Interview with Reverend Dr. Michael Pfleger

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This interview is part of the Columbia College Chicago archives in honors oral history project: Chicago ’68. That is part of a collaboration with The Council of Religious Leaders of Metropolitan Chicago.

[Electronic clicking—Tape begins at 0:00:30:00]

JB: There we go, record. Just orally agree to have the, you know, interview that we’re going to be talking about your, your life and experiences leading up to the year 1968, and perhaps if we have time a little bit about after that but focusing on your religious activism and your life in the church as well as—

MP: —Sure.


MP: I’m more than happy to be recorded.

[both laugh]

JB: thank you so much.

MP: sure.

JB: Do you prefer uh, if I call you Reverend? Reverend Pfleger—

MP: doesn’t matter. Either—

JB: Doesn’t matter?

MP: Either is fine. that’s fine. Reverend is fine.
Okay. Thank you so much. If you would like a copy of this, I can talk to them about faxing one over or—

No I don’t need a copy.

Okay. And then would you be comfortable with video recording—

—Sure.

—at all. Okay. That’ll just take us one second.

[video camera chirp and sound of set up]

Okay. Fantastic. So first of all this interview is part of the Columbia College Chicago archives in honors oral history project: Chicago ’68. That is part of a collaboration with The Council of Religious Leaders of Metropolitan Chicago. Um, I wanted to get that recorded and um—

Sure.

So thinking back I want to start in the beginning of your life and kind of work your way forward towards the year 1968. Where did you grow up?

Grew up in the Wrightwood community, 81st and Talman on the South Side of Chicago. Went to St. Thomas Moore for Grammar school, Quigly high school, um Loyola University, Niles College and then St. Mary’s University for my post graduate.

[noise from recorder adjustment]
Thank you. I'm just going to take a second to check the levels. Alright. That sounds fantastic, um, [pause to think] (paper shuffling) What was your favorite thing to do with your mother growing up?

MP: Um, I suppose one of my favorite things to do with her was um, she—she very much liked to, she liked to engage in conversation about activities and about life and general—she loved the—she always taught me to speak my mind, speak about what I believe in, what I thought about my questions. It was always prompted to speak up and then defend what it is I thought, so I think my mother was my first real instructor, you know, at home, by having to always—prompting conversations and, and looking that we made sure we talked about issues, talked about things—from Grammar school on up she always pushed engagement and conversations and talking about issues.

JB: How did you see her use those traits in the world around you?

MP: Well I watched both my mother and my father—two things, one be—would always be very—you always knew exactly what they thought, and they were always consistent, whether they were sitting around the kitchen table at home or they were out with their friends. They were consistent about their values and about their thoughts on things. Secondly, I watched her be a great fighter and defender of my sister. My older sister had um, ugh—was mentally challenged, and never went beyond maybe the fourth or fifth grade, and she became a defender of hers. Both her and my father, but more so my mother, um, and wanted to—became—not only defensive but also very protective of my sister. When they went into Tucson (??) my mother said absolutely not. We’ll raise her at home. We will teach her and we will take care of her.

JB: Was that intimidating for you, with having—how did your parents, sort of, outspoken nature affect you as a child growing up, was it—

MP: —It became natural to me. That became common in our house, and our house was a great gathering place on the block were many people would come and hang out on the front porch, or we had a screened in porch in the backyard, and it was kind of a central gathering place on our block. But it became natural that when you came to the Pfleger house you talked, you discussed issues, you argued things out to—you know, that just became part of, you know, who I am today. It certainly was in my house at home.

JB: How would you describe your relationship with your sister, in comparison to your parents?

MP: Um, I think I took on a lot of my mothers protectiveness for her. I became—I remember I would become very angry when I would see her taken advantage of or hear her called retarded, or
laughed at, or talked about. It became something that really grated on me on the inside so I
came, um, ugh, very defensive about my sister and protective of her. We were very close.

JB:
Absolutely. Was it—would you say that—how did defending your sister, at the time, make you
feel in terms of growing up in the neighborhood you were in. Did it—what was your engagement
with other kids in the neighborhood and stuff like that?

MP:
Oh, my engagement with other kids was fine. We, like I say were a very outgoing family our
porch was a gathering place, got along well with other young people in the neighborhood. But I
know when I would be at places, or we’d be in a shopping mall, or we’d go into the plaza, and if
I see people point at my sister or laugh or talk about it, um, ugh, I would become very angry and
very defensive. I watched, without consciously naming it at that point, but years later, I could
tell—connected all the dots in my life realized how much watching the injustices done against
my sister and the prejudice against my sister, laid foundations for the way I became and fought
and began, in a sense, the rest of my life on stuff.

JB:
Was there a specific time were you remember having to defend her?

MP:
I remember one time at a shopping center, um, I see kids laughing at her and I ran over and
grabbed this one kid and told him ‘what are you laughing at?’ or just ‘stop laughing at my sister’
and that was really the only time, that I can consciously remember.

JB:
Sure. What about your father? Were there any specific rules that your father had?

MP:
No, my father was the more reserved, he worked, usually worked—always two jobs, sometimes
three jobs. He was very, very—you know, he was the one that was gonna make sure he provided
for his family and took care of his family. Worked a lot. We had a good relationship. Um, but he
was—I never wondered about his care or his love, but I knew he spent a lot of time working. So
in the younger years, particularly, I think I was probably more raised by my mother than my
father, but he was always there and always present, but he just was working all the time.

JB:
What did he do for a living?

MP:
Well he had a number of different jobs. He worked for a tool company, he owned his own
bedding company at one time, he worked for the 18th ward Democratic organization and the
ward office, um, so he had a number of different jobs over the years.

