

Interview with Fr. Paul O'Callaghan - June 28th, 2019

00:00 - Jacob Beebe

What is your name and what is the name of this church?

00:05 - Fr. Paul O'Callaghan

My name is Fr. Paul O'Callaghan, and our church is St. George Orthodox Christian Cathedral.

00:12 - Jacob Beebe

What is the location of this church?

00:14 - Fr. Paul O'Callaghan

It's at 7515 East 13th Street in Wichita, Kansas.

00:19 - Jacob Beebe

What date did this church open?

00:21 - Fr. Paul O'Callaghan

This particular edifice opened on Christmas Eve, 1990. However, the congregation traces itself back to the purchase of its first edifice which was May 6th, 1918.

00:43 - Jacob Beebe

How would you describe your general beliefs, and what are its defining characteristics?

00:50 - Fr. Paul O'Callaghan

Our beliefs are in accord with Orthodox Christianity worldwide. We are a congregation of the American, North American Archdiocese of the Orthodox Church of Antioch, and therefore our beliefs are the same as what one would find in what's often called the Greek Orthodoxy or Russian Orthodoxy. So Orthodox Christian beliefs center on God is the Holy Trinity, the Father with the Son and Holy Spirit, and Jesus Christ as the incarnate word of God, fully divine and fully human. Everything revolves around those core beliefs, and the Trinity, and the divinity, and humanity of the one person of Jesus Christ.

1:42 - Jacob Beebe

Have you participated in other religious organizations?

1:59 - Fr. Paul O'Callaghan

I grew up in two Roman Catholic parishes in my hometown and we moved from one neighborhood to another, changed churches; Blessed Sacrament Church and then St. Raphael Church in San Rafael, California. In college I attended a local Episcopal church, St. John the Evangelist in Chico, California. My home parish, Orthodox home parish is St. Nicholas Church, Antiochian Church in San Francisco, California. After attending seminary at Holy Cross Greek Orthodox Seminary in Boston, Massachusetts, I was assigned during my final year to serve St.

Mary Church in Cambridge, Massachusetts. And then after that interim pastor time there, I served for three and a half years at St. Nicholas Cathedral in Los Angeles. Following after that I was pastor of St. George Church in San Diego for nine years before coming to St. George Cathedral in Wichita.

3:07 - Jacob Beebe

What attracted you to Orthodoxy?

3:13 - Fr. Paul O'Callaghan

The primary attraction to Orthodoxy was its traditional worship. After the modernization of Roman Catholic worship in the 1960's, I, along with many other Roman Catholics, were disaffected rather than, you know, embracing the revised form of the liturgy. And also, as I began to study and learn orthodox theology, I found the Orthodox vision of things compelling.

3:56 - Jacob Beebe

Is there a reason, other than the religious body, why people are attracted to this specific congregation?

4:03 - Fr. Paul O'Callaghan

I think people are attracted for a number of reasons. One would be the somewhat imposing and certainly unusual Byzantine style architecture that people see just driving by. This is something different, this is something perhaps many find appealing or beautiful. I think many others find the worship majestic, traditional Orthodox Christian worship. And thirdly, I think most people find the members of our congregation to be very hospitable, warm, and welcoming. So I think those are the main reasons people would be attracted to this particular congregation.

4:48 - Jacob Beebe

You already said this a little bit, but where did you receive your religious training, and how do you continue your education?

4:56 - Fr. Paul O'Callaghan

I took my bachelor's degree in Religious Studies at California State University in Chico, California. And then my Masters of Divinity from Holy Cross Greek Orthodox Seminary in Boston. And, you know, ongoing education is met mainly just been through personal reading and study.

5:24 - Jacob Beebe

Have there been any books or influential people who have influenced you in your religious and career choice?

5:36 - Fr. Paul O'Callaghan

Yes, there are a number of texts that have been critical for me. One is *My Life in Christ*, also known as the *Spiritual Counsels of Father John of Kronstadt*, a Russian priest of the late

19th and very early 20th century. He was very important. Also other writers like Nicholas Zurnov, John Meyendorff and a number of others were compelling in articulating Orthodox Christianity in a way that I found resolved a lot of the issues and conundrums lying between Roman Catholicism or Protestantism.

6:31 - Jacob Beebe

Do you or your church do any community service or outreach? How are new members reached?

