

Interviewee: Father Sakowski

Interviewers: Wendy Villalva

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Abstract:

In his interview, Father Sakowski discusses the growing Latine presence, especially the Mexican presence, in the church where he is a bilingual pastor. He has a doctorate in Theology with 13 years of higher level education in his past where he learned six languages including Spanish. He discusses challenges within the church for himself and that he has seen his Latine congregation endure, along with the Latine Catholic celebrations that are conducted at the church.

Wendy Villalva 0:03

Okay. Good evening Father Sakowski. It's a pleasure to meet with you. As a recap, tonight's interview is a project collaboration with the Chippewa Valley Museum. Our goal is to understand how local Latinx artists influence Eau Claire and the surrounding area and to recognize your role in this Community. I don't want to waste too much of your time, so I will just get right into it. So do you mind sharing some demographic information such as your age, race, ethnicity?

Father Sakowski 0:31

I turn 46 in a few days.

WV 0:35

Happy early birthday.

FS 0:36

Thank you. I come on all sides of my family from a Polish background, all either my great grandparents, in most cases were born in Poland or my grandparents and so. What was your other question? that-

WV 0:56

Just age, race and ethnicity, so you pretty much covered it.

FS 1:01

Yeah. I know some people talk about white and I'm really not comfortable, I don't know. I don't like that way of you know delineate, so because I really come from a Polish American heritage, and you know, that's my heritage.

WV 1:17

Very good, thank you, so this is a little bit about your background. Would you mind sharing some information about your academics and the journey that you took to have the position that you are currently in?

FS 1:29

How long do you have? I have a lot of academics-. [laughing] That is, it is kind of collecting dust right now, but I graduated from high school in 1994 and I'm a very grateful alum of Assumption High School in Wisconsin Rapids. I think we had an outstanding education, and then I went into the seminary and spent two years in St Paul at the University of St Thomas at the College seminary there. [I] transferred to the Catholic University of America in Washington DC and I did my undergrad degree of philosophy there, and then a master's in philosophy there. Then I was in Columbus Ohio, at the Pontifical College Josefinia and got a couple more degrees there in theology before I was ordained. And then I taught high school for five years as a priest, and then the Bishop [_____] sent me to Rome to the Gregorian university and I got two more degrees there. So I think I got the doctorate in theology up there, on top of my bookshelf. So ultimately a doctorate in theology, but I have 13 years of studies after high school.

WV 2:50

That is quite an impressive academic background.

FS 2:53

Yeah. For what it's worth. Which isn't what I really value about myself honestly. So, yeah, go ahead.

WV 3:02

Okay, thank you. Can you share with us some of your past unique pastoral opportunities?

FS 3:09

Sure. I mentioned the five years of teaching in high school as a newly ordained priest. So I was a chaplain and a teacher in high school and in that time I also did a lot of youth ministry. So either various, you know, service trips or mission trips or retreats for young people. They have been to our diocese in LaCrosse which runs an orphanage in Peru. I've been there five times. Three times I've taken a group of young people either young adults and, or teens and some parents down there and really, the purpose of those trips was to learn from the culture and the people down there. More than, I mean we did service but we found we received a lot more by the cultural encounter and the faith encounter. Yeah, even during my years in seminary there were great pastoral opportunities. Like working with Mother Teresa's Sisters in Washington DC among the poorest of the poor, or doing street ministry in Washington DC in some of the troubled neighborhoods. And we're doing when I was in Columbus, I really cherished my time. For three years with a healing Ministry for those who are carrying wounds from abortion men and women, and that was, you know, that was really powerful to see healing happen. So those are just some as a pastor for the last 10 years. I would say my area of ministry, that we're really branching out in the most, is for trauma and addictions. I just did a three month sabbatical to try to really provide care in that area and it's so needed right now so a lot of different things.

WV 5:04

Yeah, that's a lot of really good work. Thank you so much. So Father Sakowski is from Wisconsin Rapids, a very small city, with a population of 18,000, that currently has a six-percent Latino population. Is this a number that has increased since you were growing up there, and if so, what do you think are contributing factors?

