



Paul Costopoulos
Holy Trinity + Holy Cross Greek Orthodox Church
Birmingham, Alabama

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[*START INTERVIEW*]

[00:00:03.15]

Michelle L.: Today is August 1, 2019, and this is Michelle Little. I'm interviewing Father Paul Costopoulos for the Southern Foodways Alliance, and we're here at the Holy Trinity + Holy Cross Greek Orthodox Church in Birmingham, Alabama. Father Paul, if you'll introduce yourself, your full name, and date of birth for the record.

[00:00:27.08]

Father Paul C.: My name is Father Paul Costopoulos. I was born on January 1, 1946 in Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

[00:00:37.02]

Michelle L.: Okay. And would you tell me just a little bit about where you grew up, your family?

[00:00:40.26]

Father Paul C.: I was born in Carlisle, [Pennsylvania]. My parents were Constantine and Katherine Costopoulos. My father came to the United States in 1929. My mother came in 1935. Their marriage was a pre-arranged marriage. They got married in 1936. They were happily married for well over sixty years. I have five siblings—four brothers and a sister. I am the fourth in a line of six. I went to school in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, attended Gettysburg College in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. Studied the classics, majored in Greek with a minor in Latin. Also, minored in Spanish, and attended school at the Holy Cross

Greek Orthodox Seminary in Brookline, Massachusetts from 1967 to 1970. Graduated with a Master of Divinity degree, was ordained to the priesthood in 1975, and served as a priest for forty-four years.

[00:01:52.15]

Michelle L.: So, you grew up in the Greek Orthodox Church?

[00:01:54.16]

Father Paul C.: Yes. My parents were both Greek Orthodox. My dad, he was a restaurateur. He owned a restaurant. He worked very, very hard. The restaurant was open seven days a week. He worked anywhere from twelve, fourteen, sixteen hours a day, seven days a week. Both my mom and dad were active in the church. From the time I was a child, maybe even before school, they would take us to the church regularly. I grew up in the church, served in the altar, attended Sunday School. Very young in my life, maybe the age of fourteen, fifteen, I just felt a calling to the priesthood, and eventually went to seminary upon my graduation from Gettysburg.

[00:02:42.24]

Michelle L.: Okay. So, what kind of restaurant did your dad run?

[00:02:47.04]

Father Paul C.: My dad owned a restaurant, it was called the Famous Texas Restaurant. It was a—I won't say a meat and three, it was a sit-down type of restaurant. He served

luncheons and dinners. He specialized in hot dogs. We called them the Texas hot dogs, chili dog. When we put everything on the hot dog, it was chili, mustard, and onions. I would say he served the best hot dog ever in the world. I miss the hot dogs, which I ate growing up. Of course, as a child, not only did my parents work the restaurant, but it was something that was expected of the children as well. My siblings and I, from the time we were eight, ten years old, were expected to work at the restaurant. So, my very first job at the restaurant, at the age of eight, was peeling potatoes and peeling onions. The onions, of course, would go onto the hot dogs. We would have to wash dishes. And we also served as waiters at time whenever a waiter or waitress failed to show up. So, from the time I was eight years old until the time I graduated from high school, I worked in the restaurant. I received my work ethic from my dad and from my mom, because it was something that, as I got older, I was expected to do two, three hours an evening after school. Sadly, at least when I was young, I also had to work on weekends. I couldn't spend a lot of time with my friends, going to football games and doing a lot of things that teenagers do. That kind of really upset me at the time, but as I look back now on the years and my time in the restaurant working, I am grateful for that work ethic, which I received from them, and grateful for the sacrifice that they had made for me and for my brothers and sister.

[00:04:32.10]

Michelle L.: What kind of community was Carlisle? Was it pretty—

[00:04:35.00]

Father Paul C.: Carlisle was a . . . and is a small town of about eighteen thousand people. There is some industry there, tire and rubber factory, Carlisle Tire and Rubber. At one time, I don't know if it's still there, there was a manufactory of rugs called Masland's Rugs. Lotta small businesses. There's a college there, Dickinson College, and a law school that now is affiliated with the university of Penn State. It's a closely-knit community, seventeen thousand people, eighteen thousand people. The community hasn't really grown. It was about seventeen thousand people when I started school back in 1951, 19[52], and today, I don't think the population's anything more than eighteen thousand. Interestingly, all my siblings stayed in the Carlisle area, except for my brother, John. John worked in New York, lived in New York, but now he's retired and he spends much of his time in Carlisle. So, my wife and I, my children, we don't spend a lot of time in Carlisle but we do go visit there periodically to spend some time with the siblings.

[00:05:46.05]

Michelle L.: Did any of your siblings follow your father's footsteps into the restaurant?

[00:05:50.20]

Father Paul C.: Yes. My brother, Jim, when he was the oldest—twenty-four, I think he was about twenty-three, twenty-four, maybe even younger—my dad helped him buy a hotel. It was called the Molly Pitcher Hotel. It was a sixty-room hotel in downtown Carlisle, but it also had a very large dining room, and a little tavern and a bar that he ran. And he ran that for many years, until his time of retirement, about ten, twelve years ago. My youngest brother, Tom, he continued to work the restaurant after my father retired. My

father really didn't retire; he just gradually reduced the time that he would work the restaurant. But anyway, Tom did take over the restaurant, and then eventually—I think about ten years ago—they sold the restaurant to another Greek family. It's no longer called the Famous Texas Restaurant.

[00:06:44.05]

Michelle L.: And how did your dad decide to name it the Famous Texas Restaurant?

