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Interviewee: John Kennedy

Interviewer: Paul Ortiz

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K: We had five parishes and nine priests living there at St. Mary's in Balboa. Of course, the main parish, St. Mary's there, and Sacred Heart, all English-speaking Zonians. Paraiso was a congregation of mostly Panamanian people and a lot of islanders, the native—the blacks from the island, they make such a bulk of the Panama population around the capital city. They come over to build the canal—their grandparents—and then the U.S. wanted to repatriate them all, offering them free passes back to their island, Jamaica or Barbados, all them places, you know? [Laughter] Most of them decided to stay there. So they root and raise their kids. All the kids were born Panamanian, speaking English and Spanish. We always had a lot of fun ourselves. They called them—the people from Barbados are Bajans, and we called their language Bajan. And also, they themselves called us whitey-whitey. So you speak—and we had all kinds of jokes: Spanish jokes, English jokes, half and half jokes. Some of them, you have to have the right audience or you don't get a titter out of anybody.

O: [Laughter] Right.

K: All my work down there was half and half, mostly Panamanians really, because out of Balboa I worked at **Chiriquí** in West Hernando, Panama, right on the Costa Rican border—both sides, the Atlantic side and the Pacific side. The real

Panamanians and the Zonians, they don't talk about the other side. It's the next side. In fact, *Shorty and Slim* are these records; they are selling them downstairs.

O: Oh, yeah. I saw that. [Laughter]

K: And their title is *The Shorty and Slim*. It's really a great taste of Panamanian culture: the mixture of English and Bajan from the islands. Jamaican, Spanish, and English. One of their albums, they call it *The Next Side*, because down there the black people, in Balboa you don't talk about Colón as the other side. It's the next side. [Laughter] And that's the name of one of their albums: *The Next Side*. [inaudible 2:47]. So, my career down there in Panama has been mixed half and half, but predominantly it's Spanish.

O: Father Kennedy, when did you first go to Panama?

K: 1949, right after ordination. I was an ordained priest in 1949 up in Philadelphia.

O: Okay. Did your family have a tradition of serving in the priesthood?

K: Only priest was me, but my parents were both Irish immigrants from Ireland, Tipperary my father, and County Mayo my mother. They never heard of Panama, and I never heard of it, either, until I met a Vincentian priest, who encouraged me to go to the seminary. Then I went to that seminary run by Vincentian fathers. Of course, they pushed me because I didn't want to be a seminary professor myself. I wanted to be a foreign missionary. I was aiming for China the whole time, and

the year I was ordained, 1949, Mao Zedong moved in and kicked all the Christian missionaries out. So I never got to China. I'd still go to China if I were healthy enough and young enough.

O: [Laughter] What is distinctive about the Vincentian order? Does it have a particular—

K: Well, it's an order that was founded in about 1580 or about in Paris in France. Basically, they called it one of the French religious orders of the Catholic Church, because our being—cultures, our spiritual exercises, our prayer books and all those things, they're all originally in French. In our seminary training, we were given these French books. First of all, learn French, then read these books in French. So, we have a French taste to our customs and our Vincentian fathers order. And it fits right in with the Latin taste, too, with the Latinos who are very—of course, the Panamanians have Spanish—they speak good Spanish, very good. [Inaudible 5:09] in Colombia, because Panama was a colony, was a part of Colombia until 1903. So, I went down when I was ordained, right away they told me, you're going. Five of my classmates went with me. They sent us to Panama. We went first to Costa Rica to learn Spanish, each one of us to live with a Costa Rican priest mostly in little villages where we'd be exposed to culture and meet real people, not schoolteachers. Just mix and study on the side. They made my acquaintance with a local schoolteacher, and she'd come in every morning to the parish house and go over grammar with me. Then from mixing with her, in three

months I was able to preach in Spanish. After six months they said, okay, back down to Panama, vacation's over. Have you ever been to Costa Rica?

O: No, sir.