JB:
Was his schedule consistent or was he—

MP:

Pretty consistent. He, I mean, he had a five day a week job and then on weekends he would also
bartend at a bar, the neighbor across the street—

JB:

Wow.

MP:

He would work in the evening sometimes doing some other stuff so he, he had a pretty consistent
schedule but like I say just working.

JB:

How did that make you feel?

M.P.:

That was fine with me because I knew, I mean, [electronic humming] I never doubted his love,
ever doubted his presence in my life. I always watched him willing to sacrifice for his family.

J.B.:

When you – so, you – you say your mother raised you or spent most of the time with you. Did
you have any other siblings?

M.P.:

Just my sister and I.

J.B.:

Just your sister and you.

M.P.:

Yeah.

J.B.:

Did she work as well?

J.B.:

Or was she – what did she do outside of the house?

M.P.:

My sister?

J.B.:

Your mother. I’m sorry.
M.P.:  
My mother? She worked, at one point she worked with Firestone Company. She worked for years as (bottle cap hitting table) secretary at the church office, so my mother always kind of worked, too, but she always tried to work around the hours of, of, when I was at home.

J.B.:  
How did she juggle having those two jobs or having, working between your father’s schedule and having, you know, being able to contribute at the church?

M.P.:  
You know in that day, parents did what they had to do and just made sure that we were always covered. You know, when I would leave grammar school and my mother was working in the church office, I would go there and [electronic hum] come and sit in the office until she finished working and then come home with her.

J.B.:  
How many hours would you spend at the church?

M.P.:  
It would vary. Sometimes it would be an hour; sometimes it could be two to three hours depending on how she had to stay after work and do some stuff so, it would really depend on whatever her schedule was that day.

J.B.:  
What would you do while you were there?

M.P.:  
Most of the time, sometimes I would sit in the office with her, but most of the times I would go to the kitchen and talk to the lady who was the cook at the church, Mary Bess. I would spend a lot of time talking with her.

J.B.:  
What kind of conversations did you have?

M.P.:  
[sips a drink] That was Mary, I didn’t realize two years later but Mary was really teaching me black history but I didn’t know it. She was sharing her life. Her struggle as an African-American woman. She was telling me what she was doing to try and make it better for her kids. She told me some of the prejudice she had gone through and some of the things – the names – she had been called. So, she was sharing her struggle with me. Mary Bess was the first African-American person I had ever met in my life. So it was all very new and different for me. And she was just a dear friend that I looked upon like an aunt or a grandma but then again realized a few years later the kind of stuff she was sharing with me was her struggle, and her history and her prejudice that she had received. I just didn’t connect it until much later. She was just a friend.

J.B.:  

How did you first meet her?

M.P.: At the Rectory. You know, she was a cook there. And my mother, um, worked there. And my mom and her were good friends. And so my mom would let me go and sit in the kitchen while she was preparing dinner in the afternoons, while my mother was finishing up in the office.

J.B.: You describe her as sort of a mom or grandma.

M.P.: Yes.

J.B.: How quickly did your relationship become sort of personal and you know -- How would you describe her as a person? Was she very outgoing with this kind of thing?

M.P.: She was very outgoing. Very motherly. Very caring. You know, she’s treated me like I would be her own son and I saw her like I say as an auntie or a grandma. She was – we just had a very good relationship and it was kind of naturally created because my mother and her were good friends and we just grew into it because I would spend time with her almost every day for five days a week. We just became good friends. And I’d share about whatever was going on in school and she’d tell me what was going on in her life and her kids, so it was just a – she was like a family member.

J.B.: Did your relationship with her ever become -- ? Was your family aware of it? Did she ever become like a family friend or was it something that was kept exclusive to church?

M.P.: No. I mean, she was a friend of our family and sometimes she and my mom would go to the store together and I’d ride with them. SO, yeah, I mean, she was a friend of the family.

J.B.: Your mom and her were co-workers?

M.P.: Yeah, they were co-workers at the church and friends. Yeah.

J.B.: How long did you keep in touch with her?

M.P.: Well, I mean, I kept in touch with her for a number of years until she retired, stopped working, and then every once in a while we would speak. Because I went on, when I went on to college. I
moved out of my house after high school and I never moved back, I never lived back at the
house. So we kind of lost touch. I’d talk to her every once in a while every year, so once or
twice a year later on in — in life, but um, until she passed and um, but we um, you know, we
didn’t stay as close as I probably think that we should have. It’s just that my life became very
involved on the west side of Chicago. And I was at college and I was in seminary and I was just,
you know, engaged in a lot of different stuff, so I could say it wasn’t until probably I was in
graduate school where I was ordained before I really started to realize what an important deposit
she had put in me for who I was becoming.

J.B.:
Growing up in the neighborhood you grew up with [dog barks once] your mom worked at the
church. How far away was the church from where you lived?

M.P.:
Three blocks.

J.B.:
What do you remember about the church specifically?

M.P.:
[00:16:30]
I mean I basically kind of remember it was a very family oriented, or a center of the community.
It was a gathering place. But that was primarily—you know, it was a place for—I had a different
kind of relationship because my mom worked there so I knew, you know, more of the priests
there better and — and -- But it was certainly, most of the people in the neighborhood went to St.
Thomas Moore, that was the church of the neighborhood. But, it was a, now it’s so different.
My father was involved in the Knights of [ 00:17:12 ] (??), the Men’s club. My mother was
involved with the women’s club. So, it was a family gathering place in the neighborhood.

J.B.:
Were there any specific priests that you had sort of a personal relationship with?

M.P.:
Well, the – not really. I mean, I knew a little bit Father Murphy, um, because he was a young
priest that came in and he was very, very, you know -- . He drove a sports car. He was like a
different – he was a whole different kind of image of priest from me so I thought he was really
cool. But the other priest I basically knew through just because I was an altar server, so I knew
the priest who was was over those, but the pastor there was -- was there – was Father Hayes.
Was a very, very gentle, grandfatherish guy and so as close as you could get to him in that day, I
looked at him as being this kind, gentle man.

