

Sarah Heavren 0:01

We are recording. The following introductory conversation and questions have been structured off but not copied from the suggested introductory script and questions provided by Indiana University as part of the *Journal of the Plague* COVID-19 Oral History Project. My name is Sarah Heavren and I'm here with Fr. Justin Bolger. Today is March 11, 2021, and it is 1:04pm. I am coming to you from my dorm room on the, on the campus of Providence College, and Fr. Justin is speaking from St. Pius, which is across the street from the school. Fr. Justin, I would like to review the informed consent form that he signed for participating in the project. This interview will be part of a collection in the Rhode Island COVID-19 Archive, as well as the Providence College Archives and Special Collections. As stated on the release form that you said the Rhode Island COVID-19 Archive is a public digital archive project created and maintained by the Providence Public Library and the Rhode Island Historical Society in response to the COVID-19 public health crisis. The Archive seeks to document and share the lived experience of Rhode Islanders from all walks of life during the global health crisis. Any audio or video recording of this interview and a text-based transcript of the interview will be contributed to both the Rhode Island COVID-19 Archive and the Providence College Archives and Special Collections. Do you verbally agree to this?

Fr. Justin Bolger, O.P. 1:29

Yes.

Sarah Heavren 1:30

I am briefly going to review the license on the release form that you signed. Under this CC-BY 4.0 license, the creator will retain the copyright to their work and allow uses such as the Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence Public Library, and Providence College Archives and Special Collections to include the materials in the permanent collections of the Rhode Island Historical Society and the Providence Public Library; and the public to have access to and share, adapt, modify and cite the work. Per the CC-BY 4.0 license, the Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence Public Library, Providence College Archives and Special Collections, and the public must credit the creator when making any future uses. Do you verbally agreed to this license?

Fr. Justin Bolger, O.P. 2:18

Yes. And so they're going to be able to edit this too?

Sarah Heavren 2:26

I don't think edit, but be able to, you know, like take take parts. Like they could take a quotation from, so I think that's what they mean by modify.

Fr. Justin Bolger, O.P. 2:36

Right.

Sarah Heavren 2:37

Or, you know, save the file in a different format. They're not going to actually change anything that you say.

Fr. Justin Bolger, O.P. 2:43

Okay, gotcha.

Sarah Heavren 2:46

Do you have any other questions before we begin the interview?

Fr. Justin Bolger, O.P. 2:49

That's all.

Sarah Heavren 2:50

Okay. So Fr. Justin, do you mind sharing what your role is on campus? What you do in the PC community?

Fr. Justin Bolger, O.P. 2:59

Yes, I'm one of the campus ministers. So I work out of the Campus Ministry office with other friars who serve as priests and ministers there and other lay staff. And what we do is we serve the sacramental needs of students, staff, faculty on campus, so celebrating Mass and confession and other sacraments is needed. And we also are there just for other spiritual needs, counseling, things like that for everyone on campus. We also have a lot of programs that we run out of Campus Ministry. And there are a lot of students who are Campus Ministry leaders. So we guide those students in the various programs that they run out of our Campus Ministry office. So one of the ministries that I help direct is called Faith and Science. And this is a ministry started by a student that seeks to integrate and overcome, well, used to integrate faith and science and overcome any kind of notion that that they're incompatible. And so we do this by hosting events, lectures, discussions, things like that. And also help out with a couple of other things. A remote student outreach, so I'm reaching out to students who are taking classes remotely. And so, and I do that in different ways, just with meeting with them and sending them reading materials and other things via the mail. So yeah, that's a few of the things that I do on campus.

Sarah Heavren 4:51

Where are you from, and where do you live in relation to campus?

Fr. Justin Bolger, O.P. 4:55

I am originally from Maryland and--but I got to Rhode Island, actually, this summer, this past summer. So I haven't been here too long. I got here at the end of the summer. And upon moving here, I was assigned to our Priory on the Providence College campus. So that's Saint Thomas Aquinas Priory. It's a very big house, and it houses all the different friars who serve in different capacities on campus.