[00:06:48.12]

Father Paul C.: I'm not sure he named it. I think it was a restaurant he adopted, because when he had come to Carlisle in 1930, he worked for the restaurant for three, four years. He worked very, very hard. My maternal grandfather owned the restaurant. He liked my dad a lot, hence the reason why—in 1935, when he brought his daughter, my mother, to the United States and brought her to Carlisle—he felt that the ideal mate for her would be my dad, Gus. [Interviewer's note: The narrator's father's full name was Constantine] I guess because he figured because my dad would be a hard worker who would take good care of my mom, who would be a good father. And so, back then, it was quite common to have pre-arranged marriages. Of course, they got to meet one another, get to know one another over a couple weeks and they liked each other, and they felt that it would be a good match. They got married.

[00:07:41.23]

Michelle L.: So, you grew up in Pennsylvania and then went to school. Then could you tell me a little bit about where else you've served?

[00:07:51.16]

Father Paul C.: Well, when I graduated from seminary, my very first position was Executive Director of the Campus Commission, which was a pan-Orthodox commission whose offices were at the Archdiocese, the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese in New York. My task then was to organize campus programs for campuses throughout the United States. I also was an assistant youth director at the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese. This was from 1971 through 1973. It [was] in 1971, my wife and I, Penny, got married. So, we lived in Brooklyn, New York at the time. In 1973, his Eminence, Archbishop Iakovos, wanted to ordain me. I felt that I was a little young to be ordained, though I really wasn't. I was twenty- . . . five, twenty-six at the time. But I quoted to him, "I can't. I can't. It is a church law." The old church canons say that a person who is going to be ordained to the priesthood must be thirty years old, so I mentioned that to the archbishop. I said, "Your Eminence, I'm not ready to get ordained." He wanted to ordain me and send me to a parish in the New York City area, I really didn't want to serve in New York City. I wanted to get back to Pennsylvania. He says, "Well, I know what the canons say, but I need priests and I need you to be a priest. Otherwise, you won't be able to continue to work here in New York." So, it was about that time that I attended—a World Student Christian Federation conference in Addis Ababa in Ethiopia. On my return, I stopped in Beirut, Lebanon. I met with a international youth organization, Greek Orthodox youth organization called Syndesmos. I was offered a job, so I came back in late January of

1973. I was supposed to go back to Beirut with my wife in April, but it was during that time that all hell broke loose in terms of the war in Lebanon, so we had to change our plans. I was in Carlisle at the time without work, and to make a long story short, my brother [Jim] offered me his tavern and his hotel to work until I decided what it is that I wanted to do. So, my wife and I, we ran a little tavern for two years. We specialized in sandwiches, served beer, and whatever taverns serve. Had a good time for two years, made a little bit of money. I was grateful for the time there. I probably counseled more people in that tavern over a two-year period than I did in my priesthood as a priest for forty-four years. [Laughter] Because people would come [to] the bar, they'd want to talk, and they knew what my background was, what my intentions were. And so, it was kind of a delightful time. It was a cute little bar. We worked it very, very hard, but in 1975, I received a phone call from New York, from Bishop Silas. He was calling on behalf of the archbishop to see if I was ready, because the archbishop remembered what I had told him, that one had to be thirty years old to be ordained. So, Bishop Silas, when he called me—and I was at the tavern at the time—my youngest daughter had just been born. He says, "Paul, I'm calling on behalf of Archbishop Iakovos. You're almost thirty years old. Are you ready to be ordained?" I said, "Yes, I am. I'm ready to be ordained." So . . . several months later, I was ordained a deacon in Clifton, New Jersey. Then, on November 30, 1975, I was ordained to the priesthood in my home parish of Camp Hill, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

[00:11:20.00]

Michelle L.: So, he was really seeking you out, waiting . . .

[00:11:22.25]

Father Paul C.: Oh, he was seeking me out. The church needed priests, and I'm grateful that I found the calling, because I really feel that priesthood is a calling. My forty-four years as a priest have been wonderful years. I've enjoyed serving churches. I served churches in Huntsville, Alabama. That was my very first parish. I served there for three years. After three years, I received another phone call from New York, went to Jacksonville, Florida, served twelve years there. Then went to Denver, Colorado for about six years, and then have been here in Birmingham for the last twenty-four.

[00:11:57.04]

Michelle L.: So, they sort of arrange where you go—

[00:12:03.07]

Father Paul C.: Pretty much so. The Greek Orthodox Church is a hierarchical church. The head of our church [is] the patriarch, [and] we belong to the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese, which comes under the Patriarchate of Constantinople. At the head of our church is the Archbishop of America, who is in New York. The church is divided into diocese or metropolises. There are ten. I belong to the Metropolis of Atlanta. So, as a hierarchical church, assignments are pretty much like the military. The archbishop or the head of the church is kinda like a general. They tell you where it is that you're gonna go, what it is that you're gonna do. Of course, they try and—by God's grace—are fairly successful in matching up priests with communities where they feel that priests will have gifts that will

benefit a community. Assignments are made in that particular fashion. So, yes, we're assigned. It's not regarded as a job. I'm not employed by the parish; I'm assigned by the bishop and, of course, the local parish is responsible for your compensation and for providing for your material needs.

[00:13:16.10]

Michelle L.: So, when you came to Birmingham, had you visited here before, or . . . ?

[00:13:23.12]

Father Paul C.: I came to Birmingham in 1996. At the time, I was a priest in Denver, Colorado.