FS 5:27

Yeah that is very interesting. I didn't even know that, because I haven't lived there for 25 years but it doesn't surprise me because really the whole state of Wisconsin has grown in its Latino population, and that is recent. Like, I don't know for sure what the number was, but I'm pretty sure if I went back to those censuses from 1980, 90, and 2000, that it would be closer to one-percent or less. I think that's in the last 20 years that that growth has happened, and you know more often than not, it has to do with immigrants finding ways to support their family, and, at least in the in the places where I have done interactive work with Latino immigrants usually you know a few of them find meaningful work and good place to live and then their relatives or neighbors or friends start following them. Which is actually exactly how the immigration happened for my ancestors, right, I mean like. You know about 100 years ago it's totally how it works, because you don't know this new and scary place and you kind of talk to the people you trust and you go where they tell you, you know. Some yep.

WV 6:50

Yeah that sounds very much how immigration works with all areas of the country. You find places to go where your family is located and that's how the population increases. So growing up, did you have interactions with the Latino community that influenced your path today? For instance, such as learning Spanish or working with Latino populations in general.

Speaker 1 7:15

It's interesting, you know, because I've always had a real fascination with languages and a desire to learn other languages, and with that I think a desire to be changed by another culture, right? Like because you can't learn a language without plunging yourself into a culture. But really like Wisconsin rapids growing up was not diverse right? It really wasn't, I mean minimally diverse, but I did have Father Joe Hirsch, who currently is running the orphanage in Peru that our diocese has and he's always had a real missionary heart and he was bilingual. There were a small number of Mexican immigrants that were starting to be in the area, you know, and he was doing some Ministry for them. So I saw a little bit, and just hearing him and his missionary heart got me thinking that way and then during seminary, I think the 2000 census came out, and it did show that the State was becoming substantially more Hispanic. And when I realized that I really redouble my efforts to make sure that I would be able to provide ministry bilingually. I spent six weeks in Mexico in 2001 working on Spanish and so forth, so. Those are some of the reasons why- that got me where I am so.

WV 8:50

That is, it's very neat that you take the time to just go above and beyond, with doing that, like spending six weeks in Mexico to learn a language that's really nice. I have done some research and found that you have been working with the Hispanic population for 10 years now. How did your work with the community begin? It's a very broad question.

FS 9:11

Yeah, well it goes back further than 10 years. You know, I got little tastes and glimpses in high school and college and then, as I mentioned, I made a point of going back and kind of brushing up on Spanish and really learning it and I finally had my six weeks in Mexico in 2001, between the academic side of it and some chances for full immersion and kind of an all weekend ordination party for it for a priest that was ordained. There were little kids talking to me in Spanish, for two straight days, like, was overwhelming and exhausting and by the end of the weekend I actually was having conversations in Spanish. Then I went through times where I barely used it, but it comes back. So when I was newly ordained- when I was in seminary there was a lot of ministry that I was doing that was Hispanic Ministry. Then, my first five years as a high school teacher I barely used it, and then I was in Rome studying and getting a doctorate and my classes were in Italian. I learned to read in French and learned to read in German and use my Latin and Greek and you know, like I love languages, when I was done with my time in Rome Bishop Callahan gave me my new assignment as pastor of these two parishes and Hispanic Minister. So really I mean, I was told in a sense, you know, and I think my Spanish was better than he thought it was. He figured I could go from a tie into Spanish, and it was at first. They were hearing a lot of Italian coming out of my mouth, the first six months but then every one of the last 10 years- and now I feel much more comfortable speaking fluently in Spanish and I still don't have a mastery of the language, by any means, but I can do my best, and so.

WV 11:05

That was gonna be my follow up question, if you felt that you had very good control of the language.

FS 11:14

It's better and better because I do ministry, you know, pretty much every week. Sometime around four years ago, I used to always write up my homilies and read them- read the text at mass and

I've started to just preach more extemporaneously and I feel comfortable doing that, even though I make mistakes when I do that, but its overall much more- I think connects much more at a human level. I certainly can understand what people are saying 95% of the time, or sometimes I have to ask them to say it a different way. Once in a while I get hung up on- it usually is vocabulary and it usually is the nouns, like everyday nouns. I just never have used some of those words. So it's sometimes one word and I ask them, like, what's that? And they look at me funny like, well how can you not know that it's a book or it's- [____?] I never use that word. Anyway, but we get through those misunderstandings.