J.B.:
Did your sister come and stay with you while you were in the office?

M.P.:
No. My sister was usually being taken care of by a next-door neighbor during the day when my mom was at work.

J.B.: Got you. Which relationship did you feel more strongly? The members of the church—with the priesthood? Or sort of these people that you were maybe spending time in the back office and kind of the experiences?

M.P.: I don’t know if I would say one over the other. I mean, we had friends in the church. Certainly Mary Bess was a friend of mine. The priests were friends— I wouldn’t say that I saw any one over the other. I think they all kind of had equal relationships, equal friendliness with.

J.B.: Growing up in your neighborhood as well, you mentioned that you walked to and from church. How did you get to school?

M.P.: Walked to and from school.

J.B.: Would—what was your interaction with police officers in the neighborhood?

M.P.: Um. It was okay. It was—because there was—the neighborhood had a lot of police officers living in it. It was a very middle-class, white, a lot of police, firemen, city workers, so I mean, they were neighbors. That was my main connections. I didn’t see them too much other than being neighbors.

J.B.: How was religion observed in your home?

M.P.: It was central. I mean, faith was deep in our house. My mother and father were very strong believers but as—as—and it was, you know, something that—church was not a thing you thought about. It was not a thing you had an option to. You either went to church or you didn’t go out. But at the same time my parents were very again—were very progressive and outspoken thinkers, so they, you know, if there was something said or done at the church they didn’t like, they’d come home and talk about it. You know? They were very free thinkers, but very committed to the commitments at the church. They served the church. Sacrificed for the church and bow to the church.

J.B.: Was there a time that they disagreed with someone in the church that you remember?

M.P.:
Oh, yeah. I remember different times I disagreed with something, one of the priests did or something was being done in the church. Yeah, I mean, not—not once in a while, but often. I mean they would always voice what they didn’t like. That was them.

J.B.: Do you remember any specific things?

M.P.: Not any one thing stands out. Just that you know if it was—if it was something that was said by a priest or said by um, someone in the church that they felt was just wrong or out of line, you would hear about it. They didn’t necessarily take it on or fight it but they were verbal about it.

J.B.: How did that impact you seeing them—?

M.P.: Well, it impacted me that I grew up in a house that was, you—you expressed yourself and you had to.

J.B.: But was it ever a question for you to see your parents question the church?

M.P.: No. It was natural for as long as I can remember. Whether it was the church, whether it was something going on in the neighborhood, whether it was something going on in the city, my parents always expressed what they felt very, very clearly. They had no problem articulating it.

J.B.: When you went to high school in 1963, I believe, you began going. Where did you go to high school?

M.P.: Quigley High School on 79th—77th and Western.

J.B.: Is that—where did you want to go to high school?

M.P.: Quigley. It was between there and Brother Rice, but I wanted to go to Quigley. Those were the two possible schools for me.
Yes, we discussed it and my main attraction for Quigley at that point was it was this beautiful school and it had, you know, one of the nicest high schools around. It had a great pool and I love swimming and a great campus and it was walking distance from my house. I walked to school. I was 81st and Tomlin this was 77th and Western. So I walked to school every day. [electronic hum-brief]. Go ahead.

J.B.: You mentioned that your dad was working a lot. How did you guys afford to go to Quigley?

M.P.: Well—My parents, part of their m.o. was wherever I wanted to go to make sure that they could support me to go there. They wanted me to have the kind of education that I wanted and do whatever they could do. So, they—they sacrificed for that.

J.B.: Were you aware that that was a sacrifice at the time?

M.P.: Oh yeah. I mean, I always knew that I—I. I watched my parents all my life, whether it was my sister or myself—they tried to give us our thing—whether it was music lessons, whether it was, you know, going to something that I wanted to go to. My parents were always—I grew up watching them sacrifice for their kids.

J.B.: How did you feel on your first day at Quigley?

M.P.: I don’t remember. That was 1963. I know I was excited to be there. I enjoyed going. I loved the school. I loved Quigley. And it was extremely diverse. It was the most diverse high school in Chicago in terms of African-American, Latino, and White. And I loved it. I loved Quigley.

J.B.: In terms of the diversity within the school [electronic tweet sound], were people just mingling constantly? Was that the first time you’d experienced anything like that?

M.P.: Yeah, I mean, that was my first experience is seeing all of the different groups, you know, going to one place together. You know what I found at Quigley was not only a good mingling of folks, but also a good identity so there was a strong African-American club there. There was a strong Latino club there and yet everybody I thought really mingled well and shared with each other. So, I—I loved the experience there.

J.B.: And how conscious were you of the civil rights movement at this point?

M.P.:
A little conscious only because in—right after my freshman year in high school, I went down to Oklahoma and I spent that summer with five other guys from Quigley working at a Native American reservation. And I was there about two weeks before I walked into a store with some of my friends from the Native Americans and the store owner—this was 1964—were told that they couldn’t come in because they were Indians but I could come in because I was white. And I had never experienced anything like that before. So that was my first kind of head on with prejudice. I remember calling my mom up and saying, “Oh, I’m moving down here They’ve got a lot of problems down here.” And my mother laughed and said, “Welcome to America!”