Sarah Heavren 5:35

So now, about a year ago, when all this was starting, do you remember where you were and what you were doing when the pandemic was kind of taking off?

Fr. Justin Bolger, O.P. 5:46

Mm hmm. Yep. I was in Washington, DC. So that is where friars in our province, in our East Coast province, that's where we are formed for service in the church and in our province. So we have a big seminary there. And we also have a smaller house, a parish with a house where friars

live. And that is where I was. That's in Southwest Washington, DC, St. Dominic's, and, yeah, so I was living there and studying, finishing up my degree in theology at our seminary, which is near CUA, in Brookland, in that northeast neighborhood of Washington, DC, so I was living in southwest, studying in northeast. And that's, yeah, where I was when the COVID-19 pandemic began.

Sarah Heavren 6:44

How did the pandemic affect your studies? You know, especially if you were just wrapping up, was there supposed to be some sort of degree ceremony that you were anticipating that got canceled or moved to an online format?

Fr. Justin Bolger, O.P. 6:58

Yeah, that's right. Some of my classes went to online. And some because they were just, we kind of had a contained community, we were still able to do maybe just one of my classes. Well, I wasn't taking many classes at that point because mostly I was writing my dissertation. So I could, I was doing that, you know, mostly as a solo enterprise. But there was one class that I was doing a little bit in person, and then another class that was totally online. And then yes, at the end of the semester, we didn't have a ceremony. So we just, what we, we had to, actually, some of us who were receiving our license in sacred theology is one of the degrees that we receive there at the seminary, we had to defend that, which we were able to do that before a small panel in person. So we, although some people who were farther away had to, had to defend their dissertation more remotely, so. But I did that. But however, there wasn't a public award ceremony at the end of the year, which is what we would you always do in past years.

Sarah Heavren 8:24

At what point did you know that you were going to be assigned to come to Providence College?

Fr. Justin Bolger, O.P. 8:31

Um, I figured that out in I think it was late April. Yeah. So and then, I had some--yeah. Again, finishing the semester, and then some time with my family. Yeah. And then headed up to PC.

Sarah Heavren 8:55

How did it feel knowing that you were going to be entering a college environment at a time when there was a lot of uncertainty about what the college environment was going to look like? And all the information about trying to reopen the school was coming out, you know, pretty frequently, but also changing very rapidly.

Fr. Justin Bolger, O.P. 9:15

Mm hmm. Yeah, so it was certainly new, but I guess it was new to everyone. So there's something I think something that was, I don't know, it wasn't that stressful, I would say because everyone was in this together, you know, there are all these obviously there are a lot of regulations for how any kind of public affair can take place. And so you just try to abide by those as best you can. And, and then of course, adapt where needed. So we just went into this, myself and I think other friars who were serving the campus with trying to make the best out of a difficult situation. So for example, Masses, for, for Masses, we were able to establish like a live streaming technology so that if you were not able to be there in person, you could watch online,

right, via streaming. And then, you know, the chapel had to be rearranged a little bit, so that there would be the distancing protocol, but, you know, so that students could abide by that. And, and I also started serving at St. Pius V parish. And that was interesting, you know, seeing everyone spaced out wearing masks, and, but, you know, we were still able to have Mass at the parish, and on, mostly on campus. There were a few times when there were spikes on campus. So during those times, there, there wasn't Mass available for the public. So that, I mean, that was difficult. And I, especially for students, I think and those who want to go to Mass. And so, you know, trying to, we were trying to be there in other ways with them as we could, but it was definitely difficult. And I felt for them, the students who couldn't attend Mass

Sarah Heavren 11:41

Once you did move up to Rhode Island and come to PC, how much of the summer was dedicated to trying to adapt things within Campus Ministry, to now meet the COVID protocols? Did you kind of dive headfirst into this, you know, first year trying to adjust to a new place, but now you're also trying to adjust the way that your ministry is performed too?