K: It's right next to Panama, beautiful little country. We called them the ticos, they were very good to me. The priest I lived with, a real holy man but at the same time a lot of fun, good jokes. He became a bishop, in fact. Then he died five years ago. Father Coto was the name, C-o-t-o, Alfonso Coto. But from him and the laypeople, that's the best way to learn a language. I get all these commercials on T.V., I get mad, the Rosetta Stone. Join Rosetta Stone; you'll learn to speak! You never learn. That's the same thing we've been doing for years. Buy a textbook and try to—you can't learn it just from reading a book. The only way is to mix with the people.

O: You've got to go.

K: Now these days, young people traveling so much, a lot of kids are learning as teenagers. They're learning foreign languages, these summer programs, and their parents let them travel now by themselves. So they go to Indonesia and India and South Sea Islands, any country, Latin America. So after that Costa Rice experience, I went right into Panama and worked with the Panamanian people, not in the Canal Zone. I worked three hundred miles west, the part of

Panama that abuts on Costa Rica. We have missions both Atlantic and Pacific side, our side and the next side.

O: What were social conditions like, Father Kennedy, when you first went to Panama?

K: It was poverty, but no real indigence. The Canal Zone, of course, that was just like a little slice of the state of Delaware or New Jersey or Texas—a lot of southerners. You hear it around here. The Canal Zone people, a lot of them speak real southern like. [Laughter] But our life in the Canal Zone was like living in Texas or Alabama, Florida, and there wasn't much difference. But a lot of Americans ended up marrying Panamanian girls, and I was happy to see that. Nowadays at these reunions now, you go to where they're selling stuff. The vendors, they're selling all what they selling from Panama. And all of them, they get together and have a drink or two, a few beers, all they want to talk about is Panama, not the Canal Zone. They remember Panama, the Republic. Most of them still own summer houses up on the beaches in Panama, and they spend all their vacation time. Of course, they all go back to the States. But after a while as the kids grow up, they didn't know anybody back in the States, they grow up as Panamanians. All the kids speak perfect Spanish. All the American kids who come here with their parents to the reunion, I think the Panamanian people as a whole, they all, caramba, can't wait to get rid of those gringos. [Laughter] Maybe so. They wanted Panama's aspirations, to be their own country. They realized,

but they didn't like having a foreign flag flying over part of their soil. So naturally, [inaudible 9:38] but when the Americans left, the Panamanians, they miss us. They miss the gringo presence down there. They won't admit it openly. So many people back in the States, all they want to talk about like at this reunion, they want to talk about Panama. That magazine that comes out every two months, it's full of stuff about Panama. It's written in English, but they have a few pages in Spanish, but it's distributed in the States with ex-Zonians. It's Panamanian in tone. The bulk of my work down there was with Panamanian people, which was good 'cause I learned Latin culture in being with them. They always asked me, Padre, you got any new jokes? Always say, yeah, but I can't tell 'em in church. [Laughter]

O: What were some of the challenges being a priest in Panama in 1949?

K: There was no—some of the Latin countries like Mexico had a revolution and a lot of anti-clericalism. In fact, in Mexico they shot and killed a lot of priests and nuns during the teen years, 1910 to 1920 and during the [19]20s.

O: Oh yeah. The revolution.

K: The revolution time. But I never felt any of that. In fact, when the big riots in 1964—of course, the Panamanians kept rioting. We had nine priests there in St. Mary's, and I was on the bishops' episcopal committee. In fact, he appointed me episcopal vicar for the churches of the Canal Zone. In that way, they did the

