

Me: Why don't we start, just have you state your name and what you do here, basically.

ABS: My name is Father Barnabas Senecal and I have the office of Abbot, so I go by the title Abbot Barnabas. The Abbot is the spiritual and temporal leader of the community of Benedict and Priests and Brothers. I was elected to this office in 1994 by the membership and was re-elected in 2002 and probably will serve until 2012.

Me: So then, why don't you give us some history on this specific monastic tradition.

ABS: I think I'll start with 1846, when Bavarian monks came to the United States to serve German-speaking people. And they started in Pennsylvania, and we were founded in 1857 here in Atchison, again, to serve a German-speaking people. Benedictines are men and women in our situation, Benedictine men, who live together and work for the church, for the good of the people; usually in education and in parochial work, pastoral work, and in the fact that we live together and support one another in common. We've just recently celebrated our 150<sup>th</sup> year here in Atchison, and the college itself started a year later, so it also celebrated 150 years.

The tradition that we brought from Germany, from Bavaria, has a long history, even pre-Christian, in terms of people who live alone, who are not raising a family themselves, live alone together; under vows and with set purpose. And so Benedictines throughout those years in Europe were educators and were missionaries. And were important in the churches development and have been preservers of culture and you know you see some of these TV ads of monks' copying machines and for a long time that was a valued work they did. We have a good library here, we have some people who come to do research on footnotes and books they've translated. Given the nature of the libraries changing, it's important that some retain a book collection in addition to having access through internet to many, many things. So that's part of the bigger picture.

In the United States there are Benedictine houses. Other than in KS we belong to a group called the American Cassinese congregation which has 22 houses throughout the United States and we have a common set of governing laws but each Benedictine house is autonomous, it's self governing, it's self supporting financially, it elects its own officials, chooses its work. But we also do have every 5 years a process of evaluation by outside members from other Benedictine houses. So there's a commonality and yet, each monastery develops its personality based on its work and the people that join it.

Me: So you've given me the history of this place, what about your personal history. What was your life like growing up? What religious traditions were you a part of?

ABS: I grew up in Atwood, KS, NW corner. My father had come from a French Catholic family near Hays, Plainville-Demarr in Zurich. My grandparents Senecal are buried in Zurich, KS. My father had three brothers. They all became priests. My father had seven sisters and three of them became sisters of mercy. So that within my dad's family there was a sense of serving the church within religious life at least or within the priesthood and serving the diocese. My father chose to send all seven of his children across the state to Atchison to high school and then to college. And on my mother's side she'd grown up in Topeka, a strong Catholic family, her name was Stracher and the name Stracher is

known around Spearville and other places in KS. In fact, one of the bishops of Kansas was Archbishop Stracher. So in my family there was that tradition and today I have one brother, blood brother, who a priest in the community, a pastor here in town. His educational background was that he has a doctorate in physics from K-State. I had a brother here in town that was a lawyer who recently died. And I had a twin brother who was a member here in this community for a good number of years. So the family it was kind of a natural progression for me to live with my parents expectations and what they thought would be a good life and so I came to high school here, came to college, did my theology study here, did some summer school stud in American History at KU and then a School Administration Masters Degree from Emporia. So I've been a Kansan pretty much all my life.

Me: So of course you then moved on to living here.

ABS: I was ordained in 1964 as a priest in the church. I maintained membership within the monastery. Many of the men here are ordained priests and they are authorized by the Bishop to work within the Diocese or whatever Diocese they might choose to work in, but typically we work in our own area. I was ordained in '64, I spent a year in the college working the dormitory and teaching theology studies. And then I was in a parish here in Atchison for several years and then I spent 24 years in our High School at Maur Hill, now Maur Hill-Mount Academy. And it was good work, it was working with boarding students who'd come from other states and other countries and it was working with the youth of Atchison. And then I did parish work in Overland Park for 3 years at Holy Spirit Parish, loved it, was even the principal of the grade school one year.