Fr. Justin Bolger, O.P. 12:09

Yeah. Well, that was interesting, because different protocols would come in. And so it was all happening so rapidly. So it was it was hard to have a definite plan because of course, we're hoping that the protocols lift so that we can have a normal semester, but different, you know, it was changing almost from day to day. So fortunately, I wasn't in charge of a lot of the decision making. We have another friar who is head of Campus Ministry. And so a lot of the decisions would fall on him regarding again, you know, how many, for example, how many students one could have at Mass. And then other sort of ancillary activities of the Campus Ministry, such as retreats, you know, can we have retreat? Well, it turns out, we were trying to figure that out as the summer went on. But it turns out, that we weren't able to have off-site retreats with students together. But we were able to adapt at the same time. So we could do some online, a few things in person. So, so yeah, the summer was a lot of, it was spent trying to respond to the different protocols that were coming in, especially from the state. And then we would have to apply those to our life on campus and then see what we could do for for ministry.

Sarah Heavren 13:50

What was it like once the fall semester did start and students were back?

Fr. Justin Bolger, O.P. 13:56

Well, it was definitely, you know, difficult for different reasons. I think college should be a time where you're really engaging with other people about important ideas. And it's hard to do that remotely, you know, and it's also a time where you're where you're meeting new friends, making friendships, and it's hard to do that remotely. Because friendship is something I think that naturally takes place face to face. And although the remote technology is helpful, I don't think it's a substitute for in-person, face to face communication. And so, of course, then once we're talking about receiving the Sacraments, this comes into play as well because the Sacraments are physical encounters with God. So, you know, the Catholic belief that upon consecration, the bread is no longer bread, but it becomes the Body of Christ. The wine in the chalice is no longer wine, but it becomes the Blood of Christ. So to receive the body and blood of Christ is to receive Christ Himself. But that is a physical act, right? Yeah, you got to be there to receive the Body of Christ,

of course. So when I mentioned how there were those times when students couldn't receive the Sacraments, or at least the Eucharist, and so that was difficult. So, those are just, I think, a few of the challenges that go along with trying to have school during these various, you know, amidst these various protocols, and especially trying to do Catholic higher education, which involves the whole person, preferably in person.

Sarah Heavren 16:06

You've alluded to a little bit that, you know, we had that outbreak in the fall that was kind of serious. We had to shut things down. In particular, people weren't allowed to go to Mass. But the friars did a little golf cart tour. So do you mind explaining that a little bit?

Fr. Justin Bolger, O.P. 16:29

Yeah, sure. So, as well as being, doing my work in Campus Ministry, I also am a musician. And I like to play a lot of music and still do as a friar. And in fact, a number of the friars in our province play together. We play music, we write music, we record it, and release it. So it's, we actually do it. Well, it's a great way to evangelize and, but also to do something fun together. We like old time bluegrass and gospel music, and we compose new music. And it's also a fundraiser for that seminary I mentioned in DC. So a few of us who are here at Providence College, during that outbreak time, that spike time on campus when students were advised to stay in their dorms or in their apartments, even off campus, a few of us got our instruments out, went on a golf cart, and drove around, and we would basically serenade students. So we played some music. And one of the chaplains also offered blessings for students. And so it was just kind of a way to spread some cheer amidst a difficult time. During one of the times, we went in the middle of one of the streets off Eaton, off Eaton Street, where a lot of students live in apartments and houses there, and we just kind of were in the middle of the street playing some music. I think we played some Bob Marley. Don't worry about a thing. And it was reverberating off the different houses, and students came out and they were able to check it out. And and, you know, we brought some joy into their eyes momentarily. And we drove around campus as well doing the same thing. And I think a lot of, a lot of people, you know, put it on Instagram and things like that. And we got some nice feedback from students, but also from parents that we were trying to think of creative ways to reach out to students and kind of reassure them. And like I said, bring some joy amidst a difficult time.

Sarah Heavren 19:01

Can you explain a little bit the ministry that you mentioned before about trying to connect with people, with students who are studying remotely? Was that something that you started in the fall, or that has been more put in place in the spring?

