it at the other parish, and they came over in a block with the kids, had all their names and information, so they sort of laid out the first year and it wasn't too bad. But right after that, we celebrated First Communion, and that's a real important celebration for the little guys. And the second year, it was big. It was beautiful. Now, this year, it's not so big again, but those were the kids who had started preparing before they came here. Now this year, I think it's the first time we have kids that just started preparing here.

A baptism preparation program went from one or two a month to about ten a month now. And maybe nine months ago, almost a year ago, I decided our program was vastly inadequate for people because the majority of the Latino people here, the Central Americans, the Mexicans, are from rural areas, and three-quarters at least have had very poor preparation in their faith. And I realized that people seemed to know nothing about

the Bible, partly because the fundamentalist Christian groups in town--I could chastise these people for that reason--seem to be convincing them that we don't know, we don't care for the Bible or something. I don't know.

But that was some of it, just that need to start sharing with people the ancient tradition. I've got this box of Bibles here under the desk, so bought a couple cases of Bibles and people buy them. These are five bucks. Everybody buys from us. We're getting some nicer ones now. Everybody's buying the nicer ones. But starting with the story of Abraham. We've managed to get from Abraham into the desert in an hour and a half. [Laughs.] And I love doing it. I tell them the story of the patriarchs and the Red Sea. And then I say, "After that was the Prophets," and that's about as much as I can say.

But people read. I've got this little format, this outline, so people just read a couple lines at a time. So people seem to like that a lot. Are you familiar with the Old Testament?

AK: [Laughs.] Yeah!

JH: Not the Old Testament, your testament. But it's like bedtime stories sometimes. It's magic. You should hear it. The kids stop crying as soon. As I start talking, the kids start () [makes popping noise]. They're glued. It's just beautiful, just beautiful. So I think that's a big jump, and I'm proud of that. I'm really proud of that. Nobody else around here is doing that. And I've done a good number of weddings. We have about as many Latino weddings as we have Anglo weddings in our parish. There's another bunch of Anglo weddings that are done through our parish at Duke Chapel, but it's almost an even number of Anglo and Latino weddings here. And we do the preparation for those too.

And then the rest is meetings that involve the Hispanic Center. I'm on the board of directors there. They are right across the street now in the Baptist Church.

AK: Oh, I didn't realize.

JH: So the ties are pretty tight. And the rest is people that come to the door, people that are looking for help, looking for a reference for a job or a job idea or to fill out an application for an apartment, help just to get through things. And it seems I always have one or two people who are sort of adopted, almost as dependent as children for rides and attention. And thank God that's one or two. It's sort of delightful but if it were more, I'd sort of have my hands tied.

AK: So people just need general help in terms of language and filling out forms and these kinds of official things where it's probably a little frightening to do it yourself when you're not totally sure of what the norms are. That kind of leads into another question that I've been asking. Some of the other interviews that I've been doing have been with health services, with Lincoln Health Center and other programs. And we have some other interviewers doing some interviews with the police department and that sort of thing.

So what I'm leading up to is curiosity really, what your experiences have been? Or what you know the church's experiences have been working with other service providers, really, for lack of a better way to put it? And if there's been a relationship at all in helping the Latino community become adjusted or helping other parts of the Durham community work together with them. I'm curious if there have been any programs to that effect. Obviously your role as a board member is related to that.

JH: Well, people call all the time.

AK: Doesn't have to be official. A lot of it isn't, ends up being unofficial, I know.

JH: I would say on one hand maybe there's such a scarcity of opportunities for people that people will call here from Lincoln Health Center and say, "Gee, can you help us do this? I've got this lady here and she's just at the end of the line. She's going to have a baby, and what can you do? Can you pay her bill?" So these organizations know that we'll pay a bill, so they call us. And I think they call around. I don't know how many churches do that. There are a couple of big downtown churches that do as well, the Methodist church and the Episcopal church. I presume, I sort of guess that they hit us, they hit them. [Laughs.] They kind of do a rotation of places looking for help.

They'll call here and say, "We need a crib. Will you put an ad in your bulletin for a crib?" And actually I should call and see if she got one. It was in the bulletin this week. So they look to us for resources, but it seems to me because there are just so few opportunities. Or just wonder what we might know. People call from out of town too. Somebody called from Oxford last week.

AK: Looking for information.

JH: Or help. Most usually help. Or from like the state hospital in Butner. "What can we do with this guy? We've got this alcoholic here. He's dried out, but he's got to go somewhere." They just don't know where to turn. I said, "Well, I do know there is at least an alcoholics meeting, an AA" A couple months ago I gave someone a number. She called and found out when the meetings were, and she said, "Well, that's something!" Just some information, a couple of the few possibilities.

But there is a network of people. We're sort of learning as we go along, too. We have a consortium of parishes in this part of the diocese of Raleigh, and a couple months ago, somebody said, "So what are you doing? What do you do for the people when people are getting married? What do you do for people baptizing babies?" And somebody said, "Oh, this is such a morbid conversation. What's the matter with you all? Isn't it happy?" I said, "Yeah, it's the best thing we do." I think we were all a little embarrassed. We didn't want to know if somebody was way overdoing us. We just don't know. I said, "This is really a very enlightening conversation." I think we all sort of woke up and said, "Yeah, it is."

Just to find out, "What are you doing?" I'm just sort of faking it as I go along. Nobody wrote a book on this. It's the same with the services in town here. You deal with folks that don't have Medicaid, don't have Medicare, or whatever all those things are, and don't qualify for this, that, and the next thing because they don't have good papers. So it's looking behind the books for help.

AK: That's great. I've heard other people say similar things, but you encapsulized it really well. About how many families would you say now come to the bilingual service or come for other programs?

JH: I'd say that we might have four, five hundred families that come to Mass, but they don't come every week. In the course of a month, probably four or five hundred different represented families. But on the other hand, most of those folks are not really a family. The vast majority of Latinos are young workers, and I think if we took a picture of the congregation, sent it to churches in Mexico, they'd wonder, "Well, why don't those

people come to church here?" Because I don't think they do. [Laughs.] In Mexico the churches are all feminine [laughs] and old, and here it's pretty young.

But there are a lot of young people in town, and the ones that are serious and are tired of the drinking and carrying on in the young Mexican community here are happy to have found at least some sort of outlet for their hope and their vision. And their sense of connectedness to God and to what they've known in their families even, for some kind of growth as a real human person. In a sense I'm guessing. But there are more and more families here too, it seems to me. There are certainly lots of babies. At the Masses, there are lots of little screaming babies. [Laughter.]

AK: I'm sure you notice that. You had mentioned that there were about as many marriage ceremonies in the Latino community as in the Anglo community. So do you think that's due to it being a young population, a young community? I'm just curious since you had mentioned it.

JH: I think so. On the other hand, we don't have a lot of weddings. We're somehow sort of short on weddings here. Some of that could be that the vast majority of our young couples here are from out of town and may well go home and get married there. So we just don't have a lot of weddings anyway. But I think we have probably ten a year of Latinos, and ten, twelve a year of Anglos.

And church marriages are not the norm. It's not the Latino norm. People get married in church sometimes after a couple of children. Sometimes it's a hope to stabilize a situation that's not very stable or whatever. But sometimes it's because they probably realize that, well, they're growing up and this is what you're supposed to do to

participate in church. You're supposed to be married there too. Sometimes before their children start to make these other sacraments, people come to get married.

END OF INTERVIEW