It was mutually agreed by the bishop there, in Denver, and by myself that I would seek assignment elsewhere. Birmingham was offered to me. I did visit Birmingham back then. I came and I served a liturgy in June of 1996. Had an opportunity, and I was grateful to Archbishop Iakovos for affording this opportunity, because typically it wasn't done. But he figured, since I was a priest as many years as I had been, he was going to give me a choice, so to speak. He offered me Birmingham, Atlanta, and Charlotte. So, I visited Birmingham, offered a liturgy, preached a sermon, met the people, spent a little time here, liked what I saw. Then I called New York and told the archbishop that I wanted to come to Birmingham, and the assignment was made. So, I came in September of 1996. Yeah.

[00:14:22.08]

Michelle L.: So, what'd you think of Birmingham when you came . . . ?

[00:14:26.13]

Father Paul C.: I was impressed with Birmingham. I liked Birmingham. It was a beautiful city—it is a beautiful city. Interestingly, when I had made my decision to come to Birmingham in 1996, people in Denver were notified of that decision. I recall, one day, working out in the Jewish Community Center. I belonged to the Jewish Community Center to use their fitness facilities, and it was just right across the street from the cathedral where I was the pastor in Denver. I recall a fella . . . at the J.C.C. saying, "Father, I hear you're moving." I said, "Yes." He says, "Where are you going?" I said, "I'm moving to Birmingham, Alabama." He said, "Birmingham, Alabama! What the hell do you want to go there for?" [Laughter] And I knew exactly what he was thinking. He, like much of America, thinks of Birmingham as Bombingham; they recall the history of the city back during the time of the civil rights initiatives that were taking place back in the [19]50s and the [19]60s. They remember that Birmingham, like many of the cities in the South, were very segregated and that there were a lot of social and moral issues with which people had to contend. That's why he mentioned what he did. But what he said to me made an impression upon me. I said, "Well, you know, I did get a chance to visit Birmingham." And I said, "Birmingham is a very progressive city today. Many of the issues that were prevalent back in the [19]60s may still be there, but the community is a very diverse community. There is an acceptance both by the African Americans and the whites of one another for the most part. To say that there is no racism in the city would be a fallacious statement, however, there's racism that exists everywhere we go. And I don't think it's any more pronounced in Birmingham than it is even here in Denver or in other

parts of the country, as well." And I said, "I visited the city, it's a beautiful city. It's very family-friendly. The Greek Orthodox community there is a very progressive one. The people are very hospitable; very warm. At least, the people that I've met." And in the twenty-four years that I've been here, I've found that to be basically true. It's a very friendly city. People are wonderful. Those of all ethnic and racial backgrounds. I've met a lot of people over the years, and I've enjoyed my time in this community. I'm a Yankee transplant, you know, coming from Pennsylvania and then living in Birmingham all these years. My first three years, of course, were in Huntsville. And then Jacksonville, Florida. So, again, most of my life—and certainly my years of ministry—have been spent in the South.

[00:17:22.25]

Michelle L.: And so, for people listening that don't know anything about the Greek Orthodox . . . denomination, could you tell a little bit about what is Greek Orthodox?

[00:17:37.14]

Father Paul C.: Well, the Greek Orthodox Church is a church that purports and espouses to be the one holy Catholic and Apostolic church. Persons who are familiar with church history well know that Christianity, for a thousand years, was united. There was only one church. The actual division of churches took place, historically, in the year 1054. There was a separation of the church from the East, the churches in the East which came under the patriarchates of Antioch, [Alexandria], Jerusalem, and Constantinople, and there was also the church in Rome. So, when the split took place, it took place between what historically

we refer to as Western Christendom, which was primarily Christianity as it was being expressed and manifested in Europe and in Western Europe, and the Christianity that was being expressed in the East was expressed primarily in the Middle East, in Greece and that part of the world. So, when the separation took place, those churches that were in the East became inheritors of the Greek Orthodox tradition. The churches in the West became inheritors of the Roman Catholic tradition. We think of the Protestant Reformation—the Protestant Reformation which took place in the fifteenth and sixteenth century—was a reformation within the Western Catholic Church. Orthodoxy, although there have been sects that have broken away from Orthodoxy, claims that the type of reformation that took place in the West never took place in the East among Greek Orthodox. So, the Greek Orthodox purport that we have two thousand years of unbroken tradition. Unlike the Catholic Church, we do not have a head of the church who is infallible on matters of the faith. The head of the church—churches, at least, administratively and pastorally—is what we call the patriarch. We continue to have these patriarchates in Constantinople and Antioch, Jerusalem and [Alexandria], and there are other patriarchates now in Russia and Romania who are heads of their churches as well. Like the Catholic Church, the Orthodox Church is a sacramental church. We, like the Catholic Church, number our sacraments as being seven: baptism, Chrismation, confession, communion, marriage, unction, and Holy Orders. One of the things that distinguishes the Greek Orthodox Church is our clergy can marry, so our priests do marry, as I myself am married. I have a wife, two children, and six grandchildren. I don't know—what else do we need to say about the Church? What else would you like to know? There's so much that I could say.

[00:20:32.13]

Michelle L.: [Laughter] Right, right. Just anything you think—

[00:20:36.05]

Father Paul C.: Again, and in terms of faith, the Church, like Western churches including

Protestant churches, highly revere the Bible. We regard the Bible as the Scriptures of the church, the Word of God. Unlike Protestants, we do not consider the Bible as being the sole source of tradition. In addition to the Bible, we have Holy Tradition. Holy Tradition are the teachings of the church as they have been communicated to us, we say, primarily by the Holy Spirit by the writings of the fathers of the church, through the worship of the church, etcetera, etcetera. Now, the cornerstone of the Holy Tradition is, of course, the Scripture itself. We are not among those who say that salvation is effectuated or accomplished by faith alone. Faith is of paramount importance. We recognize the teachings of the holy apostle, Paul, that faith is that which justifies a person; puts a person in a right relationship with God, leads to righteousness. But we also recognize the teachings, not only of James who says faith without good works is dead, but the teachings of Christ, who, in the twenty-fifth chapter of the Gospel according to Saint Matthew and the parable of the Last Judgement, clearly speaks about that which is onto the actualization of eternal life in God's kingdom. That is—how much it is a person will have loved in this lifetime, showing compassion to the hungry, to the poor, to the naked. To those who are in prison; so on and so forth. So, we believe, of course, that there is an inextricable link between faith and works that lead to one's salvation, and works are of

paramount importance. And yes, we do believe that works are necessary; however, we do not believe that works by themselves can lead one into the Kingdom of God or enable one to experience the fruit of the Holy Spirit in this lifetime or eternal life in the life to come.