WV 12:19

You also mentioned that you know Italian and German. How many languages do you know?

FS 12:28

Yeah I mean I can- I've used and learned a lot of languages, particularly in my doctoral research for theology, because when it comes to theology there's a huge amount of literature that doesn't exist in English. So I had a reading knowledge of, you know, German, French, Italian, Spanish Latin, Greek, English, right, and I even read a book and Portuguese, even though I didn't really ever studied Portuguese but it's close enough and I was able to figure it out. I think I still can read all those languages, but I'm certainly rusty on the German and the French and I totally can't speak those anymore. I mean I probably could have gotten by 10 years ago with a conversation in a couple of those languages. Even Italian, right now, I would- I can still understand what an Italian person is saying just fine, but if I try to respond, Italian and Spanish are so similar that they get jumbled together really easily, and right now, the Spanish would be winning on that one because that's what I use, so.

WV 13:40

That's very interesting. Okay, so this next section is talking a little bit more about your career and the Church. So can you share with us some of the work the Parish has done with Hispanic parishioners?

FS 13:53

So lately, you know, it really started with Father [_____] who was pastor for like almost 40 years at St Mary's in Altoona, and I think if I understand correctly, he was in his mid 70's and getting very close to retirement. You know, really past retirement age, and he discovered that there were Spanish speaking immigrants who weren't able to- didn't feel like they could come to mass and he decided to try to learn Spanish. His Spanish was terrible, I understand, but the immigrants were so grateful, so a small following started coming in, and then there was- there were a couple of other pastors very briefly here. I arrived in 2012, at the time, there was mass in Spanish once a month and that was kind of the- and then you know they'd figure out how to deal with baptisms or marriages if they came up. I moved that immediately to once a week and I think we had 30 people coming at the time 10 years ago, when I first arrived, and now we average somewhere between 100-110 on a given Sunday. Big events many, many more, and on other days, maybe only 70 you know but usually there's over 100 and about half are children. Right.

WV 15:15

Okay, in which ways has the parish's staff changed?

FS 15:20

Yeah. That's been a big transition. It was really hard my first four or five years. Now I look back on it, and I see what was happening. Like basically I was wearing like 20 different hats, you know on the Spanish speaking side of things, and I still was pastor of two parishes that had a lot of other important things going on. So I was the secretary, I was the one who figured out how to prepare people for sacraments and, you know, how to help them get ready to be married and how to you know- and often helping them solve complicated legal problems or just a lot of difficult immigration problems and it got to the point where I couldn't even really sometimes cross the street from my house to the church when I had other appointments to attend to, and you know, "padre, padre, padre" [speaking in Spanish], they were reaching out to get me to help and finally we started hiring bilingual staff. Which is hard to do. I know like anybody in the area knows it's not always easy to find bilingual staff and a lot of us need it, but we do have one full time employee and one part time employee who are fully bilingual and in our other two- other full time employees who are working really hard and quickly learning Spanish. So our staff is becoming bilingual. And we've made it a priority on our job descriptions are preferred, you know, that bilingual preferred, but not always possible, but we really are trying to be bilingual parishes because it's really important.

WV 17:00

I was able to attend one of your Sunday masses and it was very nice to see the ways in which Spanish was able to be incorporated and how the Spanish speaking community was able to engage during the mass. How have you modified or restructured your masses to include, I'm sorry, to include the Spanish speaking community?

