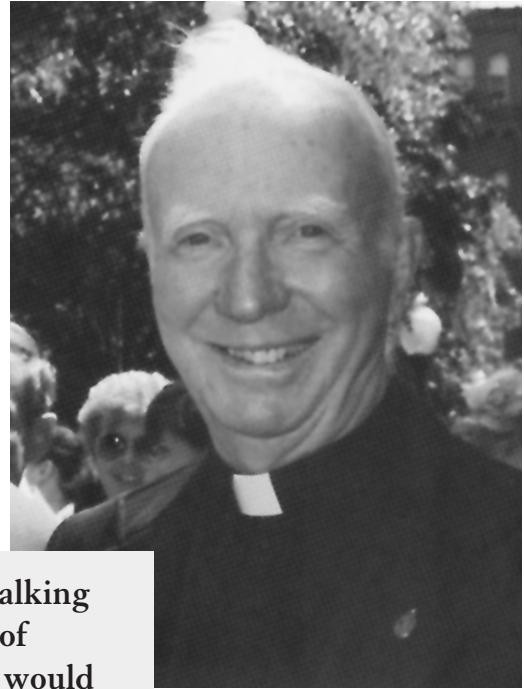


INTERVIEW

Fr. Richard T. McSorley, S.J.  
Director, Georgetown University  
Center for Peace Studies

‘I realized I was responsible  
not only for myself, but  
for the people’



*Father Richard T. McSorley, S.J. was born on Oct. 2, 1914 in Philadelphia, Pa., and has taught at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. since 1961. He is currently the director of the University's Center for Peace Studies. He founded the Dorothy Day Center-Catholic Workers Center in Washington, D.C. in 1980, is a board member of the Catholic Worker, and was a national board member of Pax Christi for six years. He is the author of eight books, including his autobiography, "My Path to Justice and Peace," published last year. The following interview was conducted by Nina Ogden on July 11, 1997.*

**Fidelio:** We were just discussing your book, *My Path to Peace and Justice*,\* and you were saying that you wanted people to learn about peace and justice. You said that you wrote the book, not to be dogmatic, but to describe it through stories. I would like to say that, since there's absolutely nothing dogmatic about Father McSorley, and that since you always give those kind of lessons, I opened your book and made some delightful discoveries.

**Fr. McSorley:** I think the best way to learn something is to tell a story about your own life, and how something is created in life. That's what I'm working on: to imitate Christ in that. He told

\* *My Path to Peace and Justice, An Autobiography*, by Richard T. McSorley, S.J. (Marion, S.D.: Fortkamp Publishing/Rose Hill Books, 1996).

**Nobody else was even talking about the evil—the sin of racism. I decided that I would not allow my priesthood to be used for segregation.**

**Later, in 1963, when Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., called for 'Mississippi Summer,' I spent the summer marching with the students at courthouses in Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi.**

parables to farmers, simple people—told them stories about their own lives and about his life. Everybody's willing to listen to a story, but if you say, "Now I will talk on the topic of justice," they go to sleep. They don't know what you're talking about. But if you say, "Now I'll tell you a story about what happened to me when I was in the prison camp, or in southern Maryland, or what happened to me when I was teaching at Georgetown University," then the story is interesting to the listener, even if he doesn't think he's going to accept the message.

**Fidelio:** You're a well-known and rather notorious, so-called, priest. Can I

ask you, first of all, how did you arrive at your vocation in the first place?

**Fr. McSorley:** You mean, to be a Jesuit?

**Fidelio:** Yes.

**Fr. McSorley:** Well, it had nothing to do with justice and peace in my mind. I was the second oldest of fifteen children, and it was very clear to all of us that the best thing a boy or girl could do with their life would be to be a priest or sister. There wasn't any question about that; there

wasn't anything even close to it. That was the view that my mother and father gave me. As a result of that, eight of us became priests, and three other boys entered the seminary and left.

I think it was my parents' example, and it was all very indirect. They never said "You should be a priest or you should be a nun," or "I'd like you to be a priest." They never said that. But they acted. When nuns came to our house, they ate in the dining room with my mother, and they got lamb chops and things we never got. We never ate in the dining room, never used good silver. If you were a child you'd say—much better to be a nun! And, when the priest came, he got the best room in the house.