[tape is bad up from Welcome to America until [00:27:17]]

M.P.: -and um, so I got two of my friends and I, ‘cause I knew if we asked we could never do it, but we rode our bikes over to Marquette Park to see Dr. King and what this was all about and um, (pause to think) that was life changing for me because of two things I saw there. I saw, one, people who I knew, lived in my neighborhood, went to my church, saw some family members of my friends, um, and there they were in—part of this hateful throwing rocks—and cars were being burned and I just—I’d never seen anger and rage and violence like that. But the second thing was I saw Dr. King walk up through that park and he was not responding to any of that. And um, I said, you know, remember riding my bike home that day – first of all on the way riding to the park I passed the Ku Klux Klan headquarters on 71st Street that I never knew was there and later on, in years later I asked my parents, “How come you never told me about that?” “We never wanted you to see that.” So they would never drive by that. So I saw that. Then I see this rage of people, some people who I knew. I see Dr. King walking there, not responding to it all, but as his greatest witness of non-violence I’ve – I’d ever seen. And um, and uh, I was riding my bike home saying this guy. There is something about him. Either he’s crazy or he has some kind of power about him. I became obsessed from that point on with Dr. King. I began to read everything he’d ever written up until 1966. I’ve had a wall in my room that I cut out things in the newspapers that I could find anything about him and put up there and um, he really became like my – the strongest mentor in my life at that point.

J.B.: You were actually witnessing like neighbors and people you knew from the neighborhood acting — acting violently and being part of the mob?

M.P.: Right. Screaming. Yelling. Throwing things. Cars being turned over and started on fire. I mean, just all this craziness I’d never seen before.

J.B.: Can you describe the scene in the park as you got there? Where were the demonstrators? The violent demonstrators?

M.P.: I mean, it was—it was—there was some all along on the outside of the park and then as you further when you got in, it got thicker and thicker and there was this huge crowd that was kept
back by policed as he walked through where there were kind of the um, that must have been
more of the yellers and the screamers and race baiters, but those on the outskirts were kind of,
you know, getting into a throwing things and, you know, and then I saw you know, down the
way there in the park when we were in there was this – um, trying to turn over this car and it
eventually started on fire, so. It was just – it was total chaos.

J.B.: Did you have to walk through the violence sort of to get – to see the stage?

M.P.: Well, we had to walk through part of it to get – I wanted to get up close – I wanted to see Dr.
King so I had to move through some of the outside stuff. But, I mean, it was pretty easy to do.
We were three white kids. And this was an all-white group, so, you know, we were just – we
were part of it walking through it.

J.B.: How did that make you feel seeing people you knew there?

M.P.: I was scared. I was scared because I had never seen anything like this. Never felt anything like
that. So, um, I was scared at what I saw but I was mesmerized by what I saw of him.

J.B.: After you went home, do you – how did that affect how you saw those people in the
neighborhood after that?

M.P.: Well, I know after that I became very skeptical of folks. Of, um, particu—in our house, for
instance, you could never use the F-word, you could never use the N-word. They were not
allowed in our house. I knew other people used it, did it all the time, but it wasn’t in our house.
I became more sensitized if I heard somebody saying it to look at them. Or if there was
comments being made or racist jokes being told, I would try to constantly make sure that I
walked away or if I was there, I didn’t laugh. So I became, I went to a sensitizing spirit, I would
say starting with that, but the more I read and learned about Dr. King was really what the
sensitizing was.

J.B.: Being that you were white, like you mentioned, it allowed you to sort of pass through this crowd,
did you feel like, did you feel any pressure to show people that you weren’t like the others?

M.P.: No. Not at all. I was invisible to be honest with you. Yeah, no pressure at all. People were all
into their own thing, so—um, um, you just were there. You know, you could be a participant or
non-participant. Most people they were participant, but you know, we were three high school
kids. They didn’t pay much attention to us.
J.B.: Sure. So while you were in high school, who was your favorite teacher at Quigley?

M.P.: (Pause to think) Wow. Who was my favorite teacher at Quigley? I’m not really sure. Probably Mr. Hill was my English teacher and he was probably my favorite.

J.B.: Was there something special about him?

M.P.: He was edgy—I mean, he made you study Gwendolyn Brooks and studied black poets and Latino poets and poetry that would be like the spoken word stuff of today. He was just—he wasn’t the status quo so he made you look at stuff that you wouldn’t ordinarily think or read. He was probably my favorite teacher.

J.B.: Were there people at the school who were able to further your interest in the civil rights movement and—and Martin Luther King?

M.P.: No one particular. I would just say certainly some of the black students. Just being friends with them, you know, kind of unconsciously as high school kids would be—hear stuff. The things they had to deal with or went through or name called or whatever. I mean, it wasn’t uh, you know, I wasn’t, I would love to say that I was that smart or that mature to have delved deeper. But I wasn’t. I was a high school kid.

J.B.: Of course.

M.P.: And um, I was exposed to stuff because of my friends and learned stuff. Wow! Yeah! But um, no. Not beyond—beyond that.

J.B.: You mentioned that too, when you saw him you thought, you know, either—Martin Luther King Jr. that is—you thought he’s either got a special power or he’s crazy. At the time, which were you kind of leaning towards?

M.P.: Neither really. I just didn’t know and—but I said I was going to learn about him. And I did. I spent an enormous amount of time. You know, there was no Internet. There was no—you had to go to the library. You’d try to get the books and watch the newspapers. Try to cut out stuff about it or if there was something on TV about him. So. The more I—the more I learned about him the more I became obsessed with him and what he stood for and what he was about.
J.B.: What did you do – what did you do for fun while you were growing up or during your time at Quigley?

M.P.: We hung out a lot at an ice cream parlor on 87th Street and went to movies, played basketball and just um—I was a real outdoors person. We played a lot in the neighborhood with just friends on the block and stuff so and I had some friends that were, um, we, just fun people. We used to hang, hung out a lot of time at this place called Nellie Lane. It was an ice cream place on 87th Street we spent a lot of time at. And um, so, we just, you know, we just—just normal high school fun things.

J.B.: What did your parents um—what did your parents sort of expect from you after high school upon graduating?