FS 17:19

Right. The big change was like going to a weekly Spanish mass 10 years ago that was pretty groundbreaking and, as you know, it feels like such slow growth and sometimes we felt stuck so often, but actually the population has quadrupled like so it's really grown. Slowly, but surely, and then we did start already the, nine years ago, with a couple times a year we try to have a bilingual mass and really bring together like. We tried to get everyone to come, you know from you know all the masses. Some people come, some don't, and then have a celebration afterwards and that's been a great chance to try to bridge some of that culture gap and we've, I think, moved our programming to where whatever we're trying to do in parish life, you know, like the person who helps with preparing couples for marriages, is working, both with Spanish speaking couples and English speaking couples. Or when we're getting children ready for first communion our catechist, even the ones who don't speak any Spanish, they know the Spanish families and they're working with them. Like, and I've just tried to keep a balance between honoring the unique customs of the immigrants and celebrating those, and there's a certain amount of separateness that works with that, but really I've absolutely refused to say that we have these two separate communities that don't even know about each other. And they just pretend, like the other ones not there and I have relentlessly pushed against that and I get pushback from both sides against that sometimes. But we can't exist that way. I'm not willing to have a faith community that ignores entire other populations.

WV 19:12

This next section talks a little bit about your work in the Chippewa Valley. So, if any, what have been some challenges or struggles with working in Eau Claire and the Hispanic Community? I know you talked a little bit about that push back. So can you elaborate more on that.

FS 19:28

You know, it's two things. It is the language barrier some of the time, and even more cultural barriers and they both arise because you have a relatively new immigrant population. You know, and varying levels of education. Some very well educated, but a large number of immigrants who have only grade school education, some who have no schooling, some are illiterate. A lot of situations where the parents were born in Mexico predominantly, or other countries, children born here, and, in many cases, where they've lived more- the whole family has lived more years here than anywhere else and in with- and so first generation of immigrants with any culture, including again my own ancestors, the norm would be that the very first ones here probably don't learn the language very well. They do know, like all of them know some English, at least a few words. Some, you know, I can tell when they laugh at my English jokes that I'm telling to somebody else. Like, oh you do speak some English okay, but that- But the children, very quickly learn, you know, languages and we kind of want them to know both languages. You know, know their prayers in both languages, know that- keep their culture and become active members of the United States. What was I gonna- so with that then the cultural, like an immigrant's view of things, they don't understand why things work the way they work here. You know, the bureaucracies that we have set up in our schools, in our county courthouse in our- How our law enforcement works, how our laws work, how you go about getting a license for this or that. That all is radically unfamiliar, and I know this because Italy, like I lived there for four years and the bureaucracy there is confounding. I mean like, and I'm a very well educated person with a lot of privileged education, and I had a lot of trouble figuring out that system. So like someone who has only a few years of schooling, I very much empathize with what it's like to feel like an outsider in that situation. Do we try to bridge those gaps? And then there's one of the biggest obstacles is this issue that we don't really talk about in our state, but here, and in several other states, it is impossible for a number of the people to get a driver's license, and that is a real challenge. That we have a federal level problem of immigration that we all know is there that needs to be solved, and I'm not taking any political sides. Just this is a reality that we have a large number of under documented or undocumented people who are living and working and living as very active stable members of the local community in a lot of places like our own community. And they would love to be here legally and for various reasons there's not a path to do that. Yeah, and for my families with children who are not documented like, according to the laws going way back more than 20 years, they would need to leave the country for 10 years just to start the process and when they're raising children who only know- they're not going to do that. Meanwhile, because the Federal Government has not solved this problem for now a few decades, here we are at the state level with a lot of people who can't get a driver's license and because they can't get a driver's license they're driving without insurance, some of them, without training, some of them. And unlicensed, right, and it creates rifts between local law enforcement and families that can and you know- Where they become afraid of the police, because the police might pull us over and the greatest fear of some of our people is that the parents and children will be separated from each other. Even though I kind of know that it's very unlikely that any of our

adults would be deported for getting pulled over a few times without a driver's license, in theory it's possible, and that is a very real fear for a lot of people.

WV 24:03

How has the pandemic affected the Community and the Church?