Fr. Justin Bolger, O.P. 19:16

No, that's been more in place in the spring. And what it's about is reaching out to them to see if they'd like to have a discussion over Zoom, just to see how they're doing. And so I've done that a bit. And that's been good. Just kind of introduce myself to them. And we can have a nice talk. And I can see are there any ways that I can help them especially if they're prayer, or anything else. See if they have any ideas for other ways we can help them. We sent a care package to various students involved with Campus Ministry, and that included some spiritual reading. We're reading God Is Love, Deus Caritas Est which was Pope Benedict XVI's first encyclical, and

we're reading that in Campus Ministry right now. So we sent them a copy of that. We also have a copy of a book on Marian consecration written by one of our friars in the province, Fr. Gregory Pine, and the famous YouTuber Matt Fradd. He's a Catholic apologist. So we were able to send that. We also had a card and students could write handwritten notes to those students who are remote. And we put some other things in there. So they were able to receive something, you know, physical, tangible, that they could have, and also read these notes. Oh, yeah, we also included some of our music in that.

Sarah Heavren 20:54

So once the fall semester ended, and all the students went on, or I guess the students went home before the fall semester actually ended. But what was it like being on campus over winter break and not having students around? Were you just preparing things for the spring?

Fr. Justin Bolger, O.P. 21:13

Yeah, so we were still doing some remote programming because the, even though the students were gone, the semester was moving forward remotely. So, you know, some of the friars obviously, were teaching or if they're in administration, yeah. Trying to plan for the future. And depending on where they are in the administration, and then in Campus Ministry, again, we would, we would live stream Mass, and some other events. I was also working again with that, with a student on the Faith and Science ministry. So we had, we hosted a panel discussion, and it was actually appropriate for the time as it was on isolation in the post-digital revolution age. So looking at the effects of isolation, and kind of diagnosing the current problem of people being isolated physically, but then also emotionally and spiritually and psychologically, and then finding remedies that our faith and our Catholic tradition has to overcome isolation and its effects, its ill effects on people. So we had a psychologist, a neuroscientist from Stanford, and a philosopher, and theologian from Mount St. Mary's in Emmitsburg Maryland. And the psychologist was a clinical psychologist from Washington, DC. So they all spoke about this issue from their respective fields, their diagnosis and their remedies. So, and they were all Catholic. So they're all people faith. And they had a great discussion. And it was a really nice kind of formative discussion in that they were, they were speaking to students as well, and, and all these participants in the panel were fathers, too. They all, they all have children, so they could really speak to the difficulties that a young person might have in being more isolated, and the struggles that being, you know, online all the time, using our digital technology, the struggles that that brings, even though, you know, digital technology is able to kind of facilitate communication. For example, we're having this conversation, we're recording this because of our computers and the internet connection here and the application called Zoom on which we're recording. But it has limits, you know, and also, some of the technology that we use is designed to not so much to connect us, but to kind of create an addiction to a, to almost a simulacrum of connection. And so people spend a lot of money in order to understand how to, you know, how the human brain works, and how you can kind of increase a, yeah, literally an addiction to a given piece of technology or given app. So you only have to think of how many hours a day some people spend on applications like Instagram or TikTok which are designed in a certain way to increase attention, right? And so anyway, the discussion was very good. And so it kind of flagged both how technology helps, but also its limits and its dangers. And then ways to overcome that, and especially ways to think about how, what real communication is like, and most of all, how God wants to communicate with us. And how God cares for us even in times of difficulty.

Sarah Heavren 25:33

How do you think the spring semester is going so far? Are you planning or helping plan any more events or Faith and Science events?

Fr. Justin Bolger, O.P. 25:43

Yeah, I am. We have one coming up soon, that will be one person lecturing. So that will be a little bit simpler. And so we have that coming up. And but we also want to have a panel discussion later in April. But again, that's going to be on Zoom. It's not going to be in-person. So you know, the limits of the protocols are still with us. So we're kind of trying to do our best. with what we have. Now it seems it's, the weather is nicer now. And so you see more students out and about, that was one part of that, that break between Thanksgiving and the beginning of the spring semester that was weird is the students were gone for about two months. And so campus seemed very empty. And, and then maybe even weirder is when we have certain spikes, and stronger regulations. You don't even see students, so they're there, but they're in their rooms. So that's strange, too. But, yeah, this semester, you know, I think we're doing our best, like I said, to plan to have events, have events in-person insofar as we can. But it's, I think there's still a degree of fatigue, which is natural, because, you know, we don't have as many, as much face-to-face contact. We don't have as many good recreational activities like, you know, like, intramural sports, and things like that, or seeing the PC, the different PC sports games. Although I think that just in the last week or so, some of those regulations have rolled back so some students can attend different games on campus.