M.P.: Well, college was never a question. It was always a given that you were going to go to college. Um, and um, they wanted me to seriously kind of make some decision when I was going to go forward in this seminary—the priesthood thing. You know? No pressure to go or not to go but you need to make up your mind what you’re going to do, so going on to Niles College and Loyola University—it was a seminary but it was affiliated with Loyola so I took most of my classes at Loyola so I had kind of like the best of both worlds in one sense.

J.B.: How early did discussions of the life in the priesthood begin?

M.P.: Well, I had thought about it in high school. I mean, I thought about it in grammar school actually because of my relationship with the church and—and um so I had thought about it there. Then, high school, I thought about it when I was going in, but then we didn’t think about it a whole lot until mostly senior year and I would say that it probably coincided with two things. One, because um, um, I was learning about Dr. king at that time. It was very, very clear that he did what he did because he was a minister. Not because he was a civil rights activist or but he was a minister. He did what he did out of his being a minister. And at the same time then I was having to make some decisions about college. So, um, yeah. So that’s—that kind of affected um, um, my thinking more and more about it. So in college, I dabbled back and forth. I mean, wanted it, didn’t want it. But I got very involved in the West side of Chicago in a church there and that kind of—the priests that were there were very, very influential in my life and as a result
I think helped support me going into the priesthood because of I admired them and what they stood for. And other folks like that. And other priests I met during that college time.

J.B.: 
Sure. When was um—when was the first time you stood up to your parents?

M.P.: 
I actually stood up to them a number of times when I was growing up -- in the house, but I mean, um, I don’t think really standing up to them. When I said I was going to move to the West side of Chicago and live at that church, you know, I think my parents were a little concerned. Not so much that I was moving to the west side, but was I going to put aside my academics because they were supporting me, they didn’t want me to drop out or not do my college thing at the same time. So, it was very important to them that, you know, they were—so they were very, you know, not happy with it, but I told them that I needed to do this for me and if I was—I would promise them I’d stay in school or promise them I’d graduate from college but I needed to do this. So, you know, as long as my grades stayed up and I would – I would continue in school, they were fine with it.

M.P.: 
Work with the church, yeah. You know, they realized soon I – I started out there I was going like once a week. Then it was twice a week, then I moved in there. And um, so, they were seeing this. They knew me and when I’m in something, I’d go in it all the way and so, um, you know, they were just very concerned because they, you know, I was going to be the first person from our family to go on to college. My mother and father hadn’t gone. My sister obviously hadn’t gone and they wanted me to have a college degree no matter what I did. So that was just a big concern to them that I would drop out.

J.B.: 
It’s interesting too because it’s—it’s sort of the work that you were interested in doing. How would you—what were you doing on a day to day basis there?

M.P.: 
At Precious Blood, the church?

J.B.: 
Yeah.
M.P.: Um, I would work with the young people in the neighborhood. The priest that was there and myself started a youth center on Western Avenue and trying to make that go. Do things, mostly with youth. Um, I put together a choir there for the church on Sunday mornings. Um, we did outdoor movies in the summertime. So it was primarily a youth center—it was youth and then the choir. So those were the main things I worked with. And I got involved with the Panthers organization because they started meeting at the church and I was really intrigued by them because I saw them doing more in the neighborhood to help people than any of the churches were so I—I wanted to learn about them. ’cause they were always again so demonized and um, I saw all the good they were doing and then, um—So I got involved with them and then I would start—

J.B.: How did you first meet them?

M.P.: In the neighborhood. I met Fred Hampton and—and Larry Johnson, probably the two people I got to know the most and um, knew Mark Clark but only, not as well as like Fred Hampton or Larry Johnson. And um then volunteered. At that time they were doing the breakfast program in the projects and um, um, so I got involved with going and uh picking up bread from the stores and bringing it to the Panther’s headquarters.

J.B.: Did people in the church, um, people in the church obviously knew that they were – they were meeting there and that you were working with them and stuff.

M.P.: Uh huh.

J.B.: Did your parents know that you were in—getting involved in the civil rights movement at all?

M.P.: Oh yeah. I mean, they knew it. Um, I mean, I remember one of the nights down at the Democratic convention, my mother, how in God’s name, saw me on TV and got in her car that night and drove to the church at eleven o’clock at night furious with me because she was worried about me and I wasn’t even there. I was still downtown. So, it wasn’t a philosophical problem, it was a fear for her son problem because she saw this stuff going on—

J.B.: —Of course.—

M.P.:
—She saw what was happening on TV. She saw all the police and what was happening. And she was worried about me! But she was furious that I had not told her about it. And, in a sense, it was on purpose um, because I knew my mother would be extremely worried for me and would do everything in her power to discourage me not to go. So, I didn’t want her to worry. Um, and like I say for her to have seen me on TV that night it was one in a million chance.

J.B.: Do you know what she saw exactly?

M.P.: No. they were just showing a group of the protestors and for whatever reason, you know, I guess a mother knows her son. So, she saw me in the group and she said it was me. She tried calling the church and um they said I wasn’t there. So she ended up getting in her car at one point and just driving down there. But, um, she did not wait for me. She insisted that I call her when I got home and I did. We didn’t have cell phones so she couldn’t call me. I couldn’t call her. Um, so yeah, but it was—she was very worried about it.

J.B.: Sure. So um, you had—you’re going into college and or you’re graduating Quigley and you’re getting ready to go to Niles and you’re working at Precious Blood Church, um, when did you finally make the decision to go into the priesthood?