FS 24:10

It's affected a lot of people in a lot of ways. So, you know, it really depends on the individuals, because in the Catholic Church, we have, we really do have a great diversity of political opinions. You know, we're not by any means monolithic about politics. So some of our people who come to Catholic churches are to the left and to the right politically, and that probably does affect how they interpret the pandemic. You know, so there are some who are furious that there were ever any restrictions of any kind, and are really mad about that- and Trump- and understandably traumatized about the shock. Because when in spring of 2020 things changed so fast for so many people, it was traumatizing. Then, over time, of course, there's the, I would say, for the ones that I interact with the most, well we're trying to run really great programs for people using the appropriate precautions. And being available, really, do want to be a strong presence and we don't want to wait until the virus goes away because it's not probably ever going away. So we want to be reasonably safe given the circumstances. We do see ourselves as essential in the community and we don't need to be reckless so we've been trying to strike that balance. And our Latino population has been wonderfully cooperative with any of those kinds of restrictions we've asked. In that regard then, there's been a lot of stress. For those of us running things, and I think anybody listening who's running an organization knows, that the last two years have been incredibly stressful that way. Parents, of course, have been stressed out in a different way as any parent knows with having children and having to quickly go into quarantine mode multiple times a year, quickly adapt because the school or daycare has changed its offerings. I mean that's really hard, so all the more reason for me to do my trainings in the area of trauma and addictions, because it, you know, I think most of us have been traumatized the last two years in various ways, and we want to be here for people and walk through it together.

WV 26:33

Yeah, that's very understandable. So what are some positive experiences that have influenced you in some way when working in the Church?

FS 26:44

Oh, my gosh there's so many. I always love, you know, working with our children. I visit our St. Mary's school, which is part of Regis Catholic Schools, every single week and have mass with the school kids every single week and that's always a joy and a delight. It's also a big part of why it's such a joy working with the immigrant Latino population, like I mentioned, half of the mass attendance on Sunday are children and they're so warm and so smiley and so joyful. So all of that life of those families brings me incredible comfort. On the other end of things, though, I also, living here in Altoona, this is kind of where most of the healthcare facilities have been built in the last decade or two. And I make the rounds to over 15 healthcare facilities, you know, on a regular basis and visit our aging people in the area who have struggled immensely, especially during the pandemic. I find great joy in being with people in moments of sorrow or pain and being able to bring the light of Christ there as well. I think there's an exhilaration anytime that my teams and I figure out how to solve some of these really difficult problems, the pandemic has been so hard and when we figure out an innovative new way to tackle a problem that opens up new possibilities it's really exciting. I mean what we're doing is really exciting stuff, and we fail half- more than half the time when we try to figure something out, but the times when it succeeds are really awesome, really a blessing.

WV 28:37

Okay, thank you. So this is kind of talking back to the audience that you work with. So I know that you mentioned that it has grown, the Latino population has grown, in the Church, but what factors do you think contributes to this growth of Hispanic and Latino populations in the Church?

FS 28:57

In the church, yeah word of mouth is a huge one there. So they hear about it from friends. I think the growth, it seems to happen from party to party, and if I hover over the immigrant population, they really know how to have parties in a really fun way. [laughing] So, you know, and then the occasions for those usually often are religious ones. Like a baptism, or first communion, or confirmation, or a wedding, or a quinceanera, which is connected to the church too. Those are what days, where we'll see a couple hundred people in the church and have a chance to meet with and talk with them, and those are times, where people come up to me and say hey what about you know this, this, and this, or they discovered that oh, you have mass every week in Spanish Oh. You know, and so right now those are some of the main ways that we form new connections. We are working towards the day when our people, who are coming to mass right now, actually

will feel confident as missionaries. You know, kind of going into homes themselves, or going- Eventually we really want to make inroads into the agricultural workers. There are a lot of immigrants who work on farms, very long and difficult hours, and I'm well aware of it. I just don't have the resources, right now, to reach out in that direction. It would all be on me and I don't think I can do it, you know, but we are, I think, growing strong as a community with the leadership of the community. That, I think, we're a few years away from really being able to send out groups, that without me needing to be there all the time, would be really great at connecting more people with our faith community. I'm looking forward to that.

WV 30:47

That's good. Do you have a sense of where parishioners are from in Latin America?

FS 30:54

Yeah I do, and I should know this exactly. We have at least seven or eight countries that are Spanish speaking. I think at St. Mary's that, actually, we were very close to 20 different nations worldwide that are represented. We're not super diverse, you know, I mean there certainly are a lot of lighter skinned people around that are of European descent, but there are many different countries from all continents here, Spain. Yeah, but Mexico is the number one by far. I would say, at least 85% of our Spanish speaking parishioners are from Mexico and probably from three or four different places in Mexico. We do have a few kind of bigger clans, you know, have relatives who are cousins or distant relatives of each other and have- that makes up a chunk of our population. But we have Puerto Rico, we have Honduras, we have Guatemala, we have Peru, and there are several other Spanish speaking countries that are also represented with two people here, three people there.

