Interviewer:

Alright. The Department of Religious Studies at The University of Kansas is conducting a research project that seeks to preserve the history of various churches and other religious organizations in Kansas. We would like to record your memories of your experiences in religious organizations. We expect that each interview will take about one hour. We assume that you are not- We assure you that you are not obligated to participate and may discontinue your involvement at any time. Since we are trying to create a public record of Kansas religious history we are primarily interviewing persons who agree to let their interviews be available to the general public through a website, to be identified by name as the person who was interviewed. Should you have any questions about the project please contact professor Tim Miller at 785-864-7263 or at tkansas@ku.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may call the Human Subjects Protection Office at 785-864-7429 or email mdenning@ku.edu. Alright, are you ready?

Father Timothy Sawchak: :

(Nods)

Interviewer:

Excellent. [The] first question is, what is your name?

Father Timothy Sawchak:

Father Timothy Sawchak.

Interviewer:

Excellent. What is the name and address of your church?

Father Timothy Sawchak:

Holy Trinity Orthodox Church. 11901 Pflumm, Overland Park, Kansas 66213.

Interviewer:

Excellent. What is the denomination of your church?

Father Timothy Sawchak:

Orthodox. Orthodox Christian. So- And we’re part of the Orthodox Church in America.

Interviewer:

Excellent. Can you tell me a little bit more about the Orthodox Church in America?

Father Timothy Sawchak:

So the OCA, short for Orthodox Church in America, was initially part of the Russian Orthodox Church. And then in 1970 it was granted, this is a big word, autocephaly, which means that it ministers itself. So we don’t have an administrative tie to the Russian Church anymore. And so there were churches here in America that would have been founded roughly around the time of 1900-or-so that were part of the Russian Church that then became, in 1970, part of the Orthodox Church in America.

Interviewer:

Excellent. Where are you from?

Father Timothy Sawchak:

I was born in Scranton, Pennsylvania when my dad was in seminary. So- But my father is from Pittsburg, Pennsylvania and he was a priest, so we moved around a bit. So we lived around the Pittsburgh area. We lived just south of Erie, Pennsylvania for a while. Then we moved to Los Angeles- Lived there for a year and a half. Then to St. Louis where I went- So, Melville High School. So I went from eighth grade through high school in St. Louis, and then when I graduated from high school, came to KU, studied architecture, and then when I was done at KU went to St. Vladimir Seminary in New York. And then my first parish assignment was south of Pittsburg, so I was back there. I was there for three years, then to Cleveland for seven and a half years, and then back to back here in 2005.

Interviewer:

Wow, you’ve- You’ve travelled around quite a bit.

Father Timothy Sawchak:

I have. Yes. But- So I’m not a Kansan by birth but I have a lot of history to the state. My wife, her mother, was born in, outside of Goodland, Kansas.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Father Timothy Sawchak:

Bird City, Kansas.

Interviewer:

That’s- So I guess you already answered my next question, where did you, sort of where did you work before you came to Kansas, but you’ve already given me that. And then you said you moved to Kansas when you were in college- And what about time frame? What was that time frame?

Father Timothy Sawchak:

So I started at KU in the fall of 1983. And that’s when I went to KU.

Interviewer:

Okay. And then you came back here to this church in 2005?

Father Timothy Sawchak:

April 2005.

Interviewer:

Excellent. So what have been the biggest differences between your previous experiences in other states and in Kansas in regards to being an Orthodox priest?

Father Timothy Sawchak:

I would say that the biggest difference is- The geographical difference was that when I was in the Pittsburgh area and the Cleveland area we were in a very ethnic area. And so there were lots of Russian, Slavic people that were in those areas, as well as many other neighborhoods, stuff like that. But the church was definitely seen there, from the outside, as being more of an ethnic thing, so more of the contact there was when we would sell perogies. And I- And it was really connected with food a lot, you know? So one of the simple answers to that is that we have had many more people who are converting here in Kansas then it was in Pittsburgh and Cleveland.

Interviewer:

Because it- Because it was-

Father Timothy Sawchak:

The numbers, you know? Yeah! Because it was- It was seen more as like an ethnic-cultural thing, not particularly something that- I mean, they knew it was a church and everything, but there wasn’t as much of a religious connection to it. So that’s definitely one of the differences, just sheer numbers. Being here, there- I’ve been here now for well over thirteen years. We’ve always had someone coming into the church. At least someone. Usually more than that. So I would say that’s one of the bigger differences. The other one I would characterize as not being particularly geographic, but just simply that there’s been a change in the Christian culture, I think, in this country since I was ordained a priest back in 1994. So we see lots of people coming here that are coming from a quote-unquote Evangelical-Protestant world, whereas back when I was in those other parishes it was mostly coming from what we would call as Mainline Protestant.