Sarah Heavren 27:45

So I, I believe the Hillbilly Thomists just released a new album not too long ago, right?

Fr. Justin Bolger, O.P. 27:53

Yeah, that's right.

Sarah Heavren 27:55

So did you record that during the pandemic?

Fr. Justin Bolger, O.P. 27:59

Yes, we did. We recorded it in a in a retreat house that we have in New York. It's kind of a remote area. Yep. And so again, I'm a musician, and I've brought a lot of the experience I have in the music industry, especially recording into the order. And so I've recorded a number of albums within the order, some of our choir and DC choir seminarians, and we've released some chant and polyphony albums. But what we've also done two bluegrass folk gospel albums under the name the Hillbilly Thomists.

Sarah Heavren 28:44

Has this latest album been successful so far?

Fr. Justin Bolger, O.P. 28:49

Yeah, I think so. It's, it was number one in the Amazon new folk releases for a while, I don't know, four weeks or so. And we are, yeah, we've sold a good amount of albums. Now, it's an

interesting development where CDs are becoming obsolete. So they're both, you know, they're kind of the best way to make some revenue off. You know, that it's a real product that you can sell to someone, they can buy, and you have that exchange. Whereas with streaming music, you know, there's not a real product that someone has. They, if they have, you know, access to the internet can stream a song. But most people don't stream full albums. They pick and choose songs that they like, and so there's less, I think there's less ways to gauge the success of a given album. Because there you don't have, it's easy to identify this success when it's albums sold, both in terms of revenue and just counting that now you can count the number of streams as well. But, so yeah, I think it's doing well. We would be selling more because our student brothers, our seminarians in a typical year would also go to parishes. And because we're--Dominicans are mendicants. So we ask for donations from benefactors in order to pay for our expenses, such as going to school, right, and our food, the different expenses associated with school, and our seminary has a lot of, that's probably our biggest expense as a province. So usually the student brothers will be going around to their parishes, and talking about who they are, how, what the costs are associated with being a seminarian, a student brother, and then they would have this CD that they could say, Okay, well, I'll be at the back of church after Mass, you can buy a CD. Usually, we sell a lot that way. And people were very generous to us. We haven't been able to do that this year, right? So we're doing a lot more online. And but yeah, it's going well, and we're we're getting reviews, very good reviews on the album, including some that are coming out internationally. So we had one that just came out in Germany, one that's coming out in Spain, and one in France. So different publications are kind of finding out about us and writing. And that's good because then that just drives more traffic from new markets to our website, and hopefully they support us.

Sarah Heavren 31:55

So one of the big things with living on campus is the idea of pods, and students staying with their pods--their pods, kind of being their roommates. You live in the Priory, which is kind of like one big pod. So what has it been like living in the Priory during the pandemic?

Fr. Justin Bolger, O.P. 32:17

Well, I mean, I assume it's, it's, many of the elements are what they would always be like. So, you know, we eat together, we pray together, we spend time together watching sports, or just hanging out, you know, things like that. So a lot of the elements don't change. But there are a few things that do in the liturgy. So we would do distancing for our prayer. So the typical arrangement for a monastery or convent is you sit in choir stalls, and that arrangement, you're usually sitting right next to another friar but in this case, we would put a little bit more distance in between friars for, yeah. And then also the same with eating. So we'd have less, more distance between each friar in our refectory. So yeah, those are a few of the regulations that we put in place.

Sarah Heavren 33:27

Have you pursued any new hobbies or discovered any new interests lately?