I was elected abbot in 1994 and have been serving that role sense. I love doing work that the Bishop asks of me, for instance administering the sacrament of confirmation in parishes throughout the Archdiocese in spring and fall. And just being a part of the broader faith community, not only here in the monastery and Atchison, but throughout the diocese, have a lot of good friends as a result of that priest function in the diocese.

Me: And you mentioned strong family ties to this tradition, What would you think are the main reasons why people are attracted to this tradition specifically, I mean, that don't have your same experiences.

ABS: Well, there are time periods and when I joined here in the late '50s there were larger groups of people joining and there was a lot of comradeship within that group. We used to run a program called Camp St. Maur on the high school campus and a lot of us worked together closely all summer long and it helped develop a sense of comradeship. Today religious communities like the Benedictines are smaller and the individual that joins goes through a very deliberate process in himself. And we do a postulancy with them for 3-6 months, then they do a year of novitiate, and then make vows for 3 years and after that make vows for life.

Why each one of them stays or why they are attracted; they're looking for even today as it was 40 years ago, a sense of belonging to a church group. We gather four times a day for prayer and we recite and sing publicly and the Psalms become a part of your thinking and a part of where you put a sense of petition for prayer and where you put your sense of

praising God in song and word. That's something that a person commits themselves to and finds a joy in and finds a purpose in and that persists throughout your life.

Professionally, I'm sure people have joined here because they wanted to teach, they wanted to teach in the high school or they wanted to teach in the college, or to teach through the parish work. People join because there's an opportunity to continue learning and to continue forming other people, forming young people.

Today we probably have a 100 college students majoring in youth ministry or religious studies. We have a lot of young people who go on to secondary or primary education. And it's a joy to see these people come back, alumni reunions, or you meet them in cities and events and they're proud to say they went to school here. That's a long term kind of "why do people come and join" because it's long term in the sense that it takes some years to pass for that to come back and feed you. You see people forming their own families, who've gone to school here, so a large part of why people join and stay here, I think, is because they become part of a formation group for themselves and for others within the Catholic tradition. Do the liturgy, train others to do it, develop their own talents. When you live community life it's like family life, in terms of it has its joys and it has its testings.

So one of the unique things these days is the power of the internet; in that some people come to us because they've seen our website. Now they're looking for something to begin with and they might find something on our website or somebody else's that they like. So I hope that answers some of your question.

Me: You mentioned internet as a new source of people finding interest, what trends have you seen over the years in terms of people joining the groups. Have there been fluctuations in the amount or has there been a steady decline.

ABS: Well, since 1994 I've had the funeral services for 24 of our monks. We've not replaced that group. Probably today we have two junior monks, that means the men in their first three years of vows. We currently have 3 postulants, who probably will begin a year in novitiate in December. They're diverse; one has finished a masters in education at Creighton, one has finished 3 years of college here with us, so he's been here quite a bit and one is a priest in another diocese who thinks he wants to live in community and to work in a college with its spirituality programs. For us to have 3 in the novitiate is different, we haven't had three in the novitiate, well we did for one period of time, but for quite a while, quite a few years. And that's a trend throughout.

You know, when I joined here we were 175 people and today we're 52 people counting 10 men in Brazil. We have a mission in Brazil that we started in 1962 and we've served the church in Brazil even with two bishops. So the trend certainly has been less and there's lots of reasons for that: families are smaller and the sense of a son or a daughter going to religious life is harder to experience because the catholic schools are run almost entirely by lay people so that the sense of joining the group that sister so-and-so taught in my class is not an experience of very many young Catholics today. So that it's more of a personal search for community life and a work that you'd want to do. There are some monasteries that are more contemplative than our groups that really don't leave the worksite. They live enclosed and they support themselves by their manual labor. So it has been a lessening of vocation numbers over the past 30 years.

Me: Along with that, what age groups; I mean is it across the board with age groups you see moving in?