military—it was military, all those bases. And the Catholic and non-Catholic chaplains of the U.S. Army and Navy were down there. They were not obliged to the bishops in the States because there's a military bishop in the States. They call him the military ordinary. He's in a charge of all the Catholic priests in all the services bases around the country and overseas. But in Panama, they made an agreement right at the very beginning that the chaplains—Catholic or Protestant, whatever they were, Jewish—one of our great Jewish pastors down there was Rabbi Nate Witkin. He lived right across the street from us in Balboa. He was a wonderful man. He had a little house right where the Y.M.C.A used to be in Balboa. An American fighter pilot ran out of gas while he was attempting a landing at Albrook, and one more half a cupful of gas would have got 'em, but his motor died. He was crossing about where the bridge is now—the bridge wasn't built yet—and he went down almost in St. Mary's Church, but he fell two hundred yards short of it. The pilot's in Rabbi Witkin's house. It was the daytime. She was a nice lady, I knew her well, she was killed. Poor Rabbi Witkin, oh, he was heartbroken. She was killed instantly, and the pilot. All those chaplains, the Catholics especially, were not obliged to get permission for mixed marriages, Catholic and non-Catholic. You have to go to the bishop to get the written release, but they were told, no, you don't go to a U.S. bishop because you are all under the Bishop of Panama now officially. They cleared it through Rome that all the American priests in Panama would be obligated to the Bishops of Panama. So, my job was to be sort of—I wasn't a bishop, but I had all the powers of a

bishop in the Zone. If any of those priests wanted to get a dispensation for a mixed marriage, they'd have to come to me to get it. So, I got to know a lot of good guys and chaplains who were down there. And that's how we were quite intimately united. Since I was episcopal vicar, I was on the bishops' committee for the episcopal vicar of each area in the whole country's dioceses. There's eight of them all told: Panamá, Colón, Chitré, David, [inaudible 14:30]. I was always at those meetings, because I was on the rank even though I didn't wear the purple like they did. I had the episcopal faculties that they all had. We got real close, and I was very close to the Panamanian church, which is good because then that way, the bishops of Panama—where some of them before wouldn't go to the Canal Zone, but then the bishops themselves made the effort to learn English. They'd come over to the Canal Zone and they'd preside: we'd invite them to preside at weddings or anniversaries or any special parish function. They'd come over and check us out, the first real good look any of them ever had in the Zone. They had never gone out to a military base; they didn't know what it was like. Great relations sprang up then, even despite the riot in [19]64. I was at a meeting of bishops in Panama. It was a weekday evening, and I was dressed—sometimes we adopted down there, we had guayabera, the shirt, the little cross. I look for my chaplain's cross. I thought I had it with me, but I don't have it. You put it on your collar. That was our whole preaching insignia. My first years, we wore the sotana, you know? The long, with the—

O: Yeah.

K: You'd go to the movies, to the store, go everywhere with that, in the sotana, following the custom of the Spanish priest. But around 1954, Bishop Clavel, Panamanian Auxiliary Bishop of Panama, said Father Kennedy, our priests, they're always after me to let us dress like you priests in the Canal Zone, now without the long cassock. Will you come to the bishops' meeting and wear a guayabera, and wear that cross, and show the priests how you dress in the Canal Zone. [Laughter] So I was a model. I modelled, and the priests, Yeah! We want it! From that day on, they all started dressing like we do. Little cross on the collar, sometimes a cross on a chain, but some identification. That was a great breakthrough. We got to know the Panamanian priests; they got to know us. The same with our people: our congregation got to—as I mentioned, so many marriages. I remember coming back from, maybe it was that same meeting, one of those meetings. I came back from a meeting at Bishop McGrath's house. He was an American-born, Costa Rican mother and an American father, raised and born right there in Panama. He became Archbishop of Panama. Mark McGrath, about six-foot-six, big, real gringo. The people loved him because he was born—he was one of those American kids who spoke better Spanish than English. But I went to the bishops' meeting because I had on a dress like a bishop—the white collar—and I'm back about nine o'clock at night I was driving back through Cinco de Mayo where there's a big Pan American Airlines building there, heading back

to Balboa, and I got to the crossroads, Fourth of July Avenue. And suddenly my car was surrounded by teenagers, Panamanians. Gringo, gringo, gringo!

[Laughter] And there was this gringo driving, so I yelled a few short cuss words in Spanish to let them know. Carajo! [18:21] Oh, perdon, perdon, Padre! I'm sorry!