WV 32:13

Okay, so this again talks a little bit about some of those challenges that we discussed earlier, but have you encountered parishioners seeking help or solace from the church about immigration or legal concerns?

FS 32:27

Frequently. Frequently, yes, and in many ways we've been a hub for those kinds of offerings. We're probably one of the most networked places, you know, in terms of what- and there's a few

other local businesses, maybe that also have a lot of Spanish speaking immigrants that would cross paths there, but we've become a place that it makes sense to hold such gatherings. At least seven times during my time here we've had maybe an attorney come in and hold a presentation with those interested and then have followed up with one on one meetings, consults. So, obviously there's a lot of interest in immigrating legally and sometimes it's just not possible, but there have been other times where someone has been able to seek asylum successfully or take advantage of the dream act. I mean successfully [_____?], you know. Yeah or marriage situations, those kinds of things. I did, one time, there was a time a couple years ago where ICE [U.S Immigration and Customs Enforcement] came into town and it did a, my understanding listening to what the people said about it, a purely surgical raid where they had very particular individuals in mind, who had a crime on the record. They went into local businesses or homes and asked for people by name and arrested and detained them. Yeah, but one of them was someone who had been involved here, and had seven children, two of them are still minors and with some help from other area interested volunteers, we petitioned and they actually did release him and let him go back with his family. We felt really good about that. So various times we get involved that way. I have tried, a few times, with Bishop Callahan's blessing, to reach out to area politicians of either party to encourage a path to get driver's licensing, you know, I really think it's in everybody's interest in the state of Wisconsin that our immigrants can get a driver's license. It doesn't have to be an ID or a voter ID or any other kind of ID, just a driver's license. And that would really be for the common good and that would help all of us and I have done that kind of lobbying so far to no effect. I'm not normally a very political person at all, but that's an area that I feel like would help us all. So someday.

WV 35:26

So spanning a little bit from this question, what challenges do you see that people usually face when asking you or asking the church for legal help or immigration concerns?

FS 35:41

Yeah. Well, I mean it used to be that I felt like it was all on me and I didn't have the time to do it all or the resources to do it all and now it happens less the last couple years, honestly. When it happens there's certain things we can do, and certain things we can't. So I would say that the question has me curious, because actually three, or four, or five years ago, I was signing a lot of letters testifying to the character of this or that person and that's been much less common, come to think of it, in the last few years. My interpretation of that would be just that whatever options were there for people they've been able to take, with our help, and until new options are made available by government that's kind of- or particular crisis arises, you know that there's not going

to be as many of those for the time being, with the people that I know but we may have another legal clinic and that may lead to more of that, so.

WV 36:51

Could you speak a little on the cultural gaps that are found between Spanish speaking and English speaking residents in the Eau Claire community?

Speaker 36:

Yeah. I'll try. There definitely are cultural gaps, you know, I think in the typical valley here. We have a whole lot of immigrants from northern Europe, northern and central Europe, whose families came over maybe 150 years ago, or more than 100 years ago. My ancestors came over about 100 years ago, but there are not a lot of Polish immigrants in this area and they've reached a point where they kind of forgotten what that process was like, forgotten their own story. Yeah, and settled into a way of being and doing that's- it's pleasant it's nice. I mean we're used to sort of the Scandinavian Germanic way that this part of Wisconsin has felt for a few generations. Meanwhile the actual population has changed quite a bit and become much more diverse and so it's easy, for the people whose families have been around a lot longer in the area, just to pretend like it's still the same even though it's not, you know. That there are new cultures in the area that have a different story and we're all of this is new and different and their way of seeing the world is different. So it affects every city, every institution. It affects schools, it affects the local government trying to do its proper kind of licensing and paperwork for things, and it affects churches. In my experience, I guess, a lot of our parish members who've been around a long time, on the one side, they all seem very positive about the idea of doing Hispanic ministry, but when it comes to actually changing our staffing, changing our priorities, changing how we do parish life, how we exist as a parish sometimes, there's like "well why are we doing this", you know, and there's a forgetfulness that there's actually a few hundred people that are part of our community whose first language is not English, and that's who we are. On the other side there have been many of our Spanish speaking families in the Parish who I feel frustrated sometimes because they don't seem to have any idea what it's like to actually administer a person in the United States and it's not their fault, and that we have, for example, a litigious culture in the United States. We have to take a lot of cautions in legal areas. It's actually good that we have more legal recourse and more legal protections than they have in their home countries where there's a lot of corruption, but it also means that some of the things that they think we should just be able to do is like no, that we have to talk to our lawyer about that, no, we have to sign a lot of paperwork before we can do that [_____] get permission and talk to the insurance company. My immigrants don't understand why we have to do those things and sometimes there's been