That's the *best* kind of instruction we got about why it was good to be a priest or a nun.

I remember, one day, we were all seated at the table and my father had a visitor there. And he said "Well, Dick"—that was my father's name—"I suppose you look forward to the day when you'll have a lot of doctors and lawyers and professional people in your family with this crowd of children." Dad looked towards us, and said, "Not at all, Bill, if they don't realize that the only thing worthwhile in life is to serve God, they might as well go out in the garage now and turn on the gas, and end it all."

Now, see, that's very impressive. That stayed with me because he was giving a kind of lawyers speech to the jury. It was directed to us, but indirectly. So we got the message.

**Fidelio:** If we have time, I want to ask you about your three-year experience as a seminarian in the prisoner-of-war camp in the Philippines during World War II, but right now I want to skip to when you were finally liberated from the prison camp and came back to the U.S. You were ill—

**Fr. McSorley:** Yes.

**Fidelio:** —and you didn't get the assignment you thought you were going to get, but instead you were sent to a little backwater parish in Southern Maryland, and you didn't want to be there.

**Fr. McSorley:** That's right.

**Fidelio:** You had an experience there, that both changed your life and helped change the country. It was one of the contributions leading into the Civil Rights movement. Can you tell us about it?

**Fr. McSorley:** I ran into the racial issue without even knowing that I was even running into it. When I first got to the little parish, I found out that there was a woman who was paid two dollars a week to clean the church. It wasn't much, but the whole income of the church *per* week was seventeen dollars, so I told her that we wouldn't need her any more, that we would get volunteers. I didn't realize that white people wouldn't volunteer to clean, because they thought that cleaning the church was work for Black people. And I could hardly ask

the Black people to volunteer, because they were so poor and working so much already.

That issue was connected to another one. In the middle of the church we had a wood stove, and I had no experience with making wood fires. I arrived at church about seven in the morning to hear confessions. There were people lined up, whites on one side of the confession box, and Blacks on the other. They were waiting for confession, and I was waiting for someone to start the fire. No one was volunteering to help me, so after a while a Black man came over and said, "I'll help you, Father" and he started the fire. After mass, I called him into the sacristy, nobody else was there, and I said "Mr. Butler" (I was very aware, when I said "Mr. Butler," that I was going beyond their custom—since they didn't call any Black man "Mr." But I called him "Mr.," and thought of myself as very fair). I said, "Thank you for making the fire. You know we need this fire every Sunday, so I wonder if you can come back every Sunday?" He said, "Sure, I'll come back." I said, "I'd like to pay you for it." And he said, "Oh, no, that's not necessary." I asked "How much do you make from your regular job?" "I make 94 cents an hour driving a truck for the naval station," he said. So I said, "Supposing I pay you a dollar," thinking I was being very generous. "You can't do that, Father," he said, "I'm doing this for God."

I felt like I was slapped in the face. I was a pastor in a Catholic church, and he had to tell me he was doing this for God. I turned away so he couldn't see the expression on my face, and at that moment I realized, for the first time, that I was racist—that I was treating Black people different from white. That was a very clear beginning, and one thing led to another from that point.

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Another issue followed from that one, but they were all connected.

I went into the home of a couple who were the only college-educated couple in the whole parish, and they were white. And I was talking about some Indians had had a celebration commemorating the land that used to be theirs, and I said, "I guess the Indians were treated about as bad as we treat the Negroes now." The lady of the house said, "Father, you shouldn't talk that way, or you'll get the reputation of being a nig-



John F. Kennedy Library

**Above:** *President Kennedy meets Peace Corps volunteers. Right:* *President Kennedy's funeral cortège.*

ger lover," and put her hand over her mouth as she said it. So I said, "Well, I don't deserve the reputation for being a nigger lover," and I imitated her gesture and held the back of my hand in front of my lips, "because that is the reputation Christ has." They stared at me and didn't say a thing, so I said, "It looks like we've run out of conversation." We went down the steps together to my car and the husband said, "Oh, why don't you just put it down to the point that we're dumb Southerners and we don't know no better." He wanted me to say, "Just forget it," or something like that. But I said, "Okay, you're a dumb Southerner and you don't know no better. Good night." I knew that it would be all over town, because they were a very prominent family, and everything got spread around the town anyway. I fig-

ured that I had made my choice, and it was true. That was the beginning, but every thing every day was another lesson in racial justice. Or, I should say, racial injustice.