[00:22:35.27]

Michelle L.: And could you tell a little bit about the service, the liturgy, and particularly . . . I came to a service the other day, and the leading up to the service—the vespers, and . . .

[00:22:51.12]

Father Paul C.: Um-hm. Well . . . the Orthodox Church is a Liturgical Church, the word Orthodox comes from two Greek words, "orthos," which means "upright," "doxo," which means "glory." The Orthodox Church is a church which purports to worship God in an upright and glorious manner. Worship is of paramount importance to the life of an Orthodox Christian. Orthodoxy, we say, is not so much a religion as it is a lifestyle. An integral part of that lifestyle is a life of prayer and worship itself. So, you speak of the liturgy which you attended. The liturgy is the central act of worship. The counterpart is the Catholic mass or the Episcopalian liturgy itself. Liturgy is the celebration of the sacrament of holy eucharist or holy communion. It is a service of prayer and praise and glorification, and there are two parts to the divine liturgy. The first part is called the Liturgy of the Word, that begins with the beginning of the liturgy, and it concludes with the recitation of the Creed. During the Liturgy of the Word, which is the didactic part of the liturgy, the church seeks to communicate the teachings of the church to the people,

both through the hymnology—the hymns—through the readings of the scripture, and also through the sermon, which is preached. With a recitation of the Creed, we have the beginning of what we call the Liturgy of the Faithful. It's called the Liturgy of the Faithful because, at one time, only those who were baptized or confirmed Orthodox Christians could remain in the liturgy at that point in the liturgy. If you noted, when you attended liturgy when you were here several weeks ago, the Creed was introduced with the words, "The doors, the doors; with wisdom, let us be attentive." Those words are . . . uttered liturgically today, either by the deacon or by the celebrating priests, because at one time, there were doorkeepers. And the catechumens, those who were preparing themselves for Baptism, had to stand in the back of the church, in that part of the church which we call the narthex. So, when the priest would say—or the deacon would say—"The doors, the doors," the doors would be shut, and those who were preparing themselves for baptism had to leave the church. Only the faithful, the baptized, could stay for the liturgy. And so, they would stay, and that is because it was during that part of the liturgy that the confession of faith was made, which the baptized, confirmed members of the church would make. It is also during this part of the liturgy when the sacrament would be consecrated, meaning the bread and the wine that was brought to the church would be consecrated into the body and blood of Christ and availed to those who are baptized and confirmed. In the Orthodox Church, communion is closed. By that, I simply mean that only those who are baptized and/or confirmed Orthodox Christians can receive the sacrament. Many times, Protestants and Catholics come in and they are . . . upset, somewhat, that they are unable to receive. They say, "Why can we not receive it if we believe the sacrament to be the body and blood of Christ?" And the answer to that—and

you really have to reflect upon it; even after the answer is offered, people don't accept it—we say that when we commune, we're not only communing with God. We're not only encountering God. We're not only abiding in God, as Christ says, that we do when we partake of his body and blood. And this, in the sixth chapter of the Gospel of John. But when we receive communion, we're communing with the other Christians who are baptized and confirmed, who share the same faith. So, what separates us from Protestants and Catholics is our faith. Now, the good news is that, with Protestants and Catholics, we have many, many commonalities of faith. We believe that Jesus is a son of God. We believe in the scripture. We believe in the importance of living a moral life and a good life; living a life of faith. But there are also differences that exist. The differences that exist primarily between Orthodox Christians and Protestant Christians and Catholic Christians—is how we understand the church. So, the Orthodox have what we [call] a very strong sense of ecclesiology; the importance of the church and the role of the church in a person's salvation. We believe that a person's relationship with God and his salvation really necessitate life in the church. So, that's our understanding. So, liturgy itself is the sacrament of holy communion. And you mention the vesper service. The vespers is an evening service that oftentimes is celebrated on the evening before—the eve before a divine liturgy is celebrated. All of the liturgies are to be preceded by a Matins service, which is the daily morning service of the church. These are services of prayer and scripture and hymnology, etcetera, etcetera. But again, those who are involved in the Orthodox church will discover that there's a very rich liturgical life. Now, many of the parishes don't observe this liturgical life, because again, the laypeople do not have the time. I mean, many laypeople have callings to do things other than pray and worship and

come to church, etcetera, etcetera. But where the liturgical life of the Orthodox Church is most pronounced and most seen are in monasteries. We do not have a lot of monasteries in the United States, but we do have monasteries and we do have convents. There are many monasteries in Greece and in Russia and those countries that are more Orthodox than Protestant. All in all, it is guesstimated that there are approximately two hundred and fifty million Orthodox Christians throughout the world. If we were to think of Orthodoxy as a denomination—we don't like to think of it as a denomination, but if we were to think of it as a denomination—it is regarded as being the second largest Christian denomination in the world, after the Roman Catholic Church.