misunderstandings between me and them on those kinds of points and they think I'm trying to not honor their culture. It's like I'm trying to help you do what your culture wants to do in a way that will work here in America, and getting the staffing has actually really helped break through some of those cultural barriers and come to like oh we're trying to do the same thing and we can do it together great and we're starting to see some really cool progress on that.

WV 40:36

Okay, so this next section talks a little bit more about some celebrations. So, specifically about that Posada celebration that you had, I think now two weeks ago, would you mind sharing a little bit about when or how it started, then who plans it, what it involves, and what you think the value is in it for the community or why it matters?

FS 41:01

Sure, yeah. We didn't do it a year ago with the pandemic, but we decided that we just really wanted to do it this year, the Posada, and I believe we started it nine years ago. I really wanted to find ways to bridge the cultural gap that I was experiencing among our parishioners and get them to begin thinking and praying and working together at least some of the time. So we talked about it on our pastoral council for the Parish and kind of decided that we have an 11 o'clock English mass on Sunday and a one o'clock Spanish mass so how about we actually like meet in the middle and have a mass at noon bilingually. So we did that, for the first time, back in 2013, and we've done it every year since, and then we in that process incorporated, adapted, the Mexican custom of the Posada. Which is a nine day like memorial of Joseph and Mary going from house to house and trying to find room at the inn, being rejected, and then ending with a big party, breaking open Pinatas, and we do like an abbreviated version of that here. Which I was really excited about as it's a chance for these immigrants who actually have, in many ways, an older and deeper Catholic faith that has deep deep roots to teach the people who have lived in this area longer a lot more about their Catholic faith and celebrate together. It's been a very successful, chaotic, and successful event for the last nine years. [laughing] We also have done bilingual masses in the spring or early summer. Particularly the Feast of Corpus Christi, the body and blood of Christ in a lot of more Catholic countries. Both in Europe and in Latin America, you do a procession with the eucharist in a very public, very celebratory way outside. Which our Mexicans were all about and they were used to this, they had done this, and I think our Anglo parishioners who hadn't been familiar with this were blown away by the altar that the Mexican parishioners made, which you know the others made alters to but there's was- you know, really blew everybody socks off. So we did that procession and then had a party inside afterwards.

We've had to do some modifications for the pandemic but we'd like to bridge those gaps more when we can.

WV 43:42

So when it comes to who plans it or what it involves, can you speak a little bit more about that?

FS 43:49

Sure. It's a planning process as a matter of, you know, getting people together and having a conversation so it'd be some of the lay leaders within the parish whether they're native English speakers or native Spanish speakers. Now our staff, certainly, and now I'm blessed like I actually have a staff person who organizes my liturgy of music in both parishes and he's quickly learning Spanish and our Spanish speakers have take- he's won their hearts over I mean he just he really, he really listens well to them and cares deeply about their culture and is willing to learn from them and so Tyler had no problem, like getting- getting- their input and figuring out how to put the music together and the liturgy part together. Yeah and then one of my bilingual parishioners for a long time, who also like her family owns restaurants, I mean they were very much able to help coordinate the food side of things, among the families and get lots of people to cook lots of tamales and other delicious food. That part honestly, is- it is- for me, as a descendant of Central Europeans is chaotic. Like I operate being very organized and thinking 20 steps ahead, that's my default, but with things like that you have to be willing to kind of be last minute and throw it all together and have trust that it's going to work and it always does. There's a bit of both the organizing and kind of watching it come together at the last minute.