**The country hasn't been the same since John Kennedy was assassinated. We lost our best hopes. President Kennedy used to say that after his administration was over, people would be proud to say that they had been in the government in those days.**



Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress

**Fidelio:** How did you go from these acts of personal realization and personal conscience, into realizing that you had to organize something?

**Fr. McSorley:** Well, I realized that I was pastor and that I was, as pastor, responsible for not only myself, but the people. And that nobody else was even talking about the evil—the sin of racism. I decided that I would not allow my priesthood to be used for segregation, or for promotion of it in any way, however that went, and that if I were asked to have mass in an all-white church, I would make a disclaimer publicly, that

even though Black people aren't here and I am offering mass for you, I don't approve of the fact that there are no Black people here. I will say the mass, but I don't want that to be taken as a sign that I approve. I don't approve. This wasn't news to them—they knew that—but I said it every time, and when I was asked to hear confessions for an all-white school, I bought a couple hundred pictures of St. Martin de Porres, who was a Black saint, and I would tell the students to say the prayer on the back for their penance, and I knew that when they'd take it home their parents would see it and know their children were saying their prayer to a Black saint.

**Fidelio:** But when you first went down there you didn't even realize that you had to take sides.

**Fr. McSorley:** I didn't realize anything about it—and if I had known what I later knew—that the provincial was racist himself, I could have gotten out of there the first week.

**Fidelio:** The Jesuit provincial was racist?

**Fr. McSorley:** The Jesuit provincial, he was racist. If I had written to him saying that this segregation is wrong and I'm going to work against it, he

would have gotten me out of there right away. What I did say was, that I don't know anything about Black and white people getting along together. I'm not asking to leave, but I am having difficulties. And he said, "Well, difficulties are often better for you than successes. So, just try it out." By the time that I realized that racism was a sin, I also realized that the Provincial was one of the sinners, and he told me that when he found out that I was trying to end the segregation, "I would have exchanged you in the snap of a finger, except that by that time it was

too public." So, they waited.

**Fidelio:** You began to act within the wider, growing Civil Rights movement.

**Fr. McSorley:** Yes. I talked to leaders of the Black community, and leaders of the white community who were not racist. It was false advice, that not one white person would support you. That was all false, but I didn't know it was false at the time. So I talked to the Black leaders and the white leaders. I got advice from Father LaFarge, one of the leaders in the Church for interracial justice. He had once been in the same parish I was in, and he advised me to form a study club, to study Catholic teaching on racial issues. First we started an all-white club, and an all-Black club, and as they got to know the issue, bring a white man to join in with the Black club, and one Black man to join in with the white club, and they would change.

**Fidelio:** What year was it that you went there?

**Fr. McSorley:** I went there in 1948. I was there until '52. The study club was like a stick of dynamite. The postmistress would look at the letters that I would send out, to find out who was invited, and in the country you could tell who was at the meeting by the cars that were parked outside. Some Blacks from the naval station volunteered to come and protect me. I said, I don't need any protection. But, they decided they'd better come and stand outside of the meetings. And then, since I had taken a stand, I figured I might as well make a clear statement about it, in the open. I waited until I got to an all-white church, with a maximum congregation and I picked the third day of the Novena of Grace. The Novena of Grace was to have a sermon on St. Francis Xavier, a discussion of his life. The Novena was to be for nine days. I figured that by the third day there would be enough people, and that they would all be white. So I made up a speech. I got Father LaFarge to preview it. I typed it out and taped it, because I knew what it was going to do. It was one of the best speeches I ever gave.

Father LaFarge said, that he often thought when he was at St. Michael's church, that he would like to start off a

sermon looking around the church and saying, “Where are the good Black people?” So, I did that. I knew it was going to be dynamite, and I felt my heart pumping. And then I made it into a dialogue, with what St. Francis Xavier would say, and what the people in Southern Maryland say. I said, “some of the people would say, ‘the Black people have St. Peter’s, over in the woods.’” I said that St. Francis, who worked in India where there are Portuguese and Indians mixed together, might answer: “Are there two Churches? Aren’t they in the same Church?” Then the Southern Marylander would say, “They go to their place and we go to ours.”