Interviewer:

And why do you think there’s that shift?

Father Timothy Sawchak:

Well, I mean, I think one of the shifts is that Mainline Protestantism has declined. The- For lack of a better term, the Megachurch has grown.

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Father Timothy Sawchak:

It’s become mega. And so I think that that’s one of the differences- And it’s also that people that come now, that are converting, they have very complicated stories. And twenty years ago it wasn’t as complicated. You know, somebody twenty years ago would say “I grew up in the Lutheran Church.” You know, and for whatever reason “I found the Orthodox Church and I’m interested.” Now when I talk to somebody it’s that “Well, we went for two years to this church, and then three years to this other non-denominational church, and went to all these different things.” It’s gotten much more complicated-

Interviewer:

Definitely.

Father Timothy Sawchak:

As to where people are going, and everything. And I- And which has led obviously to different theologies and stuff like that too.

Interviewer:

Yeah. I can definitely see that. So how converts would you say you have in your parish?

Father Timothy Sawchak:

I would estimate it at about seventy-percent.

Interviewer:

Alright.

Father Timothy Sawchak:

So the majority of the people have not grown up in the church, in this parish.

Interviewer:

I remembered we talked about that on the phone- So I know we just discussed how complicated it is saying “Oh, I’m converting from one denomination to another.” But do you mind expanding on that, like, what mainly other religious denominations your parishioners are converting from? Or if there’s anyone- I know probably there’s a lot- There’s a lot.

Father Timothy Sawchak:

Yes. It’s all over the board. It really is. I mean, people have come from Baptist backgrounds. Nazarene backgrounds. And then just kind of non-denominational backgrounds. Very few have come from the Roman Catholic Church. And not as many from- I can’t think of anyone coming from the Presbyterian Church. There are a few Lutherans, some Methodists. Now, mixed in with that is the people would have said that “I was Lutheran. I was Methodist. I was non-denominational and all these-”

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Father Timothy Sawchak:

And all kings of different things, and I will say that for me, right now, it’s very confusing, too. It really is. I don’t- I mean, if somebody says like “United Church of Christ” I think that could mean a lot of different things, you know, so my learning curve is really taken off too. So, but, yeah- Again, easily I would say that it’s not just one place that we’re seeing people come from.

Interviewer:

Just a big old mash. Would you say there’s anything unique or interesting about Midwestern conversion narratives as opposed to what you might have found in the other places where you’ve- uh, overseen various parishes.

Father Timothy Sawchak:

No.

Interviewer:

No?

Father Timothy Sawchak:

I- Now, part of that is simply because I had a lot less of that happen in those other parishes, okay? The other difference, which is huge in all of this, is that when I moved here in 2005 the internet already existed, but it was really picking up. And so the difference, the biggest difference, is that somebody who came to me twenty years ago and was interested in converting, I don’t think it mattered geographically where it was, they were saying that “Well you know I just- I heard something about the Orthodox Church so I wanna check it out.” Now somebody says “I’ve been reading about the Church for three years and, now I wanna check it out.”

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Father Timothy Sawchak:

Because they’ve been reading online. So that’s been a huge difference which I don’t think affects geographically at all what’s happening.

Interviewer:

You’ve got people coming in with a solid knowledge base.

Father Timothy Sawchak:

They are, yes. Yes.

Interviewer:

That’s wonderful. So what do you think are some of the main driving factors behind conversion to the Orthodox Church in America, especially in Kansas? I know I’ve read a lot of stuff about, especially in- regarding ethnic churches, the Serbian Orthodox Church, intermarriage in one of the main driving forces, but-

Father Timothy Sawchak:

Yes. Yes.

Interviewer:

What do you think in this particular-

Father Timothy Sawchak:

To this, I mean, this might, I don’t know, at least for me I think it’s rare- I will say I think I know the reason.

Interviewer:

Okay. Yes. Wonderful.

Father Timothy Sawchak:

And again, this might be people coming from different backgrounds. And to make my point I want to do a compare-contrast.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Father Timothy Sawchak:

Okay. My father-in-law was born and raised in the Episcopal Church and he converted to Orthodoxy in the eighties because he was mad. I mean, he was ticked-off. I don’t think since I’ve been here in Kansas that, people coming to the church, I’ve ever met anybody that’s said they’re mad.

Interviewer:

Alright.