ABS: Well most houses are trying to establish an upper age limit and some of them have that at 35. There's always an exception made depending on that candidate, but typically you try to attract an age group of 20 to 30 year old people who are skilled. You know, if you are living as a bachelor fellow for 20 years you learn, you become quite independent and when you join community, you have to change some of that. Some find that easy, some don't. So that typically, there's an age cutoff at about 35 that vocation recruiters or directors would work with that kind of limit.

Me: For you being Abbot now, what's day-to-day life like for you.

ABS: Well I'm having time with this young student from KU. I was just at my computer reading letters from young people from a parish here in the diocese here who are going to be confirmed Sunday and I use those letters, I use lines from those letters to read back to them and it takes time but I like doing it. I'm looking over some material for a board of directors meeting of the Benedictine college this Friday. There's organizational things that take your time. I have a group called the Council of Seniors and I need to have a meeting with them soon. We have a chapter meeting coming up to discuss our financial situation, that means the chapter is the membership of all those who made lifetime vows to this community. We are pretty public among ourselves about our financial situation and we have an audit every year with an outside auditing firm and we have to be realistic about expenses and income. I've had a conversation this morning with people in our development office, we have our own fundraising effort alongside of the college and the high school. So that we rely on the goodwill of people as well as our own earned income. So there's that concern that the development office be in good shape and working well. We had some guests for lunch today and I spent a little time with them, so every day is different; I try to attend a good number of funerals of people both in Atchison and I've driven to Kansas City, to represent the community in those kind of public functions. We hosted the priests of the archdiocese last evening, we do that once a year; invite the bishop and the priests to come and eat and there's a percentage that come; people are tied up. So the office is one of relationships with the monks and with the public in various ways and days are different.

Me: And then what about, sort of the same question but in terms of religious practices specifically.

ABS: Well, we pray at 6:20 in the morning for 40 minutes. Public prayer. And we pray at noontime when we have the common mass, the community mass which I have at 5:15 today. Benedictine College students come to that in pretty good numbers. And we have Vespers after supper. Each of us tries to do spiritual reading, we call it lexio, which is a meditative reading of scripture or of our fathers or of some solid text of reflection. We have people who request that we pray for their spouse or their child, we post those names

on a bulletin board and I try to keep that list in front of people in front of our membership so that we fulfill that kind of relationship to others.

There's a good number of monks who identify with the trends today in the church in terms of adoration of the blessed sacrament and private prayer and praying the rosary. Typically Benedictines are known of prayers of the Liturgy, mainly the liturgy of the hours the morning prayer, the noonday prayer. And we try to do that with some skill. I like to sing and I do sing at events, I mean prayers or I may give a talk about the value of certain songs. So that's part of it; what my prayer life is mostly the public effort in doing it well. And remembering who we're praying for.

Me: You mentioned that college students will come to certain parts, and you mentioned also that you were a student. How have you seen student life change since when you were a student here compared to now.

ABS: Well that's several generations but today the students, a good number of the students, we've got 1485 and students and there's probably some 300 of them involved in bible study weekly in a program called FOCUS "Faith Among Catholic University Students" And that just wasn't part of student life in my day in the 50s. The pro-life effort defines the focus of a good number of students. In terms of their activity, in terms of their prayer, there's an effort to live well and I think there's more of a group that tries to commit itself to minimum or no drinking. I think that choice has always been there but I think there's more an effort to make it public. And if you picked up the monthly reports or weekly reports of the campus ministry office here on campus the great number of kids who participate in the hunger coalition and in teaching catechetics off campus to other groups or on campus to retreat groups or confirmation groups. In other words, the students I think are more active and religious in general than a group of 50 or 40 years ago.

Me: You mentioned your relationship with other people within your organization of Catholicism and stuff like that. What is your relationship with people in other religious traditions.