In the dialogue, I was using the words of the study club people, so I knew just what the people thought, what they were saying. The study club people were harassed in their own homes for going to the study club, and I’d heard all of this, much the same thing, and that’s why I thought it was good for them to hear it. So, I had St. Francis say, “In the Church that I belong to, all are taught that there is only one God, and that we are all saved by the one God, salvation is for everyone, and the sacraments are for everyone, and all of us should call God our Father, so we’re all one family. That’s the way the Church is in India, and that’s the way I thought it would be here.” St. Francis then said, “I have looked into the history of the Church, and I have discovered the names of over fifty men, Black saints, who are canonized. That means they are in heaven with God. So, when we die, we’ll have our choice. You can either go to heaven with the 59 Black saints, or you can go to . . . someplace else.”

Well, I had an uproar after mass. There was more comment than I’ve ever had. I’d made it clear that not only had I taken sides, but that I’d officially taken sides, and for the record.

**Fidelio:** Some of the Civil Rights leaders in the Schiller Institute, like Amelia Boynton Robinson, remember you later playing a prominent role in the Civil Rights movement nationally, and marching in Selma and that kind of thing.

**Fr. McSorley:** Oh, yes.

**Fidelio:** So you took this mustard seed of experience and it really did direct the rest of your life.

**Fr. McSorley:** Yes, I had learned from experience. I not only learned it, but I believed it was worth working for—it was

my faith, so I had no doubt about it. I didn’t see it simply as Rev. Martin Luther King—I saw it as what God wanted, and even though my work in the parish was very small, the issue that I was dealing with was a great big, national issue. So I wasn’t as anxious to leave when I was told to leave, as I had been when I first got there. I could see that I was doing something very important. I had an important position, in a sense—I was a pastor of a local church, and even though it was a small church, it was a title and a situation I never got again. But, even then I saw clearly, that if I took this stand, I would never again be promoted to any position of trust in the Jesuit order, or in the Church. Once I decided I must take this stand, whether I ever get a promotion or not, I took my stand, and was glad I did, and I have never regretted it.

In 1963, when Dr Martin Luther King, Jr., called for “Mississippi Summer” and asked white students to go South and help with voter registration drives, I spent the summer marching with the students at the courthouses in Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi. We accompanied the Black people who wanted to register to vote. We placed ourselves in danger from the KKK and the police. It was that experience which led me into the peace movement. I could see the connection very quickly.

**Fidelio:** Well, many people knew of your activities in the peace movement, but, in a certain sense, those activities have come together in a very concrete way in the present day because Bill Clinton, President Clinton, was one of your



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students at Georgetown University, and then you met up with him as you both, independently, were touring European peace movements.

**Fr. McSorley:** Yes.

**Fidelio:** And that created one of the first really loud-mouth issues of the Conservative Revolution in the Clinton vs. Bush election campaign, when they tried to use you against the soon-to-be-President, your former student, and he stood by you.

**Fr. McSorley:** Bill Clinton and I met in London at a demonstration against the Vietnam War at the American embassy. We were there for five or six hours. We walked around this square, about a half-mile walk, and each person would put a cardboard square with the name of someone who had been killed in the war, in this coffin. Then we all went to a prayer service the next morning at an Episcopal church, and Bill Clinton—he’s not Catholic—asked me if I would represent the Catholic side. There were Quakers, and Presbyterians, and Episcopalians, and others who were opposed to the war, and they all gave a talk about peace. I read the prayer of St. Francis of Assisi, and then we walked over to the

embassy with crosses, and then I said goodbye to him, and went to get the train. I didn't know where he was going.

I went to France, spent a day or two, and then I went to Scandinavia. I had a Euro-rail pass—you could get a pass for a month, and it wasn't too expensive. I got off the train at the station in Norway—the capital, Oslo—and the second person behind me was Bill Clinton. And he said, “Oh, Father, what are you

States, and was travelling around with a communist—they called me a communist! Saying that he was going to Russia, and he was demonstrating against the United States, and that all that was very unpatriotic, and he shouldn't be President. I got calls from all kinds of media, from Phil Donahue and from one or another live—they're always live on these shows—something on CNN, Crossfire, a lot of these things. I said I

wasn't going to talk to them, because you won't really broadcast what I say. I didn't do any of these shows, but I did call the transition team, and talked to Betsy Wright and asked her, if Bill would want a statement about it. She said yes, and I wrote out a statement and faxed it to her. She said, “I showed it to him,

and he liked it—he's really busy, he can't talk to you now because he has to talk tonight in one of the debates.” In my statement, I gave the details I just gave you, and I also said, that in our history there were three Presidents who never were in the military—in fact, one of them opposed the war between the United States and Mexico—including Franklin Roosevelt, and they were good Presidents. And Bill used that line in his speech, and it wasn't really brought up again.