[Laughter] When I said, carajo they knew I was a Panamanian, so they let me through no problem. That's the way it went.

O: That's the way it went. You talked about really, in some ways, working both in Panama but also in the Zone. What were some of the differences between the two areas in your experience?

K: Of course, I had Canal Zone privileges. I could buy in the Canal Zone commissaries, and when people—Padre! Will you buy me this, buy me that? [Laughter] I mean, I was breaking the law but I bought things in the big old commissary right there in Balboa, in Stevens Circle, and in different places. Just little things, you know? A nice new razor—I'd buy an electric razor and things like that that were expensive in Panama. The only big crossover was that, and I'm sure a lot of the laypeople were doing the same thing. [Laughter] A lot of them had in-laws in Panama. I had some beautiful families, marriages come out of those. There are some of them down here. I saw a lady and a guy in here at lunchtime—what was his name? Johnson?—they all come up to me. They know me because they've known me for fifty years, but they were little kids and I don't know that I recognize them. [Laughter] So they all want to say hello and

remember those days fifty, sixty years ago with their Panamanian wife and their half-Panamanian kids and all that. That aspect, the family level, they got along great. The political level was something else. The Panamanian politicians simply—gringo go home, gringo go home, gringo go home, but don't take your money. But otherwise, the relationship people to people was very pleasant. And oftentimes, people would apologize to me. Father, I'm sorry for the way somebody in the paper yesterday said such-and-such about the Americans. Gringo, go home. Father, that's not us. We love you, we love you. The great bulk of the Panamanian people are very happy with the Americans. That's the way it was. I worked full-time in **Chiriquí** and Bocas del Toro. When I was living there in Balboa, as episcopal vicar I was over in Panama City more than I was in the Zone. My contacts with the Zone chaplains was real and it was very helpful. Helpful for them and helpful for me, because they had me as a contact with the bishop in Panama because some of them never learned Spanish and they relied on me a lot. So, both sides got along real good, real good.

O: Okay. What were some of the spiritual challenges for people in the Canal Zone?

K: Well, we've got all the same spiritual challenges. Recall the church regulations about holy day mass and things like that. And they day-to-day functioned in Panama just like in the States, though the Panamanian people as a whole, there was a lower percentage of assistants at the religious services. In the Canal Zone, the Americans—I'd say a third, maybe a quarter to a third of the—like the

people that are here at this reunion. I forget what I did last year. We'll have our mass tomorrow afternoon at 4:30. It's the Sunday mass the day before the eve and it's a valid mass for Sunday. We had in the big ballroom over six hundred people at mass. My good friend Bill Wilbur, who's pastor of the Gamboa Union Church, he had a very small group. After we finished in the ballroom, Bill took over with his group and it was much smaller, not even half of what they had. The Panamanian Catholics were sort of in a way challenged to prove that we are Catholic and we're going to keep our religion. And we encouraged them, give a good example. Show our Panamanian brothers and sisters that we love them and we're all one church and try to be faithful to your convictions. You never know what good you can do by just good example. I remember one couple I married, father and mother and five kids. They were from Arkansas, and they had never seen a Catholic in their life. But this man of the family, the breadwinner, he was invited to his neighbor's in Los Rios, one of the sections there outside Panama City but part of the Zone for a birthday party or something. I was invited, too, and he came up to me. Father Kennedy, can I call you Father? Everybody does. I've never seen or even talked to a Catholic priest in my life. But I'd like to talk to you. I've always been interested, what are these Catholics like? What do they believe in? The Catholics have always been a mystery to me. Maybe it is to a lot of people, but he came to me at St. Mary's rectory and he started coming for a weekly session, then his wife joined him, then the kids. Six months later the whole family was baptized into the Catholic Church. I said, well, what got you