ABS: I remember when I was a young fellow, a young priest in the 1960s, we took part in a group called Living Room Dialogues. Which was visiting in the homes and ministers of various faith traditions and members of their faith groups would meet in people's homes and talk about religious issues or values or scripture. I haven't done that kind of interaction in quite a while.

The pastors in this area who are Benedictines participate in ministerial alliance and there's a monthly meeting and activities that go around. The monks as such 45 years ago Father Kieran started Happy Hearts, which was at that time a preschool program for various ethnic groups to help reduce tensions between peoples, because it was young kids who went to school together. That base is still there, that program is still there but it's metamorphosed into a GED program and more of a young adult program than a preschool program. But we support that financially every year and we do see it as one of our major outreaches to the community that is not Catholic in its effort in terms of it's educational, it's social, it's trying to help. Happy Hearts works with the juvenile

correction effort in the county by providing an education setting for defenders, but they're not taken out of jail do that. One of our priests goes to Lansing to the state penitentiary every Wednesday and Saturday. And sometimes takes some college students with him and that is a contact with Catholic prisoners, but it's open to whoever would want to come.

So those are the things that I think of off the top of my head about the relationship of the Abbey community as individuals probably toward a broader group. We've had priests in our community who have headed up or served on the watershed district boards who've been part of rotary international, the Atchison Historical Society had a Priest heading it for quite a while. I say prayers at the city commission meeting in August every year. So there's that touches of choice that individual usually makes about involvement in the Society and the social structure, visiting prisons locally.

Saint Benedicts has been, the abbey as well as the commons, a large part of life in Atchison through the years and the Atchison community has been supportive. We've tried at various times to create an open house setting where people could come and one of the things that we did when we did some remodeling in the church 3 years ago was develop an art gallery and we've had several Kansas artists display. One a lady from Lawrence who likes to paint women in aviation and Atchison has a forest of friendship which the 99s established, the 99s are the international organization of women pilots. This is Amelia Earhart's birthplace and because of that there's been a lot of effort to honor her, to bring people to Atchison and sometimes it amazes me; the astronauts, the Russian aviators, Aviatix who have been here on our campus for a meal or a show or something. So that kind of openness to hosting events of interest to the larger community like the 99s is part of what we're here for.

Me: You mentioned your art gallery and I noticed the book downstairs of art. What kind of role does art play in your community here.

ABS: We've got watercolors hanging on the wall surfaces around here, many of them from Father Victor Gellhouse and Peter Beckman and a few other men who, on the side, learn to paint. They learn to paint from one of the art teachers here, Dennis McCarthy or a fellow in town for a long time Walter Yoast.

The major art that we own are Frescos by Jean Charlot. Some of it is featured in a book that KU has published Murals of Kansas. Otherwise we've had religious community members who've done woodcarving, who've done ceramics on their own. We've never had anybody that made any money at selling art. Father Victor probably comes as close to anybody as having had a show of his art. A lot of people in Nemaha County, he'd painted and give them, they have a prize possession because it was a Victor Gellhouse watercolor.

Brother Martin has done a lot of pieces of ceramic and wood. Brother Emmanuel did some stone and woodcarving, some of its in place in the Abbey, either as an altar front or a statue. We have at times had people very interested in flowerbeds and the walkways around have been decorated with their work. Some of that comes about naturally, people who live here want to make the place look good. I got out and mow grass with a tractor or a Toro Lawnmower because this is a beautiful place and it does take an effort to keep it up.

Some of what we possess are some photographs of Gordon Parks. Gordon Parks came here in 1955 as a Life Magazine photographer and he shot hundreds of pictures and he sent back 36 prints, I think it was 36 or 32, that we have framed and our first exhibit in our art gallery was a Gordon Parks exhibit. You know Wichita State has gained possession of his papers and they will be a site of Gordon Parks exhibits and sessions, I'd guess you'd say, reflections on his work. He was a Ft. Scott native and became quite known as a photographer initially, then as a playwright. So we have some of his photographs on exhibit in the building here. Guests see them.