6:41 - Fr. Paul O'Callaghan

We, for many many years, have had an outreach committee that was dedicated to putting on programs to appeal to and attract the general public, and create an interest in Orthodoxy. Some of that has gone by the wayside in recent years, although we are in the process now of reviving our outreach team. We do a lot in the community in terms of charitable work. We partner with a number of organizations. Every year we have a select group of organizations that we partner with and support financially or donate man hours, if you will, to their efforts. We can't reinvent everything here, so we tend to partner with agencies whose mission we identify with. We did start and maintain an agency of our own, it's known as The Treehouse, and it exists to serve mothers and new babies in need, to provide for their physical needs, to help with their education, and promote healthy lifestyles and their relationship with God; cultivate, you know, a healthy and spiritual relationship with God. So this is the ministry that we began in 2002 and its ongoing today. It has its own location, down on Volusia.

8:05 - Jacob Beebe

Very close to Eighth Day (Books).

8:06 - Fr. Paul O'Callaghan

Yeah, very close to Eighth Day, just right on first and Volusia.

8:14 - Jacob Beebe

Can you briefly explain your educational program and any educational programs offered to adults? Do you have a prison ministry? Do you have a new members catechism of sorts?

8:31 - Fr. Paul O'Callaghan

We don't have a prison ministry outreach. Our sister parish St. Mary does that. That's been kind of their thing. So we don't do prison ministry. We started The Treehouse in partnership with St. Mary I should add. In terms of programs, yes, we have ongoing catechesis in the Orthodox faith for those who are interested. You know, it's a series of classes that is built on four primary segments of: doctrine, worship, church history, and spirituality. The entire program takes about nine months for a person to get to get through. In addition, we have ongoing adult education, or what we call continuing catechesis, for our general membership in which we offer a variety of programs on different subjects, usually in the fall, winter, and spring, if there's time, depending on the date of our Pascal or Easter, if there's time in the spring. So there are a number of programs that go on. We don't offer it in the summer. We have several Bible study groups, one

for men, one for women in the afternoon, daytime, one here at the cathedral, and a couple of other fellowship and study groups and men's theology group and women's faith and growth. So we have a number of options for people to grow and study.

10:04 - Jacob Beebe

Are their daily services?

10:07 - Fr. Paul O'Callaghan

Not every single day, but Saturday evening Vespers, Sunday morning Orthros, some divine liturgy always, of course, and then feast day liturgies. For example, the Feast of the Transfiguration, which falls on August 6, there'll be a Vespers, prior evening liturgy in the morning. And we serve daily Vespers, oftentimes, Monday through Thursday, through most of the year. However, you know, during the summer it gets a little spotty, we don't serve it, you know, as often. So we do have a service, except for in summer, almost every day, and during Great Lent we do have service every day.

10:58 - Jacob Beebe

Can you explain the art in your cathedral, and visible outside? What does it mean to the Orthodox Church?

11:19 - Fr. Paul O'Callaghan

Icons for us, if you will, are the Word of God in color. There's a term for them, I can't remember exactly what it was, but the prayer book, or the scripture of the illiterate. So icons tend to embody in visual form the gospel message, the lives of the saints, and the means by which we commemorate our Lord Jesus Christ, his virgin mother, the apostles, the martyrs, and the saints of all ages, whom we believe are near to us in Christ. So icons hold up as living examples the Gospel stories, the person of Jesus Christ, and the persons of those closest to him.

12:27 - Jacob Beebe

How does this church and its members interact with other religious organizations?

12:38 - Fr. Paul O'Callaghan

Well, we have two other Orthodox congregations in town, our sister parish, St. Mary, and then Holy Trinity, Greek Orthodox. They do not have a full time priest, but when they have events and so on, we, you know, we will participate with them. We don't actively participate with any non-Orthodox congregations specifically. However, Eighth Day Institute was founded from our congregation, as a means of developing relationships with Protestants and Roman Catholics, who share the core Christian tradition, the historic Christian faith, the essential elements of the historic Christian faith. So there by, you know, our members who are active with the institute, you know, cultivate relations with members of your church, you know, happens to be a congregation, your pastor is close to us. We're very involved with the Eighth Day Institute and other congregations in town that are represented and active in the institute's activities.