interested in the Catholics? My neighbors, the people whose party you came to. I never saw them miss mass on Sunday. I remember back in Arkansas, we had one Catholic family in my town, and every Sunday they'd get up real early, they'd get in their car, and they'd drive fifty miles to the nearest Catholic Church. It impressed me, so I've always wanted to know more about the Catholics. You can tell the people are good examples. We're Christian, we're all Christians. In fact, I myself try to use the word Christian, not just Catholic, because sometimes people who are non-Catholic say, the Catholics are not Christians. They are not Christians. Sure, we're Christians! Who founded us? Christ, Jesus Christ! We carry his name. I often in speeches and talks and service use Christian Catholics. We are Christian Catholics. Or Catholic Christians. Whatever way you like, but I like to sneak the word Christian in there because all the Protestants and ourselves, we're all one great big church. Some of them have broken off from what we call the main body under the Pope, but they're still Christians, still believe in Jesus Christ, and that's very encouraging. That's good. That's nice. As long as we worship the God that we believe in, if we practice what we preach—there's a bunch of Protestants having a convention here in the hotel now. You see them on the first floor, and they're dressed to kill. Boy, when they go to church, they're not like us Catholics. On Sunday, we get—I hate to see people come to church in shorts on Sunday [Laughter] but these people, ladies coming in—

O: Oh, yeah. I noticed.

K: With big hats.

O: Hats, yeah.

K: On Sunday, too, wherever they are, they dress for church, boy. That's a good example for us. [Laughter]

O: Yeah, wow. Father Kennedy, what types of changes did you see in the church or in the country from 1949 through the [19]50s and [19]60s? Were there any significant changes that occurred in life?

K: There have been changes, but I'd say the faith has cooled off a little. A lot of what we used to call fervent Catholics don't go to church anymore. That's—it hurts. We're not getting vocations, young boys who want to go to the seminary and become priests. That's really fallen. When I was ordained, there were seventeen of us in our year. This year, we had two men ordained in our principal house in Philadelphia where I live now. But they're Latinos, one is El Salvador, and the other is Mexican. No gringos, and we have not one single gringo in our seminary now. When I was in seminary, we had more or less sixty-five, seventy guys in our major seminary the last four years before ordination. It's like four years after college, what call graduate school, specializing in theology. But now, we've closed that building. We don't even have a seminary anymore. We have no candidates. That's affected the church all around. Thank the Lord, the Latino

Catholics are a little more fervent in their religious practice than we Americans. There's a lot of boys that are moving up, good bunch of kids, and fifteen or twenty on their way up through college towards their ordination and priesthood. Of course, we've got the heartbreak both sides, Americans and Latino boys, ordained priests, who will fall in love with somebody and take their collar off and go get married. It hurts to see that because we believe we give guidance, enough training and bang into 'em the solemnity of their vows. You're making a vow to God and to yourself. If you don't keep your own word—you've got to think about what you're doing. So we urge the men to keep vows, telling them be faithful to your vows and that's a big—it's happening, even in the *New York Times* this past week, an article that lists people getting religious marriages now all over the country's dropped off.

O: Oh, really?

K: The number of people who get married in church anymore. Everybody goes to the J.P. and that's it. And we're affected; we're part of the general population, and that certainly affects us sometimes. Surprising, for my part, I always thought girls and ladies, they're all so holy and we guys are a bunch of bums. [Laughter] I found out that the guys are more fervent in their religion than the girls. Seems the girls, they go running after the men, you know? Whether it's just plain old sex, or is it real love, or they want to have a family—but a lot of times, the girl wants to get married but by the justice of the peace.

O: Oh, not in the church.

K: Not in church. That's falling off. That's affecting the church all over Latin America, too, parts of the world. It's growing.

O: Another thing, it seems more Protestant denominations are making in-roads into Latin America. Is that something that you've seen?

K: Oh, yes.

O: And why is that?