Father Timothy Sawchak:

I do not think that’s the case. What they have said- So I’ll make a scenario which groups almost everything together. People are saying that “I think there’s something missing.” Okay? They’re not saying that they’re mad about where they are, but they just feel as though something is missing. And then- So, I’ve done this now- I’ve asked people after the fact “If I tell you now and give you a word of what you were missing, am I on the right track?” and they have all told me “Yes.” Sacrement. That is what they’re saying, that- So the Orthodox Church is eucharistic. Every Sunday liturgy is eucharistic. There could be a liturgy every day, okay? And then include with that confession, marriage, unction. I mean, just go down the list.

Interviewer:

You do the sacrament with all church functions, or not church functions, but weddings and such?

Father Timothy Sawchak:

Yes. Yes. So of course other churches do weddings too- I mean, that’s common to everybody, but really the regular, normal life of the church, to be sacramental, that’s the thing that I think people have found lacking. And they don’t even know it; they can’t put the word on that when it’s happening. Like I’ve said, I’ve asked people after the fact because I want to test my theory, and they’ve said “Yes.” that that is- That’s one thing, or the thing they missed. And that is very common, now also when people come into the Church, we don’t go fast. We take things very slow, and for many people that was incredibly frustrating because they wanted the eucharist, you know? And it wasn’t until they were done with the process of going through being catechized and everything that they received the eucharist, and they get frustrated with that because that’s what they want, you know? If it was happening where they were coming from, it was infrequent.

Interviewer:

Mhm.

Father Timothy Sawchak:

And it might have just been completely absent.

Interviewer:

From the, the-

Father Timothy Sawchak:

Oh I don’t know, probably not. Probably not in that denomination. Not that particular denomination, then again people- If it’s in that kind-of non-denominational realm I think that’s the case. I mean, I have to be careful because I don’t know everything.

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Father Timothy Sawchak:

But I think it is safe to say that it might be more on the infrequent basis. Then there’s also the issue that’s there too of that the Orthodox Church would believe that this is the body and blood of Christ. And even if there’s a eucharistic church it might not- It might be more on the line of thinking “This is a symbol.”

Interviewer:

Alright, wonderful. That’s fantastic. Thank you. Do you have any especially interesting interactions or narratives that you’d like to share?

Father Timothy Sawchak:

Absolutely! So one particular couple, they came to us- I forget, actually, what background it was. I think it was kind of a mixed bag of different protestant churches. So I remember vividly on Easter morning, the first time that they were here for that- I just asked them, I said “So what are you- How do you feel right now?” And with tears in their eyes they said “We’ve been Christians all our life but we never celebrated the Resurrection.” And that was very striking to me. So I’ve used that story a lot of times. So that’s one particular one. One that kind of encapsulates a lot of people, and this is the hardest part I think, of coming into the Orthodox Church, is liturgy. Because it’s so, excuse the pun, but it’s so foreign. To most people it’s so different that it’s a huge hump to get over. Like I said, people read for years- It’s an intellectual thing, but what they’ve lacked is just the experience part, and boy, that’s tough at first because it’s just so different than what they have known. The irony to it is that, of course, is that this is the ancient way of doing it, but to them it’s all new. And like “How could this be?” But one of the things that I’m able to do in a parish that has so many people who have come in as converts, is I can point them in the direction of “You know what? Go talk to her because she really struggled with that, but she got through it.”

Interviewer:

Like a support-

Father Timothy Sawchak:

Absolutely. Absolutely. And that helps a lot, you know, that somebody can talk to somebody else who was going through, really struggling with this- So that’s kind of a common story that happens. And then one other particular story: One gentleman, I got a phone call here at the church. He said “I’m interested in Orthodoxy, I’d like to come to talk to you.” And I don’t think he told me that he had done lots of reading and stuff like that. So the next day he came by and we’re sitting like this in the office and there was a pregnant pause. And me being smart, I figure, well, let me get things going. You know, so I said “Well,” We kinda hit a little lull there and I said “A lot of common questions come from people who are new to the church.” And I said “One of the common questions is about Mary.” And he yelled at me. And he said “Father, if I had an issue with Mary I wouldn’t be sitting here talking to you.” So it points to the fact that he had done a lot of reading already. Again, I thought I was being smart and here’s a topic that we can talk about and he’s like “That’s okay we don’t need to talk about that.”

Interviewer:

Hopping off that- For example if someone wants to have a discussion about Mary what does that- What’s the- (I don’t want to say issue.) What’s the discussion around that?