[00:29:14.08]

Michelle L.: And what is the role of fasting in the liturgy? I noticed in the bulletin that morning a note about—

[00:29:25.27]

Father Paul C.: Yeah. Fasting is something that . . . the prophets of the Old Testament did. We know Elijah fasted; Moses fasted. The prophets fasted. St. John the Baptist fasted. Jesus fasted. He went into the desert for forty days and he fasted. In the Sermon on the Mount, he gives teachings on fasting. He doesn't say, "If you fast." He says, "When you fast, be sure to wash your face, anoint your head, and fast in secret, and your Heavenly Father who sees you in secret will reward you openly." So, fasting is very biblical. Fasting is something that we in the Orthodox Church do. Fasting is synonymous with abstention from certain foods. The foods from which we are to fast include things like meat, fish,

dairy products, eggs, milk, wine . . . But again, we have to keep in mind that fasting is not only abstaining from foods but also abstaining from sin. Isaiah is very clear on this. I believe it's the [fifty-eighth] chapter of the Book of Isaiah where he talks about fasting. St. John Chrysostom says, "When we fast, we have to be sure that not only are we fasting from . . . food, but our eyes also have to fast. What it is that we behold. The ears have to fast. The tongue has to fast." So, our job as Christians is to guard against certain "thoughts" of entering our minds, sinful thoughts, such as anger, lust, greed, [and] envy, which can lead to the passions. So, fasting, we do, as St. Seraphim of Sarov states, because fasting is an indispensable means of acquiring the Holy Spirit. Fasting as it is taught by the Fathers of Church, enables one to gain greater control of one's passions. And fasting, of course, is something—when we do it, and we keep it Christ-centered—that is conducive to a prayerful life, a more prayerful life. I've [also] discovered over the years—that [through fasting] one's ability to pray is enhanced. Because one of the biggest detriments to prayer is a wandering mind. You, I know, studied at Beeson Theological School. I'm certain, at times, you have prayed or you are a woman of prayer, but persons who do pray know that the thing we have to guard against is the wandering mind. Because the mind has a tendency to wander. When we have a rule of prayer, as we are enjoined to do by fathers of the church [such as] Dimitry of Rostov and St. John Chrysostom, we have to try to abide by that rule. We have to discipline ourselves to pray because it's very easy to go from one day into the next without praying at all, because we're so caught up in our busy lives. And we just feel that, as long as go to church and maybe read our Bibles periodically, that that's enough. And it really isn't enough. Prayer is communication with God. It leads to intimacy with God. The more we communicate

with God through prayer, the more intimate we become with him. Friendships, relationships with our spouses, with our children, with people in the church, they're all predicated upon our ability to communicate with them. So, the reality is, you know this and I know this; the more we communicate with people, the more open and honest we are in our communication with people, the more intimate we become and the better we know that person. We may not like that person after we communicate with them, and they may not like us, but that's what leads to intimacy.

[00:33:15.22]

Michelle L.: All right. Well, if we could shift a little bit to the festival.

[00:33:20.20]

Father Paul C.: Sure.

[00:33:20.23]

Michelle L.: And I know you weren't here when it all began, but are there other Greek festivals at other churches throughout the United States where you've been, other Greek Orthodox churches? Is it fairly common to have these Greek—

[00:33:40.04]

Father Paul C.: Yeah, it's interesting. It's an interesting phenomenon. Our Greek festival here in Birmingham has been taking place since 1972, so the festival that will be taking place in October of this year will be our forty-seventh festival. The purpose of the festival is . . . to

afford our community an opportunity to share with the people of Birmingham our cultural . . . life. It's a cultural and culinary happening. It's one of the oldest festivals in the state of Alabama. It's attended by well over thirty thousand people. There are a number of components that constitute the festival that are very attractive to the people of Birmingham. It's a very exciting happening, because people will come for three days. And thirty thousand people for a community our size, and we're talking about four hundred families that sponsor this festival, it's a lot of people. They come and they . . . come primarily, but not solely, for the food. We have wonderful Greek dishes, such as the souvlaki, which is the shish kebob, a lamb shish kebob. We serve marinated chicken, Greek-style chicken, a *pastichio*, which is a Greek-style lasagna. There's the gyro sandwich. There are many, many Greek dishes that are very attractive to the people. I've never had a food item at our festival which I did not thoroughly enjoy. Now, I'm partial to Greek food, having grown up in a Greek household where Greek food was offered. But it amazes me that the food is as qualitative and as good as it is, because what we have here, we have mostly women—but some men—who will come down here as early as March or May prior to the festival. They do the preparation. Practically all of the items that we serve, including the desserts, the pastries, are all homemade, so to speak. Those who do come love the food. But it's not only the food. It's also a cultural festival. There's Greek music; we typically bring in a Greek band from Atlanta or another of the larger metropolitan areas within the Southeast. There's Greek dancing. In this church here, we have a number of dance groups, from children five years old to teenagers seventeen and eighteen years old. I believe there are about sixty or seventy young people who participate in the dance program. They dress up in Greek costumes, they dance. The

people who observe them at the festival love the dancing. They thoroughly enjoy it.