Me: What do you see about the future of this community, about the long haul.

ABS: It's always difficult to answer that because you depend on the good will of people to join and to stay. You know our age group, our group now is heavy with older people. I think most religious communities will be smaller than their history would bear. Partly because the nature of their ability to continue running large institutions, running them themselves, is fading away, whether that's schools or hospitals or other kind of community efforts. I would hope that we will always have some priests available to teach or administer within the college and the high school and that we would have some to serve in parish work so that we maintain a relationship to the faith practice of people. It's hard to say.

Within our congregation of Benedictines, Father Gordon Tavis at St. John's has built a projected tool to say what will the size of communities be in 10 years if the pattern you've had the last 10 years continued; how much finance will you have available to support your community. So there is an effort every 3 years to develop some projections and I just got those papers recently and we have to turn them in sometime in Nov. but it's totally speculative because it isn't like "Ok, I'm gonna start a new marketing operation and I need 10 good people" and so I go out and hire the 10 best people I can find. That's just not the nature of this. You know, you work with inquirers and you leave every opportunity for free choice and eventually mature that individual into a choice they make for life. So it's hard to answer that, except that I and others in the house have to be realistic about promises we make or what our ambitions are. We live in a big place, a big institution here and the college has begun using the church and the basement of the church, the crypt, for discussion groups and various activities in a way that makes it reasonable to keep maintaining that much facility. We don't have college kids living in the monastery, we probably never will in terms of how you could segregate the different groups. So it's a hard question to answer.

Me: What are some of your best memories being a part of this community. You can take time to think about that.

ABS: Well a recent, really good memory was the yearlong celebration of the events for the 150<sup>th</sup> year. You look back and admire the people who first came to Kansas in 1857; it was a rough, tough life. Henry Lemke was the first man to come out here and he came with some people that were coming to Kansas in 1854; on one side or the other in the statehood, will it be free or slave. And in the early years there was that sense of struggle in Kansas. They had so little, they were trying to make a living off the earth and I think

people in a community like this, they live with a sense of the endurance the founders went through and when you celebrate 150 years that's one of the things you're mindful of. The corner church down here, Saint Benedict's Parish Church, which was the Abbey church, has the cornerstone of 1866 so that we have a living sense of the history, our starting points, that was one of them practically. We just remodeled what we call now Ferrell Hall and it was the monastery from 1893 until 1929, now students live in it, it's nicely remodeled, stood empty for 30 years. I live with a lot of memory of individual monks whose patterns of interaction within the house or within the college were so admirable. And with our publication, *Kansas Monks* and our relationship to alumni, we hear stories that fill you with pride that men had this relationship to alumni. I like sports and probably every week we remember that we had 2 moments when we won the national championship in basketball in NAIA. Joe Stevies, one of those guys that played in 1954, he's quite ill in the hospital these days. So you know you see people who've lived their lives, they've started some of their lives here, and they lived them out and I've gone to funerals of some of those men.

I helped Father Gilbert Walters publish his reminiscences, a book of his, well it was practically his diary. And reading through that with him over the weeks and months, he lived to be 101; down to YMCA where he swam until he was about 99, they called him Father Time. Oh, just the personalities that make up the history of this place. The first Abbot here was Abbot for 45 years, which is a long time. Innocent Wolf; and we just recently put his name on a building, the new dormitories at the South end of the campus. Legacy Hall, Wolf Hall and Kremmeter Hall for two first superiors of the women's convent and the monk's house.

So, fond memories. There's that *Kansas Murals* book right there [gestures to coffee table]. What I so enjoy doing these days outside the house are confirmations and people tell me "You confirmed my child 10 years ago." It's a satisfying, ongoing relationship. It's good to see young men join the community and after 8 years or so, be ordained. We have one to be ordained June 5<sup>th</sup> 2010, Jeremy Heppler, and then it's a challenge, and they're a Kansas family. To help plan a career for young men like that, and each one of those who joins these days, there's just lots of options for what they might do.