Father Timothy Sawchak:

So often the discussion begins with that people think that we’re exactly the same as the Catholic Church. And there is a theological difference that’s there, especially when it comes to Mary. And so that really gets a good discussion going. That’s a very common thread also that happens- That people do think that the Orthodox and the Catholic Church are exactly the same. Now, of course, historically there’s lots that is shared, but there are differences to it as well. And that’s usually a good conversation to have, just to be able to say “Okay this is what we are. This is what we aren’t.” I think that, and I’m being stereotypical and it’s unfair to do that, but a lot of times people have heard that the Catholic Church, the Orthodox Church- They just pay too much attention to Mary, and that that’s wrong to do that, or that she’s elevated to a level that is really above kind of just being human or anything like that. And then we have to talk about that the Orthodox Church does not do that, and that she’s a great example for us to follow. I think that kind of characterizes what happens with that.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Father Timothy Sawchak:

Another common topic that comes up is iconography- Because a lot of times people have heard that this is idol-worship. And then there’s- And then we go through an explanation saying it’s not, but like I said, sometimes I don’t need to have that conversation at all because they’ve already read all about it.

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Father Timothy Sawchak:

Again, I just can’t stress enough how educated people come in. And it’s very possible that they’ve read more than the person who grew up in the Church. That’s very possible.

Interviewer:

Yeah I can see that. What- Typically how long does the conversion process take?

Father Timothy Sawchak:

Right, so I usually, not legalistically, but we look at a year.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Father Timothy Sawchak:

And so there’s two reasons for that. And the second reason I’ve added sort of later to the equation. The first one is just incredibly practical; I just want people to be able to experience a full liturgical year. And I kid with them all the time. I say “Look, I don’t want you to come into the Church after three months and then the next Sunday you come, you see that we sacrifice chickens.” We don’t, but I want them to be able to see everything, you know, because they have every opportunity to say “You know, look, I don’t want to do this.” So, again, that’s just on a very practical level. The other thing that I’ve added to the equation now, I would say in the past five-six years, is that I also want people to be able to see the warts of the church- And that we’re not perfect. There are disagreements that happen. There are scandals that happen- Not really on the local level, thank God, but nationally there have been things happen, and somebody coming into something can be rosy-eyed. And think of it, “I’m heading into something that’s just perfect.” Or maybe they’re leaving something that it was because of something that happened, maybe a scandal or something- “I want to get away from that.” But for people to see that we’re not perfect, and things do happen, and people fight. It’s like any family at all. The more I think they can see that, the more mature they’ll be about their decision to come in, you know? That it’s not that I’m just simply looking for perfection.

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Father Timothy Sawchak:

And that takes a little time for that to happen as well. But, again, roughly we’ll look at that year. People, because of situations, it’s happened sooner than that, and it’s happened a lot longer than that too. We had one gentleman who was a catechumen for seven years. So there’s no magic number to it at all. And for each individual- Also I would say that we’re going to go through this on an individual basis because people are coming from such varied backgrounds that it’s not fair to just put everybody in a box and do the same thing with them.

Interviewer:

Completely fair. Can you walk me just through, very basically, what your typical Sunday morning looks like?

Father Timothy Sawchak:

My Sunday morning? Or the Church?

Interviewer:

Either one.

Father Timothy Sawchak:

Okay well- So anybody who knows me knows that I am, maybe not never, but incredibly rare that I would be late- And my definition of that is that I would be very early. So I’m here an hour early at least. Usually on Sunday, even a tad earlier than that- So I just like to be able to shift gears, you know, and get into the moment and really think about what’s going to happen- So on a Sunday morning there’s a lot to be thinking about. Hopefully by Sunday morning I have a sermon that’s ready to go, which can change, so I have to be open to that. There’s just lots of thoughts happening. What is- I don’t know the particular theme of what this particular Sunday is- Things like that. And then, of course, there’s just thinking about all the different things happening with people and everything like that. Gosh, I don’t know what else- I don’t know what you’re looking for practically. I mean, simply stated, then we begin liturgy.

Interviewer:

That’s fair. Anything else you think I should know going into my other interviews?

Father Timothy Sawchak:

I don’t know, I mean, I think that in the interviews you’ll be able to pick up how similar people have had- What happened. Or maybe their story about how they encountered the church, but how unique it is too, how different it is. I will say another thing too, I mean, sometimes it’s couples. There might be spouses who are coming into the church, and very often they’re on different levels. One is that “I’ve read for seven years and I’m ready to do this but my spouse, no, they’re not ready to go at all.” And so that’s not uncommon for that to happen. In fact, sometimes people are very absolute about saying “I will not do this.” More often than not, the person who says that actually does come in, but there’s some very interesting stories, I think, that couples can tell you about their journeys- And how that all came about as well. But I also think that you’ll hear some wonderful stories just about how it happened, you know? And they’re all fascinating.

Interviewer:

Excellent. Well, thank you so much. I really appreciate it.

Father Timothy Sawchak:

You’re welcome.