K: For every one of our Catholic priests that come out of the States, I'd say there are ten Protestant missionaries preaching the word in their little churches. There's a bunch of college kids—Catholics are doing that, too and we're finally warming up—college kids come down and spend a month or two or all summer vacation teaching kids, preaching religion, knocking on doors, and it's happening all over. So we're doing that, too: that's the kind of mission work I've been doing for the last thirty years. They sent me up 1980. They sent back twenty-five years to the States to do that, knocking on doors around the states in the Spanish sectors of the cities, and we're doing it down here, too. It's surprising how many good people are anxious to take part in—especially, I'll go out and mention so many marriages, American men and Panamanian wife, the wives want to be missionaries and the kids, too. That's encouraging, but still it's sort of a battle. [Laughter] Who's gonna win? [inaudible 32:02] Somehow, they're doing it for

God, the glory of God, sure. They thank the Lord they're learning what we believe, the one true God and end up becoming Muslims or some of those other strange, Oriental religions which go counter to our culture. But it's coming along. It's growing yet.

O: Okay. What are some of your fondest memories of those early years in Panama as a young priest?

K: Mostly they all involved the people because I was living—we used to get a month off every year to go home, and my home's Albany, New York. A-w-b-n-y, Awbny.

[Laughter] My little story—it's also the kind of story I wouldn't tell in church.

[Laughter] But there have been a lot of good people, and they're all willing to share their lives with us. There used to be more Catholic traditions, getting married in church and sending their kids to catechism classes not just Sunday morning, but during the week, too. And then we have our Catholic schools. We have St. Mary's there in Balboa which has always gone very good. Most of the kids there are now Panamanians, and they're learning good and we have good teachers. It used to be the Sisters of Mercy from Brooklyn, and they were all with the Brooklyn accent and the kids were learning English with a Brooklyn accent.

[Laughter]

O: [Laughter] That's great.

K: New Yawk and git it wakin. One story which I wouldn't tell in church, the sister superior when I went down to St. Mary's—when I was still there twenty years ago or thirty—eight o'clock in the morning before classes I was in the lobby of the school. There were kids coming in and one of the nuns, the principal of the school, she called me, Father. Yes, sister? X.Y.Z. X.Y.Z? What's that? Examine your zipper. [Laughter] First time a nun ever told me that my fly was open.

O: [Laughter] Whoops.

K: But they were great, and they've all gone back to the States now. They're still working as teachers in Long Island and Brooklyn. New Yawk, you know?

O: New York, yeah.

K: Experiences with the—it says here, how did you interface with the military? Well, with the military, it was the chaplains. And the chaplains would often invite one of us to go and speak to their English-speaking military congregation, certainly. I've often had three-day retreats—a weekend Friday night till Sunday night—all the day Saturday and most of the day Sunday, and that's for the laypeople with the assistance of the military chaplain. And the same thing for the Panamanians: they had for years what they called a Cursillo Movement, a little course in Christian doctrine. That's grown all over. It began in Spain. I made my course—my cursillo was a four-day retreat from a Thursday evening until Sunday afternoon, and all the basic tools of religion pounded into your head. It's a good

recreation times also, and exchanging ideas. That was a real good touch with the Panamanian people. And, how important was Panamanian culture in your life? I wear my Panama flag—where is it? My Panama flag and my American flag. And I was happiest when I came in the bus from the airport and I saw way up in the top floor of the hotel Panama and the American flag hanging outside.

O: Together, yeah.

K: I think our love—you can call it love, respect—for Panamanian people, and them for us also, has grown since the separation of the governments. It seems to me that's the way it always should have been, that way. But of course, what did they do? They had to be more and less forced. The canal was American-built on American land and American jobs, and then they continued on and it grew and grew and grew. Now, the workers on the Panama Canal, the people who actually run that canal, they know their business. They're good at it. They come out real good. They've got engineering and they've got the Panamanian—the University of Panama has courses geared towards the mechanics that are involved in operating the canal and constructing such a canal. And now there's widening, which is going to go on for another ten years. That's all being done by Panamanians. There are some bosses—because I think one of the big firms are Japanese engineers. I don't think the Panamanians are gonna learn Japanese. [Laughter] For me, I really liked the Panamanian people very much. All my friends, my Christmas card list, is ninety percent Panamanian. Just walking

around here, they'll yell out something in Spanish or in English, but I really like them. They're good people; they're nice, ordinary people.