13:56 - Jacob Beebe

Does this church own any real estate outside of this cathedral?

14:05 - Fr. Paul O'Callaghan

Actually, we own a house next door to the church, and Jdeidet Marjeyoun Lebanon, oddly enough. That's the town from which our original core members came from in the 1890's and early years of the 20th century, and a home close to the church for the use of the clergy in the area was donated by a member of our cathedral to us. I just got back from Lebanon about two weeks ago, went and visited our property there that we have. That's the only other property we own.

14:55 - Jacob Beebe

How many active members are there at this church?

15:01 - Fr. Paul O'Callaghan

The archives account, the active members about 300 families or households. Total membership, the active as well as the peripheral, would be about 900 persons.

15:28 - Jacob Beebe

Just by listening to you it's obvious that your congregation just came to 100th year anniversary. Did you have a major event marking that? Have you had any other historic events since your time here that you know of since its founding?

15:54 - Fr. Paul O'Callaghan

Yes, we did our 75th anniversary during my first year here, that was 25 years ago, over 26 years ago now. And we did have our centennial year last year. We published a series of historical articles in our monthly messenger all throughout the year, and we had a centennial gala weekend event with our metropolitan archbishop, he came, and we had a banquet. And we did we did other things. We set up historical displays and our fellowship hall, and we undertook a major capital campaign, and remodeling project. We added new icons to the cathedral, we completely redid our fellowship hall, our hallway, our school, and recarpeted in the cathedral. So this was kind of our major centennial project. We will be publishing, it's gone to print now, a book celebrating the first hundred years of St. George congregation.

16:52 - Jacob Beebe

Do you know what the title of that book will be?

16:55 - Fr. Paul O'Callaghan

I think the title is *The First Hundred Years*.

16:58 - Jacob Beebe

Is that written by a lady named Victoria?

17:00 - Fr. Paul O'Callaghan

Yes, Victoria was a major editor. She and a couple of others work on that project.

17:12 - Jacob Beebe

This is not included in questions, but can you explain a bit the school that you have that's affiliated with this church? Is it preschool through fifth grade?

17:26 - Fr. Paul O'Callaghan

Correct, yes. It's a primary or elementary school.

17:30 - Jacob Beebe

Is it mostly members of this church that attend, or does the larger community also attend?

17:39 - Fr. Paul O'Callaghan

Yeah, it's open to the larger community. We actively solicit for students from the wider community. I believe, and I might be mistaken in this because I haven't looked at it in a while, but I believe it's 60/40, Orthodox, non-Orthodox students.

18:01 - Jacob Beebe

And last question. Do you see the church growing? Do you see it modernizing for better or for worse? What do you see in the future of this church?

18:18 - Fr. Paul O'Callaghan

I don't see modernization. We are a very traditional congregation and a very traditional faith. There have been some adjustments to the divine services in terms of how they are actually practiced, not only in our congregation, but in most American congregations. Services are not quite as lengthy as you might find, for instance, if you're going by the book in a Russian setting. So there have been some of abridgments, some of the repetitions that are in our divine services have been cut over the years, this is nothing new or nothing, really, that is even controversial. In terms of growth, you know, in my years here, we have remained I would say stable. We're not expanding tremendously. We're always bringing in new members. But since our congregation has been here so long, we have a lot of older members, we have a lot of funerals, you know, so we've been able to maintain our membership base pretty steadily. We're not experiencing exponential growth, but in terms of new faces being added, we're growing all the time.

19:48 - Jacob Beebe

Do you have anything else you'd like to add about the church at large, its members, or your school?

19:56 - Fr. Paul O'Callaghan

I think there's one thing I could add. It's that St. George Wichita within our jurisdiction, you know, the North American Archdiocese of the Church of Antioch, has an outstanding reputation for its membership. The people here as a rule are kind and generous,

thoughtful and considerate, hospitable, warm and loving people. And, you know, I, I'm a Californian and I had no intention of leaving San Diego to come here. I was asked to come. There was strictly the reputation of this congregation, not the big new church they just built that made it compelling for me. I felt like I could accomplish things in ministry that I could not do in my setting there. And that also, this congregation would be a very healthy place for my children to mature in their faith, and it really has turned out to be the case over the years in both cases.

21:13 - Jacob Beebe

Okay, well that is the end. Thank you.