There are also booths that we set up; a marketplace, that we call it, where people can buy items related to the Greek Orthodox faith. We have a bookstore which offers books, not only on our Greek Orthodox faith, but also on our Hellenic tradition, books related to the country of Greece. But there also are booths set up where Greek artifacts are sold; paintings, Greek clothing, Greek jewelry, things of that sort. So, those who come here get a real experience of the cultural and the culinary life of the people. One of the residual benefits of the festival is that it exposes a lot of people to our church. We have tours of the church that take place. The church is open; people can go in. There are members of our church who will give tours of the church, answer questions of the people. A number of people who have eventually joined the church have joined the church because their first exposure to the church was when they had come to our Greek festival, met some of the people, and visited the church itself. So, it's a very rich experience. For those who don't want to come to the church itself for the festival—and the nice thing about our festival is that there's free parking and we access the Liberty National, the former Liberty National bank, which is just a couple blocks from here. And they allow us to use their parking lot for free so people can park just a couple blocks away and walk to the festival. It's a real worthwhile experience, but we also have a takeout service, where people can literally drive up, place their orders. We have runners who go out and take the orders, bring their food to them, and they can go home and they eat. Interestingly, about thirty to forty percent of our sales . . . go to the people who buy our takeout food. One of the questions, of course, that people oftentimes ask is, "Well, where does the money go?" Well . . . the festival is a wonderful thing because . . . I've oftentimes preached to our

people that we do this not only to avail to the people of Birmingham a culinary cultural experience, but it also affords our own people an opportunity to give of their stewardship of time, talent, and treasure, because there's a lot of talent that goes into putting on a festival of this sort. It gives people an opportunity to make a contribution to the church in ways that, financially, they might not be able to contribute, and it also gives them the satisfaction of knowing that they're doing something good for the church, interacting with people, getting to know them better. The money, of course, goes to support the ministries of the church. But of whatever we take in, you know, we also give about ten or fifteen percent of that money to charity. So, some of the beneficiaries of our giving in the years past have been the Firehouse Shelter, for example; Greater Birmingham Ministries, the Society of Multiple Sclerosis, and then, when Hurricane Katrina took place in 2005, our festival [took place] in the aftermath of that devastation that took place in New Orleans. It was agreed by the community—and I was very proud of them, you know, I encouraged them, but they were receptive—that we give all of our proceeds to relief agencies in the New Orleans area that were engaged in helping people get their lives together again in New Orleans. We're talking about well over a hundred thousand dollars that we had given to hurricane relief at that time. So, what we do is, we give. We try every year, and we've been successful. We've been very faithful in doing this, about ten or fifteen percent of our income to charity and to philanthropic organizations. And yes . . . In my former parish, it's interesting. In every one of my former parishes, we've had something comparable to the Greek festival. When I was in Huntsville, they didn't have a Greek festival at the time, but annually, they had what they called a Greek night. It would bring about three hundred, four hundred people together to the Huntsville Civic Center. They would come

for a wonderful dinner, and there would be entertainment; a Greek band, Greek dancing. In Denver, we also had a very large festival, and in Jacksonville, Florida, as well. You know, I joke; I said, what they have to do at seminary now is, they have to start offering a course in Greek Festival 101.

[00:41:14.29]

Michelle L.: [Laughter] Right.

[00:41:14.29]

Father Paul C.: Because practically every Greek community that I know, in every city—now, I'm sure it's not every city, but many, many cities, there are Greek festivals. I know they have a very large one in Atlanta. They have a smaller Greek festival down in Montgomery. Mobile has one. And these are the only churches in Alabama. Houston has a very large festival. There are parishes out in Los Angeles, up in New York. Everywhere you go. My former parish, the parish in which I grew up in Harrisburg, has a festival as well.

[00:41:46.08]

Michelle L.: That's what I was about to ask. Do you remember when you were growing up in Pennsylvania, do you remember Greek festivals being there—

[00:41:52.14]

Father Paul C.: No. I don't remember Greek festivals in Pennsylvania. We didn't have them. It's a phenomena that's really emerged, I believe—I may be mistaken, there may have been communities that had Greek festivals prior—but it's a phenomena that emerged, I believe, back in the early 1970s. It's just amazing, the number of Greek communities. When I say Greek communities, I'm talking about Greek Orthodox churches, because these are the communities that are putting on these festivals that . . . take place throughout the country.

[00:42:25.27]

Michelle L.: Hmm. I wonder who came up with the—

[00:42:27.21]

Father Paul C.: I have no idea who came up with the idea. Now, when I was growing up, what was quite popular—they're not so popular, at least not in this community, were the Greek dances. These Greek dances were primarily directed toward those within the Greek community. Bands would be hired. Dinners, Greek dinners and meals would be offered. So, I do remember very well going to many Greek dances growing up. The dances would attract anywhere from two, three, four, or five hundred people. Again, the weddings growing up—practically ninety percent of the times—always would have a Greek band, Greek food. There would always be a sit-down type of dinner, etcetera, etcetera. Again, this is related to the Greeks' understanding of eating. You know? It's not that we like to eat any more than people like to eat, but as Plutarch—the famous Greek of many years ago, prior to Christ—once said, "We go to the table not to eat but to eat together." So, eating for the Greeks is not only an event for satisfying physical need, but also for

meeting a very real social need that we have for interaction with one another. So, it's unusual—it might not be so unusual today because we've gotten away from a lot of our traditions—but growing up, I rarely ever sat down to a meal by myself. The family always was there for dinner. Now, because we had such a big family, we sometimes had to eat in shifts. But there were always three or four or five people at the table, and always at Easter—or Thanksgiving and Christmas, with the entire family, friends and relatives would gather, twenty-five, thirty, thirty-five people. So, eating is not only to satisfy a need. When we satisfy the need, it's always nice that the food is good. And Greeks express love by feeding people. You know? And trying to please people by making the food extra good. But it always affords us an opportunity to break bread with one another, to fellowship with one another, get to know one another better.

[00:44:51.15]

Michelle L.: Hmm, that's beautiful. So, some of the weddings you talked about, the Greek weddings growing up, did the church community come together to cook for those weddings as well?

