

Interview with Brother Joe Schwab

Interviewer: Deborah Altus

December 5, 1995

On Friday, December 5th, I just did an interview with Brother Joe Schwab, S-C-H-W-A-B, at the Santa Barbara Mission, and the tape recorder didn't work, so I missed the entire interview that I did with him. Um, but just to summarize a little bit about what he said while it's still fresh in my mind. . . Brother Joe is a Franciscan Friar. He has been one since, uh, 1974, when right after high school, he, uh, he was living in Phoenix, Arizona, and he became a postulant, living in a house with about, oh I think 8 other young men who were interested in becoming Franciscan Friars. Um, he now lives in the Franciscan friar community in Santa Barbara at the Old Mission. There are 35 friars living there, and ten laypeople. Brother Joe is an administrative head at -- I don't know if they call it a "friary" or what -- but anyway, for the friars, and that means that he is responsible for overseeing all sorts of administrative type decisions. For example, when a brother wishes to request some money for a personal expenditure, or wishes to go on a trip, Brother Joe is the person who decides whether or not that person gets the money or they're allowed to leave. They must ask permission for a number of things: staying out late, going out at all I believe, getting pocket money. . . He did say they got \$70 a month pocket money to do with what they wished: to go out to the movies, to take somebody out to dinner, or something like that. There are also 10 laypeople living in their community. These are people who make a one year commitment to the community. He said they're generally retired people, people who wish to have more of a sense of Catholic community in their lives, and who work with them. They eat with them and pray and have mass with them every day. And these people can be married people or anything. They generally stay on average of about three years, but they're only committed to one year. Brother Joe supervises about 25 employees -- those are people who do things like cook or clean. They do quite a bit of retreats at their community, and sometimes will feed up to 100, 150 people, so they do have to have a staff that helps with that, the friars can't do all that themselves, although they do participate in domestic work. Brother Joe said he cooks once a week. So they do cleaning and cooking responsibilities, although not all of it because it's too much for them. Also because, I think he said about half their group of friars is quite old, and some of them live in an infirmary, they do run an infirmary there on the premises, and also their staff that I talked about earlier, includes some nurses and nurse's aids as well that help run the infirmary. Their daily life involves rising at 6am. They have a 7am prayer, and then they have mass, and that goes to about 8am. They have their mass in the private chapel, he said they used to have it in the main mission sanctuary or whatever you call it, but he said that they got to be a curiosity for visitors, kind of a tourist attraction, and he said there was no way they could concentrate on what they were doing, have a real spiritual experience with a lot of people gawking, and so they now have their mass in a private chapel. Mass is followed by breakfast, and then at 8:30 am they start their workday. And for Brother Joe, that involves, his work is the administrative head of the community. He's also they vicar's assistant, and so he does some sort of spiritual, I don't know what you call it, ecclesiastical work as well as just administrative work. They live in an old cloister that's above the museum of the mission, and it's sort of dormitory-style living, they have rooms, just private rooms along the hallway and share a bathroom and share showers and things like that. They do have cars, they have something like 8 cars for their group of 35 friars, and, not all of them drive, because some of them are old. So he said it's about two people to a car. And he said that worked out particularly well because of the fact that when you have two people sharing something, you can usually pretty much tell who has not done something they were supposed to, like if the oil didn't get changed or the gas didn't get filled up, you know who did it. There's a clear line of accountability there. And that really helps a lot. He also

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said that, I asked him about work sharing, and if they ever had work sharing squabbles or problems, and he said well, yes, you know, that they did, that occasionally people wouldn't do what they were supposed to do, and he said that was when it was very helpful that there were clear lines of authority, and that that authority could be exercised. He said they don't exercise it often, but that when they need to, someone will say, the person in charge will say, well, you need to do what you're supposed to do, so things can get done. And he said that he feels that that's one reason why they're successful as a community, is that they're, they do have authority that they can rely on that secular communities wouldn't have. I'm not quite sure about their authority structure, how it works entirely. He did explain it some but it is quite complicated, but there is somebody who is their, their sort of supervisor, their head. And he said they don't live so much as a family like maybe some of the Benedictine monasteries might consider themselves, but they see themselves more as group of brothers, and that their supervisor, their head person, is like their guardian, but that it really had more of a fraternity feel, a group of brothers, rather than a family-type feel. They do take all of their meals together. He said they have a recreation three times a week, and that is sort of when they get together and chat and talk about their life. He also said that one of the reason he feels that they're successful is that there's a very strict and complicated and drawn out application process to become a Franciscan friar. And he said they may have about 300 or so applicants a year, and out of those 300 maybe five will eventually become friars. And maybe only two or three of that five will take final solemn vows. He said they go through psychological testing, and that, the original 300, and that weeds out about half of them. They go through quite rigorous testing. And then for years before they take their solemn vows they go through many periods in which they themselves or other people decide whether they are suited for this life. And he said certainly everyone is not suited for this kind of a life and that, and many people are asked to leave, or leave on their own volition. Once, however, they do take solemn vows, they are a brother for life, and they can't get booted out, regardless of what they do. And Brother Joe did talk some about how they have had some scandals within their Santa Barbara parish. Some sex scandals where brothers have done terrible things that have been very hurtful to their community. I assumed he was talking about pedophilia and, he did mention that, and he said that that's been really hard for him to live with. He said, you know, when people recognize him outside, when he's going grocery shopping sometimes he feels like putting a bag over his head because he's very embarrassed about what has happened and what, that the actions of his brothers, what sort of a reputation that has brought to his community. Yet he feels like the media has portrayed the community very badly, in sort of this black and white fashion, but he does feel like the outside community has been very supportive and understanding and basically they're respectful of the friars, regardless of the fact that, that one or two of them have been involved in some fairly serious scandals that have gotten quite a bit of media attention. He said that he doesn't take much time off from his administrative work, he'll, he says his hours are sort of erratic, but that he's on call quite a bit, and so he works for several weeks at a time, and then he'll take several days off and go travel, visiting friends. He likes to hike and mountain bike. There was a mountain bike and a helmet in his office, which was sort of surprising to see. He was also wearing Birkenstocks, which was a bit of a surprise, under his long brown habit. He wears a long brown habit with sort of a rope around his stomach, in a traditional dress of a Franciscan friar. I asked him about his dress, and he says he generally does not wear his habit outside of where he lives or outside of the mission, the church. For example, when he goes bike riding or when he goes to the movies he'll just dress normally. I asked him,