O: Father Kennedy, it just occurred to me to ask you this question. What kind of impact did the Second Vatican Council have on the church in Panama in the [19]60s?

K: I think the church awakened. It awakened. The church was just a typical, Spanish-established church for four hundred years, and you don't stop that very easily. They have their tradition, their devotion to the saints—which we approve, but we tell them no saint is God. He's a good friend of God; that's why we pray to him. It's normal human nature to respect people who you admire, and we admire the saints. You just can't push them off or make fun of them because a lot of them, they died to defend the faith they believe in. They died and for their deaths, they say this—what is it? The blood of martyrs is the seed of Christians. Wherever there have been people killed for the faith—not so much in Panama—but there have been priests murdered in Panama. Father—oh, what his name?

O: Oh, right. Starts with a G, I think?

K: Up there in El Valle. Oh, I know. Héctor Garcia [Gallego] Padre Héctor, Colombian. He was shot not because—well, because he was a priest. His parish was Santiago in Veraguas, and some guy shot him because he was trying to get the barkeepers not to sell booze to the teenagers. He was defending the young

people, and they called him defensor de la juventud. There have been martyrs in Panama, but other countries where there have martyrs—Mexico—several hundred Mexican priests and nuns were martyred there in the 1920s. And lately in Colombia also: the priest who dared preach against the narco traffico. Oh, boy. We have a bishop working with us in the states now, and he was bishop of the eastern part of Colombia on the border with Venezuela. But he was trying to clear out the drug business, the narco traffico, and they came to him. Padre Excelencia? If you utter one more sermon like that, you're dead. So, he left Colombia. He's been up there ten years. He's a Vincentian father, but he's working with us in around the New York area, and mainly with the Hispanics on Long Island. All with Hispanic people, a lot of Colombian. They love him because he's Colombian himself. So, there is persecution and in Colombia itself; several priests and bishops have been killed by the—but aside from that, it really does seem that the blood of martyrs is the seed of Christians. These deaths have brought a resurgence of the faith. It's just a natural consequence.

O: Did you know Archbishop Romero?

K: Romero? Yeah. He was killed. Yeah, I knew him. He was Bishop of El Salvador. I knew him well. In fact, I was at meeting that he was at, and Bishop McGrath, the one I mentioned before, was there also. He was killed saying mass. He was at the altar. One of the military guys, he said he was doing what his superiors told him to do. He came to the church, went and stood in the middle aisle in the back

door of the church, and with a rifle killed the bishop right through the heart while he was saying mass. In a place like El Salvador, because all you could say is, muy católico. [Laughter] We love our Catholics who are going to make more saints. Something like that.

O: Well, Father Kennedy, I know you have a busy schedule at the reunion and a lot of people want to talk to you. Is there anything you wanted to talk about that we haven't had a chance to talk about so far?

K: The thing that comes to my mind in occasions like this is to let people know that the Panamanian people, just because they drove us out, they love us. Some politicians are a little bit—we don't want to come out publicly against them [inaudible 43:32] but the Panamanian people love the Americans. Look at all the marriages. Happy, happy marriages mixed between Panamanian and—it's usually the other way around, Panamanian girl marries American boy, but there's some very good Panamanian men who married American women and working out better because they just seem to get along well. My main message would be, I love Panama and I spent most of my life there. If they want me to go back, I'm ready to go anytime. That's the bulk, love for Panama and willingness to help them, that they need help, too, when they need help. But Panama's not as badly off as the other countries. They're not coming in great droves to the states, all the border trouble we're having right now where there are impoverished people who

have nothing. But thank God, Panama has been blessed by God with an economy that's pretty steady.

O: Yeah. I remember when I was there in the [19]80s, there was such a difference between Panama and say, Honduras. Night and day, night and day. Well, thank you so much, Father Kennedy. I really appreciate you taking the time.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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