WV 45:32

Is the church involved in celebrations for the Feast of our lady of Guadalupe or Dia de los muer-Reyes or No?

FS 45:43

Yes, good questions, Our Lady of Guadalupe absolutely and that again because a strong majority of our Latino immigrants are from Mexico they have that custom of the mañanitas, which is like early morning, you know, they're coming into the church at 6am, devotions and Rosary songs,

singing Happy Birthday to- taking the mañanitas to our lady of Guadalupe and then a mass and, of course, a little party. We've been doing that for several years and it's beautiful, I think culturally, that one actually is more important than the Posada. As a pastor I've pushed the Posada a little more just because it has- it's one of those I think that is a little bit better of a bridge between the cultures. The mañanitas are beautiful and our lady Guadalupe devotions are beautiful and are very, very, very like very Spanish and very culturally plunging deep. So it- so some of our Anglos go to it, but you have to be willing to do a deep dive into the culture. It's not an entry level bridge kind of thing. The idea, on January sixth, the Día de Los Reyes Magos, in the United States, it gets moved to the nearest Sunday and we kind of just celebrate it on Sunday, but other ones that come up are November 2, you know, the Day of the Dead and our Latino parishioners usually they make an altar for the Day of the Dead. I love them doing that. I love that it's a very visible thing that other children in the school and people in the parish can be curious about and ask about and it's a chance to build a bridge culturally. Coming up, then, on February second, again, a lot of our Mexican parishioners have a custom of taking the baby Jesus at Christmas time, a statue, and singing him a lullaby every night and devotions and prayers in the home. Then on February second, or the Sunday closest to that, there will be about 30 statues of the child Jesus that will be standing on their feet and wanting to be blessed. So after mass I'll be blessing all those and those will be prominently displayed in their homes in the coming year, so that one's kind of a big one that's simpler, but really important in their homes.

WV 48:08

Well, thank you very much, and so I have a couple of closing questions. The first one is where do you hope to see the church or the church community in the next 10 years?

FS 48:20

Yes, growing. we're living in a time where our culture all around us, including a lot of people who are, in theory, Christians are secular. You know, they just don't know for sure what they believe about God. I find most people I meet are very spiritually curious or thirsty or interested or intrigued, and we need to exist as a church in a way that reaches them where they are. This is also true of immigrants from Catholic countries in Latin America, where really they're starting from a very secularized viewpoint, and so I want to be a church that goes out. You know, a church that meets people in the middle of a messy, confused, broken life with a lot of beauty in it and a lot of good desire. So what we're working hard on right now I think it's really training our people to be apostles to be missionaries who go out and who bring good news to people. Not in the sense of like proselytizing them or telling- fixing their lives or even giving any advice at all, but really you know, bringing hope into their lives and helping them see that here at our church

we're a community that will welcome you and will walk with you and help you experience blessings. I expect a lot of growth on the Hispanic side. There is a lot of growth, there's more that we want and a lot of growth on the side of like people who left their various faith backgrounds and have found themselves in the midst of a lot of brokenness and they want to come back and we want to be able to welcome them back.

WV 50:11

Okay, and then is there anything else that you would like to add, or is there anything else that you want people to know?

FS 50:19

I don't think so. I really, thank you for your time Wendy, it's been such a blessing. I guess, if I had to add anything, it would just be to- what a beautiful thing it is to take the time to get to know people from other cultures. I've cherished that all the time in my life. You know, in my university studies in Rome, people from more than 100 countries, getting to know what their lives are like in their various countries. And in my time as a priest to be able to hear what it's like to be in a different culture. Every culture has both beauty and brokenness, strengths and weaknesses, right? And when we can discover the beauty that is there in various cultures and have the courage to tell the truth about the things that need to be challenged in our own culture and other's cultures like that kind of- there's so much value in that, and those are conversations that just don't happen enough in our world today, and I want to see more of them.

WV 51:24

Thank you so much for your time. I'm going to pause the recording.