M.P.: I don’t think there was a moment I remember. I just saw that evolve more and more to that while I was at Niles because (car honks) and I, you know, there’s no question because of Dr. King, um [reflective pause] because he made it very clear that you know, you can—you can pass laws to stop people from lynching. You can pass laws to stop people from segregation but you couldn’t pass laws to change somebody’s heart. That had to be done through the power of God and through faith, so I wanted to change hearts and change lives— I wanted to change the way I saw America. And um, I didn’t want to be a lawyer to do the legal thing. I wanted to be a minister to do the heart thing. And um, so it was over those years and particularly Dr. King and—and—um, and the Civil Rights Movement.

J.B.: Was activism the reason that you – did you see – would you have been dissatisfied with the life of simply providing religious counsel?

M.P.: Oh, absolutely! The activism was absolutely the DNA of it. You know? Um, my frustration today is that religion and churches do not do activism. They have become businesses. But, I mean, the Barragons (?) [00:46:42] and—and Dick Morrisroe who was shot at Selma and Jack Egan and George Clements, the people that I admired and looked up to and sought out, you know, the Oscar Romero’s in South America. Those are the folks that—that formed and shaped me and in those days it was more the norm. Today it’s the exception. You know, you had -- you know you look at Selma and see, realize how many priests and nuns were involved in that,
priests involved and nuns involved in—in Montgomery; priests and nuns involved in Chicago in—in racial justice. So it was—it was the DNA of my faith.

J.B.: When um, when was the first time that your faith was challenged in undergrad?

M.P.: Well, I think it was constantly challenged. Um, I saw the church starting to change in its policies. I watched the cardinal at the time tell the pastor that the um, Black Panthers had to stop meeting there. Um, I watched at that time the pastor of the church, Jerry Maloney [phonetic] had put a big sign on the front of the church there facing the Eisenhower Expressway saying about the Vietnam War, stop this Goddamned War and then he was confronted and he had to take that down. And so I mean, I saw, I was beginning to see that—you know, that it wasn’t a natural for the church to fight issues. It was becoming now more and more distant for the church. So, that was a constant um, um, evolution for me.

J.B.: You mentioned the sign that the – the pastor put up and – and kind of, the Black Panthers being told not to stay there, how—how did you feel about—where did you come down on—at the time were you outspoken about that with other members of the congregation?

M.P.: Yeah. I was very outspoken. I was very supportive of the pastor. And I, um, he was like a hero to me. And um, you know, then I saw the racism, you know, as I more and more I—I grew up and matured and watched and saw the racism. Saw the—what was being done to the Panthers. Saw the execution of, um, of um, the Panthers and their headquarters. Uh, Fred Hampton and Mark Clark, you know, it’s just um, I was realizing, you know, how the injustice and the racism of the city. I was watching this evolution of civil rights and—[bell rings] and, um, justice were a constant fight by the system. By the powers that be, so, I was seeing it more and more every day, that it was. Probably it was always there but, um, became more and more naïve to and at Loyola University I became the organizer for the anti-Vietnam war movement and um, uh, the more involved I got in that, the pushback we were getting from Loyola University and you know, some friends of mine that were ahead of it at Northwestern. We led this big march where we met for Northwestern Loyola shutting down Lake, uh, shutting down Lake Shore Drive and um, watching the resistance and watching the police and um, yeah, so I mean there were just countless things. Whether it was on the west side, the projects and realizing the inequality of what people were living in, to the personal experiences from people, to the Panthers, to the Vietnam War movement and so I was realizing and learning very quickly that um, the fight for justice was not just a issue. It was fighting against the entire mainstream of America.

J.B.: Wow. How involved were you in politics at the time?

M.P.: Not as much involved with politics, only the local level as we started to really fight against the alderman in that ward which was Vito Marzullo and he was a true, uh, ward boss and we started
fighting against him on some issues in the—in the ward, but other than that it was more—I saw it
as, you know, the government, you know, and uh, particularly before the Democratic Convention,
seeing it there, whether it was the Vietnam War and, you know, the—the having to push against,
uh, Johnson and the rest who were continuing this—this madness. And so I didn’t see it local as
much as I saw it national.

J.B.: How did you feel about Johnson?

M.P.: Uh, I was angry with him. I didn’t like him even though I realize he had done some good things,
but then, I can’t even remember when he came out of office. When did Johnson leave?

J.B.: Um, I should know that.

M.P.: I can’t remember that, but you know –

J.B.: I think it was ’68 when or no—He announced he wasn’t seeking –

M.P.: Right. I’m not sure exactly but I looked at the government of America as being this government
of the status quo. So I started to begin to look at government as being this—this um, without
personalizing it a whole much of just a—this institution that was um, continuing racism,
protecting it, continuing war, continuing um, injustice, and, um realizing that changing things
was going to demand a fight.

J.B.: What was your first or what were your expectations as far as becoming drafted, as a college
student you were—?

M.P.: Well, it was funny. I was absolutely against it. I was part of this big thing we did of burning our
draft cards and going through all that, but, I was a little naïve of the fact being in seminary there
was an exemption for me anyway, um, but it was more the symbolism for me than the reality at
that point.

J.B.: When was the first time you had to say goodbye to a drafted friend?

M.P.: I don’t remember the first time. I just remember the folks that I went to school with, uh, who
were being drafted and um, I’d say about half of them it was fine, [beeping sound] but there were
some that were absolutely—that’s not what they wanted to do and I just thought despite the war,
J.B.: How did you feel about the war?

M.P.: I was absolutely against the Vietnam War. I thought we were, um, we were over there killing people and destroying a country we had no business being in.

J.B.: How conscious were you of the—or what was your opinion of the protesters—

M.P.: —I loved them.—

—who had been protesting the war?

M.P.: —I loved them. I thought these were my people, you know, the flower children were my people. They—they um, these were the—these were the righteous that were standing up for what they believed. And it was mostly young people—it was people my age. So I, that was my—who I identified with.