[00:45:03.20]

Father Paul C.: No, typically they did not. The way it would happen back then is families—now, again, the reality is, in many church communities, there [were] a lot of families who are related to one another, and oftentimes they would do that. I think that what you'll find today, which is more the rule rather than the exception, is that they hire caterers. Even though many of the weddings still have these receptions, oftentimes, it's not really Greek

food; we just hire a caterer. But again, growing up, things were not as formal as they are today. But they were just as celebratory if not more celebratory.

[00:45:41.21]

Michelle L.: So, how does the—I mean, you said there's four hundred families in the church.

[00:45:46.12]

Father Paul C.: Mm-hm, mm-hm.

[00:45:49.11]

Michelle L.: I mean, can you describe some of the behind the scenes, getting ready for this amount of people to come in? Is it hard to get everyone to volunteer, or does everyone just—

[00:46:00.13]

Father Paul C.: No. What happens, in terms of preparing, we identify a festival chairperson.

You need to have a leader. We've had an outstanding leader in person of Pete Lafakis for the last few years, but we've had other wonderful leaders, as well. I don't want to start mentioning names because I might forget somebody. But the festival chairperson then meets together with a committee, persons within the community, to plan the festival itself. I mentioned earlier that we begin cooking in March, April, thereabout, and do the preparation. Of course, that means we have to have refrigeration space and freezer space to store the food, and it starts taking place like that. We have a women's auxiliary,

Philoptochos. Now, I thank God and others thank God for the Philoptochos, because the women are the workers. Philoptochos is a Greek word which means "the friends of the poor."

[00:47:01.06]

Michelle L.: Could you spell that for me?

[00:47:02.09]

Father Paul C.: Yeah. It's P-h-i-l-o-p-t-o-c-h-o-s. Again, friends of the poor. It's the women's auxiliary, but the focus is outreach, and giving to the needy and to philanthropy and to charity. But within the Philoptochos are many of the women of the church, and they are—not to say the men don't work; our men work very, very hard, I don't want to give the false impression—but the women, when it comes to cooking, do much of it. They do much of the preparation. So, to prepare something like the *pastichio*, the Greek-style lasagna, it might take a week, because they prepare literally over a thousand, fifteen hundred pans for the festival itself. And it's not easy work. So, you'll get twenty, thirty, forty women who will come on a given day, maybe five days a week, for two weeks in a row, to do this cooking and preparation. The same holds true with pastries. So, we always have a chairperson for a certain pastry. They, in turn, find women and men who are willing to come down to do the preparation. The festival itself—it's interesting. We get many people who come to work that we otherwise don't necessarily see. We talk about the Christians who are Christmas Christians and Easter Christians; well, we have some people who are Festival Christians. But we're grateful for them, believe me, because we

need as much help as we possibly can get. So, practically, I won't say all, but many of the people who constitute our four hundred families will come down here and work, because it is a monumental effort to serve thirty thousand people over a three-day period of time. By the grace of God, the festival has grown to the point where we can't do it ourselves. It continues to get larger. So, we have to hire people to help us. Especially during the festival, but not only. You need people to clean up, to bus tables. We need security, so we hire police officers, as well, to make sure everything is kosher and good and people are on their best behavior, etcetera, etcetera. But again . . . those who are committee chairpersons have the responsibility of identifying persons who are going to help them in their area of work. And in their preparation of certain food items. I don't know if that answers your question, but . . .

[00:49:34.29]

Michelle L.: Yeah. I mean, it's hard to get an idea—I mean, I know you're saying they start in

March cooking and then, I mean, just the weeks leading up to it, is it just . . . crazy?

[Laughter]

[00:49:46.28]

Father Paul C.: Yeah. Well, it is crazy, but the good thing, after having done it for forty-seven

years, it's like . . . it's like clockwork. That doesn't mean you don't have to work as hard,

but for example, those who are in charge of the *pastichio*, they usually call upon the same

people that were called upon the year before. Those people who work on that committee

usually think of that as being their stewardship for the church, so they'll come down and

they'll faithfully do what they need to do. Of course, we're always successful in getting other people to come by making announcements in church; you know, this week, and we'll have many announcements. I don't know if we made any announcements when you were in church several weeks ago, but we have to announce what's taking place. This week, we're making *pastichio*. Next week, we're going to be making the *koururia*, the Greek cookies that are very sweet and that we . . . drink with coffee in the morning. *Kourabiedes*, the *baklava*, whatever the case might be. Whatever it is we have to prepare. So, we make an announcement. We promote it through the bulletin.

[00:50:55.12]

Michelle L.: So, what—have you had assigned jobs some years?

[00:50:59.21]

Father Paul C.: I've had assigned jobs. When I was in Jacksonville, Florida, my job was to work on the food line, to serve food—and specifically, to serve, well, just to serve food. Because in Jacksonville, it was different. We had a food line and they needed servers. Those servers oftentimes would work in the kitchen, so I would go in the back and I would help prepare, broil the souvlaki, the shish kebob, or broil the chicken. Or bring out the salads, etcetera, etcetera. In Denver, my job was to work in what we called the souvlaki booth. The setup was a little bit different there. We had different booths. Our booth just made souvlaki. So, from morning to night—I mean, after a while, I was smelling, eating, thinking, and dreaming about souvlaki, but that was my job there. Here, I've been working takeout, doing cashiering. And what's interesting is, people ask me,

"Did you see so-and-so?" And the reality is, once we start work at the festival, we all have our niche. I say we're kind of like an ant colony here. You know? Ants have a job in their colony, and each ant doesn't ask the other ant what he or she is going to do, they just do it. So, the same holds true with the festival. Everybody has their little niche at the festival. We do it. I can go through an entire festival and not see seventy-five percent of the people who are at the festival. Now, what I do do is, of course, as I'm getting older is, I don't spend as much time at the cash register as I did, 'cause I now have grandchildren, all of whom are in dance groups. So, I take breaks. I go out there and I watch them dance, I mingle with the crowd, say hello to some of our parishioners. Greet people, doing all that. So, all that's very important, not only in terms of my relationship with my family, but also as a pastor and as a priest. I need to be visible, not only as a cashier, but as a priest and as a pastor, as well.