**Fidelio:** They had more horrible things that they had manufactured by then. In the book, you go through how you became involved with members of the Kennedy family. You know, on July 9, Congressman Joe Kennedy put together a resolution regarding marches in Northern Ireland, saying that the British were provoking violence there. So, I think it fitting that we know what you think about the Kennedy family, and how you became involved with them.

**Fr. McSorley:** After they shipped me out of Southern Maryland, they had me first teaching epistemology and metaphysics—and also Spanish, which I had learned by myself in the prison camp—at Scranton University. Scranton, Pennsylvania, was a very “white” city. It was also a union town, and I got involved with some people who were teaching the miners about the social encyclicals and their rights and social justice, and with other labor issues. Some years later, after I complained to the Jesuit Provincial about the rector who made it difficult for me to do social justice work, and suggested that he either remove the rector who was due to be replaced anyway, or transfer me, I was pleasantly surprised to see my name listed, in June 1961, to teach philosophy at Georgetown University. The Director of Athletics there knew me from the novitiate, and knew I had won tennis tournaments in seminary, so he asked me to be freshman tennis coach and acting varsity coach. I accepted his offer, which altered my life in a very dramatic way.

At about that time, Mrs. Robert Kennedy was looking for a tennis coach for her children. I arranged for our best varsity player to instruct them. I went over there to see how he was doing, and got invited to play tennis with them. A few weeks later, Mrs. Kennedy invited me to be a tutor to their two oldest children, that would be Joe Kennedy, the congressman now, and Bobby Jr. That is the way it began. I was over there every night for supper and other things, while John Kennedy was still President. That was 1962-63. I think they're a great family. Mrs. Kennedy brought the children together to say prayers every night, and brought them all to mass.

**Fidelio:** You had the very sad job of having to help the Kennedy family through two assassinations.

**Fr. McSorley:** Yes, I was there. I was over to the Kennedy home at two o'clock in the morning, when Bobby was killed, and I was asked to go over the day John was killed. I was with the children. And I was asked to offer prayers. They were a very good example of love of children for their father. It was more than that, their lives would be changed by this. It was



*Father McSorley with Bill Clinton at Georgetown University, 1980 (above, left) and 1995 (above).*

doing?” I said, “I'm visiting peace groups.” And he said, “Can I go with you?” I said, “Sure.” I said, I had some names of people in the Institute for Peace in Oslo. We saw some people in Oslo, and spent the day with them. And then we went to the university, and he knew somebody from Little Rock, so he spent some time with some students, and I had some meetings with some faculty who were teaching theology. He came back, and towards the end of the day I said, “I think I'll just go to the train and sleep on the train.” So he said, “Suppose we have something to eat together.” So we went to a chalet. He said, “You know this is a nice way to see a country. You see as much as a tourist does, but you also see people who are committed to peace.” That's pretty much what happened, and I said goodbye to him.

When he started running for the office of President, Bush started to attack him for being in Norway, saying he was looking for Norwegian citizenship, or he was planning to get out of the United

very hard times for them, and I have the greatest respect for them.

Like everyone else I remember the fateful day Nov. 22, 1963. Someone came to the door announcing, "The President has been shot." Praying for his recovery, I thought, "This is a warning that will make him more careful in the future." But the news got worse.

Over the next days, I was with Robert's children, and I offered daily mass in the family parlor. On the morning of the funeral procession, I got a phone call from Jackie Kennedy, asking me to her home. She wanted to talk with me. From there I went with the secret service car to the Cathedral, ahead of the procession. In the silence of the cathedral I could hear the clop, clop, clop of the horses as they approached the church door.

A few weeks later, Jackie asked me to give her tennis instruction every day at the noon hour at Robert's house. I realized right away that she had experience with the game. We kept no score and talked as we played. She had a lot of questions about eternal life, the Resurrection, God's knowledge of the future. I did the best I could to give her answers. When I got back to Georgetown, I looked for better answers in books, and consulted theologians. Then, the following day, I would discuss with her what I had learned.

