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(Unedited Transcript)

Good afternoon. It was interesting to read O'Rourke's book about Geno, because even though I knew him there was so much I didn't know actually. I just knew him and his work on neighborhoods. And really, all of it was kind of a whole new world to read about. But it was also interesting to me because in a lot of ways, I could identify with what was going on in his life, because it was going on at that time in my life. I was ordained in 1963, and unlike Geno I was not in the Pennsylvania parish, I was sent immediately to an African-American parish in the center of the Central Ward of Newark, surrounded by three high-rise projects, that had 25,000 people.

Now, for a person who actually only knew two adult African-Americans up to that time, you could imagine it was quite a change. And yet it was one of the most welcome things that had ever happened in my life. It was something I wanted very, very much.

The alternative to that might sound good but it didn't to me, and that was that I would go on and spend the next three years to get my doctorate, and be on the faculty at Seton Hall University. So, Seton Hall University, and being in an urban parish in the middle of the central ward, I had no doubt that the real place to be was in the urban parish in the middle of the central ward. There was the dull suburbs, and there was the dull University, but there wasn't the dull urban center. That's where it was happening. That's where people didn't bother you, you could be creative, you could do things. Nobody bothers, long as you didn't do some very, you know, strong protest with the diocese, you could get away. And in some cases, I did, accusing our Archbishop of racism.

(Laughter.)

You know, I still survived. And so that's one of the changes I think today, is so much creative work was done in the sixties. And what we did is we had to face the issue that the only institutions that were left in the cities were the churches. And we were going to have to build on that.

No one thought of the term "faith-based." That wasn't in our vocabulary, at all. But we saw it was there. People were not leaving that were connected to these churches. And so that was the place to start.

And I think that's the difference maybe between today and the sixties, that's one of the differences.

I also think, remember, that in '63, we were in the middle of the real successes of the civil rights movement, where you began to see some light at the end of the tunnel, that good things were going to begin to happen. And therefore, there was an optimism, and a certain energy that was generated. But it also produced a very ecumenical approach, at least with the Southern leadership conference, Christian conference. A certain kind of sense that religion had shared values about human dignity, and they didn't have to be discussed. You didn't go through a long discussions on the dignity of people. And what you did is people then came from all different religious backgrounds, and could agree on a common agenda, again without much discussion. We just had to move.

And what took place? We shared prayer, we shared kind of a ritual where we had -- for example -- the singing of either folk songs or the African-American spirituals. We began to show unity with that. We began to get a sense that because it was right, it was going to give us a strength, a power.

The bridge at Selma, what were the 150 policemen armed and all the rest, what were they? They're nothing when you have God on your side. And so it energized people, and that was the world, in my case, 1963. I was probably in my parish only a few days and I became -- I had to go pick up money from African-American business people who wanted to quietly, anonymously, give money for the freedom riders going down south. And then, right into the march on Washington, and I was beginning to coordinate it, and that was only, you know, that same first summer.

You were thrown into things and you could do things, and you had a sense of solidarity. And you had a sense of the power of your work, and you had a sense that you didn't have to be afraid of anyone that got in the way of that work.

So I think religion took a different role. It was, again, ecumenical. It was strongly pulling people together in a kind of common cause, and a common mission, and so we could share.

Second, the city was different. No one was developing anything. The only development that finally came was housing because the state made available about a quarter of \$1 billion in mortgage money in the late sixties after our summer disorders of 1967, July of '67. And where I was, by the way, is where it all started. And Newark, unlike Detroit or Los Angeles, ours was concentrated. We lost 23 people within a couple of blocks. Ours was concentrated.

But land values, when we started with New Community Corporation, we would buy a lot for \$500. So, cheaper than Toledo.

(Laughter.)

And today, the same lot, about \$120,000. So you can see, that's a different world. Downtown is developing, unfortunately using huge resources, which is a major issue. Public resources, a \$320 million arena, which is gonna cost us -- and we all know because they never get it right, especially if they're trying to get something by you. The city is going to put up \$220 million, plus all the infrastructure, which is going to run close to \$100 million.

So you can see that the concentration of what public wealth we have is not on our neighborhoods; they are being neglected. And it's very different. Now we're going through the fact of neglecting our neighborhoods. Back in the sixties we thought we could intervene and change that, and in some ways we did. In the area where our community development group works is actually now, we are attracting upper-income housing.

And that's fine, because we've overly saturated the place with the low-income side, and we're only welcome now that people do want to come and live with us, and they'll pay \$120,000 for a lot, to be able to build a house in this -- what was an area of Newark that was considered the worst area in the city, in a city that was declared by "Time" magazine as the worst city in the nation, after July of '67. So, that's changed.