J.B.: How did you feel about the Yippies and some of the more—characters of the protest?

M.P.: Um, I probably identified with them just because they were—we were protesting the same thing. My group of protestors was more of the Loyola, Northwestern University students. It was more the college students that I was working with and connected to but, you know, uh, the folks out in San Francisco, the flower children there and others around this country, you know, you felt that you were all connected even though um, it may have been very different in different places, but you always felt connected. I mean, I was very much into the, at that time it was the coffeehouses and sitting around and talking about how you were going to turn around the world and change the world and, you know, between coffee houses and—and smoking weed and—and sitting with other young people your age—none of them who had a dime in their pocket and you were going to change the world. That was my life.

J.B.: What kind of—what kind of music did you listen to?

M.P.: Oh! I’m terrible at names but um, um, uh, Moody Blues and uh—
J.B.: Yeah, sure.

M.P.: —The Van Halen’s and uh, I mean the whole group and Chicago actually um, I kind of dated a little bit, this uh, one of the girls—Jim Pankow who was the former founder of the Chicago group—They used to practice in the garage and his sister and I used to hang out a little bit, so, I would hear them when they’re just starting out playing in the garage before they became Chicago.

J.B.: No way! Really?

M.P.: Yeah.

J.B.: Wow. What did you do for dates? What did you do to hang out with people?

M.P.: Well, didn’t do a lot of hanging out. I mean, we, my hanging out in those days was sometimes sneaking into a bar before I was old enough and get fake I.D.s and all that stuff but I was more into coffeehouses and siting around and talking about how we—we were going to be the big, you know, we were going to be the revolution that changed America. We were going to take down the government. We were going to, you know. That was my life. You know. That’s the group I felt most at home with.

J.B.: So as the DNC, the summer of 1968 leading up to the democratic national convention, when did you find out about the protests that were going to be happening?

M.P.: I think I found out about them from the very beginning because I was connected to that group. So I knew about it. We were—we were doing a whole bunch of stuff, you know, in different places. Downtown, at Loyola, at other places, you know, and then mostly the north side because that’s where I lived at that time, and—and, um, but um, I was (yawn)—excuse me—it was mostly around the university and the settings that the conversations and planning and then sometimes in other places on the North Side where they would be having meetings or having other coffee houses where people were meeting at, so, I knew about it from the beginning and [pause to think] when the convention was coming here, I was a big you know, groupie of the Joan Baez’s and Peter, Paul, and Mary, so I was asked to be part of this little group that was kind of helping take Mary Travers around. They separated them actually. I never, not really sure about that why, but take them to different places where they were performing and trying to um, keep the groups enthused and—and stirred up. And um, so I was a part of that with her. Sometimes they would meet at a place together and sometimes they would break up going different places, trying to get around and meet as much people. And then I remember the night
going down to the Hilton with her and she wanted to get up to the front. And um, so we pushed
our way up to the front of the line of the, um, uh, at the Hilton and Grant Park and [yawns]
weren’t there actually very long. I guess there had been a number of warnings that had gone on
before we got up there. But we got up there. It almost seemed like it was instantaneous but it
might have been a couple minutes before, um, all of a sudden there was this – the police were
just moving on us like, you know, an attack. And there was tear gas and I got hit on the head.
And, what I – what I most remember about all that—clubbed by one of the police—but what I
most remember about that, more than anything else, even being hit—was Mary Travers. As they
were coming and you heard some of the people screaming and crying and everybody was – Mary
Travers let out a scream that for me symbolized the pain of everything that was going on. It was
just like a—I don’t know how to define it. It was just a, it was a scream that like touched you in
your gut and um—’cause I think that’s actually how I got hit is because I just stood
there. I was paralyzed by it. ‘cause her scream for me seemed to articulate um, the um, uh, the
pain, um, the anguish, the injustice all wrapped together and it was the sound of all that going on.
And that, you know, that’s as real for me today as when it happened.

J.B.: What happened to Mary?
M.P.: Well, we got her out of there and she got out of there and I mean, she, you know—I don’t
remember a whole lot more than—we ended up getting separated at that point. And she was
with some other people. She was fine. Um, but it was—that evening—that evening in Grant
Park, um, was, um, [pause] it was frustrating when they said that, I guess it was, was it
McGovern that came out first or Hubert Humphrey, which when they were coming out to talk to
the crowd—I can’t even remember who it was at this point, that’s how vague it was for me, but it
was, what I remember about that was the feeling that we had all this encouragement, all this
strength, all this unity, all this anger, all this we’re ready and we’re going to change the world.
It was like the flexing of the muscle of the system to say no, you’re not. And it was kind of an
awakening for me—the power of the system. And, you
know, the only thing it did for me, it connected me back to Marquette Park. Because Marquette
Park, it was a bunch of crazy, white people. This time it was a bunch of crazy police. So it was
different level. This was the system. Those were just idiots. Or racists. This was the system
saying no, you won’t. So it was a—it was eye opening for me. Probably good. Good that it
happened that day because years and years and years and years and years later um, fighting the
system whatever it may be—one system at a time—I don’t get easily discouraged because I’ve—
been there, done that. You know, so, it was an awakening to say wow, this is the system. This is
the police. Then, seeing that with Hanrahan and the state’s attorney and the Panthers on the West
side and um, it was um, it was – it was an experience.

J.B.: When, um, when you—when you got to the protest was there any expectation that the police
would be—
M.P.: —When I got where?
J.B.: When you were at—When you first got to the protests was there any expectation that the police would be violent?

M.P.: No, I think the protest was to, you know, I— I’m a college student. I’m naïve. And I think the protest was basically to say to the system, we’re not going to allow this. And then seeing the system say we’re not going to allow this. That was the meeting of two very strong coalitions—the status quo of the government and the protests from the street from primarily the young people. And hitting head on and um, so, it was—it was an awakening. I think the only expectation is that we were going to—We felt unbeatable. And um, and they came with everything they had.