One day, Ethel told me she and Robert had suggested to Jackie that she leave Washington, where everything reminded her of Jack. As she departed for New York, Jackie wrote me a kind personal note of thanks and extended an invitation, "Whenever you are in New York, stop in and visit the children and me."

I did visit her many times in New York, and usually took John Jr. out for a walk in Central Park, accompanied by at least one Secret Service agent. One evening following supper together, I visited with Jackie and the children. As it grew late, Jackie told John, "You get ready for bed, and maybe Father will come in to say good-night." When John was in bed, I went in as Jackie stood in the doorway. She said softly, "Do you know 'Danny Boy'?" His father used to

sing it to him just before he went to sleep. He used Johnny instead of Danny."

I said I'd try it.

John stared at me with fixed attention as I sang: "O Johnny Boy, the pipes, the pipes are playing . . ." Jackie stood silently in the doorway looking at us. I was in tears as I left the room. The heavy burden of their loss pressed in on me as never before. Jackie went over to say a prayer with him and kiss him good-night. It didn't even begin to compare to their loss, but I missed John Kennedy.

I've known other Presidents personally—but don't you think he was the best we've had?

**Fidelio:** We had a conference about two weeks ago on the tragedy in Africa, and Lyndon LaRouche, in speaking of the impotence of the West to act in the face of genocide in Africa, talked about the horror that transformed the people in America into almost a collective insanity through what happened in the Cuban missile crisis, as the first thing that drove people crazy, and, he said, the second horrible thing that happened was the assassination of President Kennedy. That we had been an optimistic country before, struggling through many odds—

**Fr. McSorley:** Yes.

**Fidelio:** —but all of a sudden it was manipulated in such a way that—

**Fr. McSorley:** Yes.

**Fidelio:** —that people became fearful and pessimistic.

**Fr. McSorley:** The country hasn't been the same since John Kennedy was assassinated. We lost our best hopes. President Kennedy used to say that after his administration was over, people would be proud to say that they had been in the government in those days. And that is definitely true now, since he was assassinated—because the government ever since has not been something to be very proud of. The story of Camelot, Jackie Kennedy used to say, captured the spirit of it, and that spirit has died out.

**Fidelio:** Do you think that if we pull ourselves together, Bill Clinton could have the capability and the backbone to rise to the occasion?

**Fr. McSorley:** Oh, yes, but he has all that

history to fight against. The assassination, the disgrace of Nixon and his regime, the two terms of Reagan, and the horrible things done by Bush. It was not true before Kennedy's day, that people were not trustful of their government. Now, it is true that nobody trusts the government. That's a big weakness. Kennedy himself said, if people don't trust the President, then everything's lost. I think that's true. The people want to trust Bill Clinton. They voted for him. But the media has a high priority in vilifying him. He's very nimble at taking criticism—he's taken a lot, but he's got to—**Fidelio:** Not let it destroy him.

**Fr. McSorley:** That's right. You know, Eisenhower had an almost perfect media reception. He had a war record. He was a military man—they covered what he said about killing communists. But, if you have a President who's opposed to these things,—well, the media is the voice of what you call the financial oligarchy in the country, and they're not going to give that kind of President a perfect media record.

**Fidelio:** Of course, you've worked in recent years with someone who has a "zero" media record and is constantly vilified by the media, and that is Lyndon LaRouche. And you have not just stood up for his exoneration, but you have worked together on questions of economic justice. Why?

**Fr. McSorley:** Because he's telling the truth, and when someone represents the truth I support him. God *is* truth, and the truth is always disagreeable to those who want falsehoods. I think Lyndon LaRouche stands for the truth on a lot of issues. On some issues I may disagree with him, but, on most issues I do agree with him. It's not hard to see that a lot of what he says is true, and that is why the powers-that-be oppose him so strongly.

**Fidelio:** That hasn't been easy for you either. Many people have criticized you for standing up for his exoneration.

**Fr. McSorley:** Well, that's nothing new for me. There's nothing new in being criticized. I'm old now, and criticism certainly won't endanger my future!

**Fidelio:** Thank you, Father McSorley.