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would there be any way to pick you out as a friar, and he said no, that he doesn't wear anything distinctive or unusual when he goes outside of the community. He says he does that because it's simply easier to get around. He said if he wore his habit he would constantly be stared at, and it would just make life a lot more difficult that way. He travels quite a bit, and some of that travel is part of his work. There are about 260 friars in his provincial area. I'm not exactly sure where that goes, I believe it's sort of in the Southwest, kind of the Arizona-California area. If he gets moved, and he has gotten moved, he's only been Santa Barbara about a year and a half, it would be within his province. Before this he was in Oakland for some time. And I asked him how it felt to be moved, to be uprooted, and to not really have a choice about where one lives, and he said that, yes, that that was difficult, but that part of the life of being a friar was learning how to give up control, and he talked about spiritual poverty as well as material poverty, and the importance in the life that he has of having to give up control. And that makes things like being uprooted and moved around without choice in the matter, easier. He talked some about the Poor Clares. The Franciscans are associated with the Poor Clares, because St. Francis and St. Claire worked together, they lived at the same time period, I believe he said that was around 1100, and that their community has been around for over 800 years. He said usually wherever there is a group of Friars there will also be a group of Poor Clares, so they often live next to each other. The Poor Clares, he said, do the job of praying. He said they all have different roles, and that while Franciscans go out more and meet with the public, and minister to the public some, that the Poor Clares are the ones that engage in prayer life. And he felt that that was very important, that there was somebody doing the praying while they were doing more of the outreach. He said that they act as the chaplains for the Poor Clares, and give their masses, and things like that. I asked them if they ever shared meals or anything, and he said no. He said that this particular Poor Claire group that they're associated with are called Colettines, and that they're very inward centered, that they don't have much contact at all with the public. They do go out some, but not much. Their life is very centered on God. He said that they, there are about 18 nuns living there, and they pray 8 times a day, they have 8 periods during the day in which they're engaged in some sort of prayerful activities. I asked him some about why he thought many of the 1960s communes didn't last, that many of them crashed and burned rather quickly. And he said he thought that there was a certain romanticism associated with communal living that many people had, that he felt was unwarranted, that communal living is a lot of hard work, and that you really need an active sense of commitment, and that that doesn't come easily, and it comes from a lot of hard work, and that this romantic notion of communal living can get in the way of a group succeeding. He said that friars spend years of training in order to live successfully -- in order to live communally. That it's hard to get in, that it's hard to stay in many ways, and so he felt that that kind of training was really essential to a group being able to succeed. He said there was that sort of weeding out process, the training, and also that authority that's there too, some of the things that have made over the years the Franciscan Friars a successful group, a long-lived group. And he also said certainly that their theological beliefs and that reason for living for living communally was very important to things lasting. But he said that certainly that it was difficult to live together, and he said that in his first experience, when he was living with young men out of high school, that he was surprised at how difficult it was to live with other people, and how personalities would get in the way. You know, the way someone did a certain thing, like squeaked their chair, or rubbed their cheek or something, could really irritate you, and could really be annoying and a problem. But certainly their constant prayer and sort of selflessness and giving

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themselves up to God and their spiritual poverty and everything, helps them deal with those annoying little things that can be a problem about communal living. . . . It's hard for me to think of other things that he said, if I do, I'll turn the tape recorder on and talk some more, but I think that I've caught many of the themes that he talked about. One final question that I asked Brother Joe was, if this was the type of life that he expected to keep doing, if he considered he would consider as a friar for the rest of his life, and he said yes, he would, that he very much likes this life, he was very much happy there, and he said he expected to continue so. Although said, you know, you never know, and he did say that the door swings both ways, but he said that it was a life he felt that he was suited for, that he didn't just choose this life, but he was called to it as well, that he certainly did expect to stay.