J.B.: Did that—what was the emotion that—that sort of conjured in you as—as it was happening?

M.P.: The emotion that—the emotion right then was painful and hurtful and how can this be and all of that, um, but, you mature and you realize that’s how it is. [chuckle]

J.B.: Was your impulse—you know—I know some people ran and others engaged and fought back. Was your impulse to go in one direction or another or was it just pure chaos?

M.P.: I think to fight back was probably, is my nature. So I think that was my nature to fight back. But it was also made me step back and say damn! This thing is bigger than I thought.

J.B.: What happened after you got hit? Do you need a moment by the way?

M.P.: Pardon?

J.B.: Do you need just a moment?

M.P.: No, I’m just trying to—if you can hang on for one quick second. I am—I am probably going to have to be done in about twenty minutes because Spike Lee is on his way over here to talk to me so.

J.B.: Oh sure. Is that for “Chiraq?”

M.P.:
Yeah. Yeah.


[sounds of phone and walking around]

We’re doing pretty well. I’m going to try and get us through the rest of the Democratic National Convention. If we do run out of time I did want to ask a little bit about Martin Luther King’s assassination. Is there maybe some way that we can talk at some further point or something like that?

M.P.: Yeah, it’s just uh, my thing is just my life is like—I’ve got a funeral tonight. I’ve got two meetings before the funeral. [to Corey on phone] Corey, when Spike gets here, let me know, okay? They should be coming here for me.

Corey on phone:

Okay. [faint talk]

[to Corey] Yeah, they just—did they call you?

Corey:

[faint]

Okay, just let me know. She said she’s about fifteen minutes out. Okay. Thanks.

J.B.: Okay Well, let’s uh—you have fifteen minutes?

M.P.:

Uh huh.

J.B.:

Do you need any time further than that?

M.P.:

No. No.

J.B.:

Okay, let’s just—

I think—when they get here. Depending on if they get here in fifteen minutes or less.
J.B.: Or not. Yeah. Okay, so you told me uh, we really did get into the story there and I’m sorry, we
got a little bit distracted. [pause to think] Oh, oh, what happened after you got hit in the head.

M.P.: Uh, uh, I mean, they pushed us back so that it became, at that point, I mean, people running.
You know I was running to get out of there. I’m not one to sit there and enjoy pain, so I was part
of the running. Then we regrouped over in another area, but um, um, I’d say it was a—the
physical pain was secondary to the emotional pain that it was this awakening for me this system
is not about to be transformed or changed by a group of people who say they’re going to change
it. And they wanted to make it clear. It was violent. It was angry. It was power at—at just
demonstration of power at its—at it’s best. So, it took some time sucking all that in and
processing it.

J.B.: Walking away from—how, how did you expect the war to end at that point?

M.P.: I think I really expected it to end how it did end. By people in this country putting enough
pressure on the government to say no. And the political pressure—I believed that then. I believe
that today. You know, I don’t believe there is anything that we can’t change. I just believe we
lack the will and the endurance to do it. you know, I watched the same thing happen when we
fought hard against apartheid and pressuring to do economic um, um, (pounds his fist twice),
economic way to do in South Africa to stop the trades and the rest, I mean, economic sanctions.
Um, so I believe government can be changed by the power of the people. I just think we no
longer seek to do it. But I think we’re now too divided to be united around a common target. So,
that’s my problem.

J.B.: Did you know that members of the church were involved with the protest and—and being
attacked by police officers?

M.P.: The church I was at at the time? Not really—

J.B.: —Or just in general, the religious leaders?

M.P.: I was doing that more, not so much with Precious Blood. I was doing that more with Loyola
University. So, um the racial and the Black Panther stuff was there. And the anti-war, Vietnam
war stuff was more, I was tied into with Loyola University and Northwestern University. So, um
they were not as connected.

J.B.: (cell phone buzz) Oop.
M.P.: Yeah, so I um, the—the—the war thing was parallel to it, but not integrated with.

J.B.: I feel like you did address this already to a certain extent, but how do you feel like, 1968 as a year with Martin Luther King’s death and uh, Bobby Kennedy being shot and the demo—you know, being there first hand with the protest, how do you feel that affected you going forward?

M.P.: I think it affected me a couple ways. One is it um, it—it made me realize how serious this was and taught me at an early age if you’re not willing to pay the price of this don’t get in it. But also, um, the—the necessity to be rooted in it. It pulled me more into King (buzz) ‘cause I realize when I was in the, with the Loyola University students, it was a different, different, um, connection, um, then, um, uh, the King spiritual thing. So, it was um, (phone hitting table) I realize that you better have something bigger than you that you were rooted in to deal with this stuff.

(knock on door)

M.P.: Yeah, come in.

Corey: They just went in to the front doors.

J.B.: Okay.

M.P.: They just came—they went in the front door of the church?

Corey: Uh huh.

M.P.: Okay.

Corey: Someone just went to let them in.

M.P.: Okay.

J.B.: Well, that’s it. Yes. Thank you so much.
M.P.: Thank you so much. Um, I’ve got a crazy life.

J.B.: Don’t—don’t worry about it. If I could just maybe ans—if you could answer this as we walk or something—what do you want from your congregation?

M.P.: I want to create a congregation of leaders who are agents of change. That realize that their job is to change society wherever they’re at every day.

J.B.: Alright Michael Pfleger, Reverend.

M.P.: Thank you very much, sir. I appreciate it.

J.B.: It’s an honor and a pleasure. Thank you so much.

M.P.: Oh! It was mine. Thank you very much.

J.B.: You, as well.

[End of interview]