Me: Yeah, I think that about covers it. Is there anything else you'd like to share?

ABS: Well, I'm one who learned to say Mass in Latin in 1964 when I was ordained. And shortly after that Vatican II matured, I would say, and documents were produced and practices changed. I welcomed all of that change, I welcomed and I still do. I think that change to the vernacular changed to a sense that the worship is part of the congregations role, that it's not simply to witness what a priest does at the altar. So that I'm happy that when we built this church in 1957, we built it Basilica style which meant it's got a freestanding altar in the middle of the space, it's got a blessed sacrament chapel to the side, that's what St. Peter's has in Rome. So I'm very at home with praying in English and praying with music that Benedictines in the United States developed in those years, when the church allowed more experimentation. Our Father Blaine has been the choirmaster for 45 years and many people at KU know him through his own studies and his efforts in music. He wrote a lot of the music that we sing for morning prayer and vespers and we're proud of that. You know, the Gregorian chant was a good music and I

sang in the schola with Father (INAUDIBLE), was happy to do that. But I also knew the division that Latin created within the community, because in 1950s into the 60s, Brothers in community are men who live the same vows, they don't study for Priesthood, they prayed in English in the lower level of the church, we prayed in Latin upstairs, so that prayer times actually divided the community. I just encourage a continued interest in English and in renewed music and not to feel again where we have to use a certain set of music all the time. And I just think the guitar can be a very tasteful instrument in church. We have a wonderful organ in our church and it's a Moller Organ, initially Haggerstown Maryland, I think their company is no longer in business, we added to the organ about 5 years ago, completing it, so to say, with ranks that make a concert organ. We should have more concerts, more recitals, because it's a wonderful instrument. We sing with it everyday, but we sing with it in its minimal use. I mean, there's ranks of hooded trumpet pipes that are processional pipes, they're strong emphasis pipes and you don't sing with those particularly. But it's a well-designed instrument and it's a pipe organ that's electric touch, rather than a tracker organ, we're very fortunate to have it and to be able to maintain it, you have to tune it twice a year.

We've made a good effort to maintain our facility in recent years, you know a lot of deferred maintenance for a long time, that caught up with us. And so we had to do a lot of tuck-pointing on the 1929 building, even on the 1957 building. It was expensive, we had a lot of help from the people and we've maintained the services within the building pretty well in terms of electricity and water and heat. So it's a good facility.

I go to Brazil every year, we have a foundation there. I usually go in December or January because it's still a dependent house. It's young Brazilians mostly, one 83 year old American who lives there, father Kieran. And they do parochial work, they've done a lot of social improvement within the city of Mineiros: farming methods, starting a college, co-op movement. We're proud of what our men have done in Brazil. Brazil's a prosperous country today, not because of us, but along side our being there, we know that.

So, well I'm happy you're doing this, you know I went to KU 6 summers in American History. Theodore Wilson was one of my teachers for a while. He was a believer in Oral History, I understand he's still in Lawrence, perhaps. I was proud to go down to KU recently when Francis Heller, former Dean of the Law School, came back to campus for a book signing. He had just published a book at age 93. Francis had been the Chair of the Board of Directors here at the here at the college at St. Benedicts, the Benedictine College from 1972 to 1979, so I knew Francis. Mortar Board and Helmet: An Academic in Uncle Sam's Army, that was his book. He was a Viennese, a Vienna person, who was educated by the Benedictines in Europe and came to the United States and studied law at the University of Virginia with Henry Kissinger. The fellow, Francis, turned out to be the ghostwriter of Truman's memoirs. And he's just a fascinating person, even at 93, to listen to; from his own experience to his commitment to scholarship to, well, just long term service to an institution like KU. Lives in Denver now with a nephew.

Well, we could end this by saying "Amen."