Fr. Justin Bolger, O.P. 33:36

Um, let's see. Not really, I mean, I kind of, I mean, one. One thing I've been doing is I've started preaching parish missions. So especially with the pastor that I work with here at St. Pius V,



we've done, we actually just finished one and so that's something that's new for me. And again, I'm using my music and preaching through the music and through the songs that I play to parishioners in a given parish. So that's, that's a nice development for me and, but it's something that we Dominicans are good at and were founded for because we are the Order of Preachers. That's another one of our names. And so it's been good to to get out and that's nice too. As more people are vaccinated, there are more opportunities to do, I guess, quote, unquote, normal things like that, again.

Sarah Heavren 34:48

What have been the greatest challenges that you've faced?

Fr. Justin Bolger, O.P. 34:54

Just in this last year? Let's see here. I think just looking for ways to reach out to people and minister to them even, especially when you can't do it remotely--or when you can't do it in-person. So yeah, I mean, there was one time recently, you know, I got a call to visit someone in the hospital. But when I got there, they wouldn't let me in because they didn't have access. So I went, I was just trying to determine, you know, how to get that and eventually that, that, that time, I couldn't see the person but, which was unfortunate, and just kind of iconic for this age, where someone desires to see a priest, but there are certain regulations in place that won't allow that, even though it could be a you know, quote, unquote, safe encounter. So, that was frustrating, definitely. But you know, but another institution, another hospital I went to recently, and I was able to do what I needed to do because a patient called me, so you know, there, it's just, you find a lot of variety there. And that can be frustrating, too, because one, one institution might enforce rules one way, another institution might enforce it another way. And so there's not consistency there. And then, I mean, another frustrating thing is, is how the regulations change, and shift, you know, from week to week, sometimes. So we want to do as much as possible in-person, but that kind of the shifting sands of the protocols makes that difficult. So. So that's been hard. Adapting to that, and adapting to the variety in protocols and, and how that changes from day to day. So yeah, those are a few of the things that have been a little bit harder. And of course, ministering to people with masks on is weird. Because, again, the human face is a complete thing, you know. A mask covers where a face reveals, and it reveals the person. And when you're doing ministry, you want to see, you know, you want to talk to the person, and you want the person to see you and talk to you. And so the mask is in this in a sense of a barrier to communication, to seeing the other, seeing their face. And having that, that kind of human communication. So that's been another difficult thing. I think also planning. It's hard to plan trips because again, this is another thing that different states might have different regulations, or they might be testing more, and so they might have more positives than another state. And so they might be, they might limit who can travel, there are things for all those kind of issues, makes it hard to to plan and to be there for, you know, certain events, you might want to be there for your family or with your friends, things like that. I was going to do a baptism of a nephew. And I was able to do that because of the regulations. So you know, there are difficulties like that.

Sarah Heavren 38:57

Is there anything else you'd like to talk about that we have not covered? Do you have any words of advice or positive messages?

Fr. Justin Bolger, O.P. 39:07

Yeah, I always have words of advice or positive messages. God loves you. And yeah, that's been a lesson to helping people to see through the difficulty of this time. And, and this happens in life, right, where our plans are interrupted, the best laid plans of mice and men, right? And, but in a sense, we can rather than be defeated by that we can learn from that, we can get, we can be stronger. I think we can kind of grow in virtue, especially trusting God that He has a plan. Providence where we are in Rhode Island, the city and the name of the school refers to the way God guides history. And God is a good God and He guides us well. It's often mysterious, but He's always drawing on good even out of evil. So this has been a difficult time. But there are, there are lessons to be learned, especially trusting God, valuing friendship and family more. Even, again, valuing the Sacraments, more our connection with God that we experience, especially in our worship as a community. So hopefully we can come out of this and people can have renewed love of community and renewed trust in God's plan, even amidst the difficulties of life, and when it doesn't seem like you know where history is heading that it's okay. And there are hiccups in life, but life goes on and God is still with us.

Sarah Heavren 40:52

Thank you, Fr. Justin, for meeting with me and sharing what the past year has looked like for you.

Fr. Justin Bolger, O.P. 40:57

You're welcome.

Sarah Heavren 41:00

This has been Fr. Justin Bolger sharing his pandemic experience

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