[00:52:59.19]

Michelle L.: Do you sometimes feel, during the festival, a little more like when you were working in the tavern?

[00:53:04.16]

Father Paul C.: Oh, big time. Big time. I feel right at home. But then again, after three days of a festival, I am grateful that God called me to be a priest and not a restaurateur. [Laughter]

[00:53:15.04]

Michelle L.: All right. Well, is there anything that I didn't ask that you wish people knew about the festival or about Greek Orthodox Church?

[00:53:26.28]

Father Paul C.: Well, again, just to give you—ever so briefly—a history of the Greeks of Birmingham, 'cause it's an interesting one, you know, the first Greeks to come to Birmingham came at the end of the nineteenth century. The first Greeks to come to Alabama made their way into Mobile in 1884, and some of those Greeks made their way up to Birmingham. The Greeks who came to Birmingham and to the United States came in pursuit of social, political, religious freedom, to better themselves economically, etcetera, etcetera. By the early 1900s, there were well over a hundred Greeks and families who were here. In 1903, they established what they called the Lord Byron Society. Lord Byron, you may know, was an English poet who lived in the nineteenth century. He fought in the Greek Revolutionary War. He was very sympathetic to the Greeks who were revolting against the Ottoman oppression and the occupation of Greece in the 1820s. So, the Lord Byron Society existed for the purpose of bringing the Greek community, the Greeks who were here, together, and to also raise money for the church. So, by 1906, the Greeks here bought a church. It was located where our church is today, right here on 3rd Avenue and 19th Street. It was a United Methodist Church. They brought in a priest from India, a Greek Orthodox priest. I believe his name was Father Kallinikos Kanellos. By the 1920s, the community had grown to two hundred families. By 1930s, there were more families, and a second church was established on the north end of town. In 1953, the two churches were brought together; hence the reason we have

two names, Holy Trinity + Holy Cross Greek Orthodox Church. That church on the north end of town was the Holy Cross Church. This church here was Holy Trinity. Since 1953, when Archbishop Michael brought the two communities together, it has this identity as Holy Trinity-Holy Cross Greek Orthodox Church. So, again, the church has existed for a two-fold purpose. Being that the church was founded primarily by Greeks, it served the purpose not only of perpetuating the Greek Orthodox faith, but also providing opportunities for the Greek immigrants to come together to socialize with one another, and to have a sense of belonging and community in American society. Interestingly, there was a . . . immigration legislation enacted in 1924 which curtailed the number of Greeks coming into the United States. It was a little austere. Without being political, something similar to what we're experiencing today. It was favorable, primary to persons from Western Europe and Northern Europe, and really discriminatory to those who were from Southern Europe and from the Far East. Thank God, in 1952, that legislation was revised. I'm not really sure how my dad got into the United States, because things were very, very strict after 1924, and only so many Greeks and Italians and people from Spain and other parts of the Middle East and the Far East were allowed to come into the country. But he made his way in, as did my mother, in 1935. But all in all, the Greeks who came here came here, like I said . . . in pursuit of political, social, economic freedom. The early Greeks worked, primarily, as fruit vendors. They worked as coal miners in steel mills, worked as dishwashers; would shine shoes, do whatever it would take in order to earn money. After a number of years, the Greeks were very frugal for the most part—not always, but for the most part—they were hardworking and very frugal. The more ambitious ones bought businesses, primarily in the food industry, and opened restaurants

of their own. This was a dominant pattern up until the 1950s and the 1960s. The Greeks, for the most part, valued education a lot. Many Greeks—and this was true of my own mom and dad—did not want their children to go into the restaurant business, because even though it was financially lucrative, it was also very, very hard work. So, what you find after the 1960s is that many of the second- and third-generation Greek Americans—not that we don't have businesspeople today, because we do, but many of them would go into professions. So, what you'll find in our church today are many people who are lawyers, doctors, businesspeople in businesses other than restaurants, insurance brokers; the professions. A lot of white-collared people. That is not to say that blue-collared persons are not highly esteemed, because all work that has socially redeeming value is good; it's just that many of the children and the grandchildren of the Greek immigrants have pursued professions other than the professions in the food industry and in restaurants. Today, the church demographically is interesting, whereas in the beginning of the twentieth century and even up till maybe 1960, 1970, the majority of the people were Greek immigrants. Today, that's not the case. I would say fifteen percent of the Greek community today is Greek immigrant. Another fifty-five, sixty percent, might be Greek-American, and then the other thirty percent are converts, people who have converted into Greek Orthodoxy. Then, of course, we have some people who are Orthodox who have come from other countries—Russian Orthodox, Romanian Orthodox, Serbians, etcetera, etcetera. The wonderful thing is, at the center of the life of the community is our faith in Christ today. I genuinely believe that God has richly blessed this community. It's a good community, those who know it. I have to really give a lot of

credit to God for the success of our festival and the success that we've experienced through the years. So, that's all I have to say.

[00:59:51.27]

Michelle L.: [Laughter]

[00:59:52.23]

Father Paul C.: Thank you.

[00:59:52.23]

Michelle L.: Well, thank you.

[*End of interview*]