In the area of religion, I think we had among priests a collegiality, nationally, that we don't have today. Jack Egan, who was mentioned in the book, in O'Rourke's book, was a great one for going around the country and getting people, Catholic priests in one city, and the sisters actually saying to come together for several days, to begin to share experience; but probably more, to feel you had people who had common issues, common mission, and you could share in that sense. And always, he'd find a retreat house somewhere -- in our state, in New Jersey, but he did that all over the country.

And Egan was an interesting person. He was the urban person for the archdiocese of Chicago, until they fired him. And then he went off and became the urban person at the University of Notre Dame, where he was given a free hand. So it was quite different.

But that network exist. There was an activism, so that people could balance service and advocacy, which I think Geno always was able to do in his life. It is one thing to do the programs to implement the legislation. But you also have to confront people constantly, "Look, this is not right. This is what we have to do."

I think in talking about "ethnic" as being a bad word, he certainly should be pleased that it's no longer that. And that actually, you know, this great melting pot, it didn't work, and isn't real. And that what we're learning, I think, is that we take our differences and we begin to enjoy that, and celebrate that in our society. What makes us different than other countries in the world is we are so diverse. And why would we want to suppress what makes someone, for example, a Lithuanian, or Polish, or African-American, or Nigerian. I can tell you, the parish I'm in now -- only my second parish, and they'll never take me out of Newark --

(Laughter and applause.)

-- but my second parish. We have 38 different countries. And really, we've got everybody now -- we just had our big celebration, international celebration. Everybody gets their flag to carry, you know, they do their dance, their music, we start up the liturgy with all of that going and then we go back to the hall, and continue it, with food then, you know, music, dress. You know, begin, it's fun. It's really enjoyable. As in '63 it would have been dull to go to the suburbs; today it is dull to go to a church that is not diverse. I think we are on the good ground. We are on the fun ground, anyway, and that ought to continue.

So, we've seen growing diversity, but unfortunately I think we're not doing well with leadership, religious leadership. And I think we have to really say that, and we have to begin to confront that.

You either have in the one case -- that I'd be familiar with, they get down to one or two issues. One issue they picked, and the other issue they didn't pick. And unfortunately, the days when I grew up, when every diocese in the nation had what you called a "labor priest." That was a priest assigned in every diocese that had as the job to help union leaders understand the theory of what they were doing, and the theology of what they were doing, that it was right; you were working to protect the worker. That was important.

And in fact, in the book, O'Rourke's book, it mentioned the one -- he mentioned several of them, but one right in my own diocese who I knew very well, Al Walsh, who really worked very closely. They were a national link to work with labor.

But those days are over, unfortunately. On Saturday morning on public radio, there was -- I think his name was Jamie Smith, being interviewed -- not an interview, a discussion. Jamie is in this church, really is a -- he's an evangelist Church, but on the other he's a very moderate person, who has ready written several books -- I haven't read any of them unfortunately. I plan to, now after hearing him -- but he was talking about how to be a moderate, but also caring about social issues, in that particular segment, compared to the religious right.

And he points out that the religious right has stolen the show. They control the media, because they know how to use it. And these mega-churches have whole departments to deal with the media. And he said, "Here we are, a group of us get together and we bemoan the fact that we can't get our message out there, that no one hears us. And we don't have, as it were, the dollars. How they do it, I don't know," Jamie said. But we'd better find out how they do it, and we'd better do it.

Today, I think unfortunately -- there's one other issue before we conclude, and that is that we really do not have much of a vision. Whether it be in politics -- I mean, it really is sad. Politics has now gotten to the point -- excuse me, except in Marcy's case -- but it's gotten to a point that we do a poll and find out what people want, and then we try to really sound like that. Not necessarily be that, but sound like that, you know. And we try to use that in our election. There's no substance to it, there's no vision to it. Certainly, we can consider it the most un-American position anyone could have, because it has no substance, has no vision for where we want to be as a people. And I think we have to get that clear in our minds, and go for it.

And at the last thing I would say is that I think we have to put a great deal of emphasis on economics, you know, what is right and what is wrong, back to basics. I was away when -- what was it, \$500 tax relief was given, and I was in Kenya in the slums of Nairobi, where they have 300,000 children who live on the street, 300,000. And I had spent several days there, and I came back, and when I turned on the TV where I was staying, the home base was, and there on CNN, they're telling about this \$500 rebate.

It just didn't seem right. It didn't seem right. There is good we can do, in our own country. I always thought, rather than give benefits, tax benefits to the top, give it to the bottom, and it's gonna be out in the marketplace in 24 hours. They are not gonna -- they can't save. You know, they're scraping to live, there's no excess.

So if you want to get it out and you want to give the economy a boost, that's the way I'd give it. And I think we need to now talk about it. Whether or not it is popular to talk about taxes or not, I think for us it doesn't matter. What is right has to be said. I really don't think Geno went and did a survey to find out whether people liked what he said. You know, I think he said it. Sometimes you like what he said, and sometimes you didn't. And God bless him, he didn't care. Thanks.