

Sarah Heavren 0:01

We are recording. The following introductory conversation and questions have been structured off but not copied from the suggested introductory script and questions provided by Indiana University as part of the Journal of the Plague COVID-19 Oral History Project. My name is Sarah Heavren, and I am here with Fr. Peter Gautsch. Today is March 25, 2021, and it is 1:02pm. I am coming to you from my dorm room on the campus of Providence College, and Fr. Peter is speaking from his office. Fr. Peter, I would like to review the informed consent form that you signed for participating in the project. This interview will be part of a collection in the Rhode Island COVID-19 Archive, as well as the Providence College Archives and Special Collections. As stated on the release form that you signed, the Rhode Island COVID-19 Archive is a public digital archive project created and maintained by the Providence Public Library and the Rhode Island Historical Society in response to the COVID-19 public health crisis. The Archive seeks to document and share the lived experience of Rhode Islanders from all walks of life during the global health crisis. Any audio or video recording of this interview and a text-based transcript of the interview will be contributed to both the Rhode Island COVID-19 Archive and the Providence College Archives and Special Collections. Do you verbally agree to this?

Fr. Peter Gautsch, O.P. 1:28

Yes.

Sarah Heavren 1:30

I'm briefly going to review the license on the release form that you signed. Under this CC-BY 4.0 license, the creator will retain the copyright to their work and allow uses such as the Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence Public Library, and Providence College Archives and Special Collections to include the materials in the permanent collections of the Rhode Island Historical Society and the Providence Public Library; and the public to have access to and share, adapt, modify, and cite the work. Per the CC-BY 4.0 license the Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence Public Library, Providence College Archives and Special Collections, and the public must credit the creator when making any future uses. Do you verbally agree to this license?

Fr. Peter Gautsch, O.P. 2:17

Yes.

Sarah Heavren 2:18

Do you have any questions before we begin the interview?

Fr. Peter Gautsch, O.P. 2:21

Nope.

Sarah Heavren 2:23

So Fr. Peter, do you mind sharing what your role is on campus and what you're involved with at PC?

Fr. Peter Gautsch, O.P. 2:31

Yeah, so this is my second year at PC. I'm an associate chaplain, which primarily puts me in campus ministry. I, the main thing that I oversee in Campus Ministry with Allyse Gruslin, one of

our campus ministers is the Peer Ministry program, which is essentially a sort of small group faith sharing program. A whole bunch of students sign up for it. And they're organized into small groups which meet every other week. And Allyse and I sort of run that program, primarily Allyse, and then I'm the chaplain for the program. And, you know, so we sort of come up with the topics that the groups discuss, we write the agendas for those meetings, we sort of do ongoing, one-on-one formation with the student leaders, we do sort of larger group kinds of formation. And it's kind of big operation on campus. There's just about a few 100 students typically who signed up for it each year. So yeah, so that's the sort of main Campus Ministry specific thing that I do. Although, of course, there's also sacramental and liturgical things that come with being a priest. So I regularly celebrate Mass and hear confessions on campus. And I'm generally available for anyone who wants to talk to a priest about anything. And yeah, I'm also chaplain for the women's basketball team, which is great fun, and sort of help out with various other sorts of things in Campus Ministry. So that's sort of it in a nutshell.

Sarah Heavren 4:03

Where do you live in relation to campus?

Fr. Peter Gautsch, O.P. 4:06

So I live I live on campus in the Priory. So in the Dominican order, which is the order that all of us friars here at PC belong to, we typically as Dominican friars live in what are called priories. It's similar to like a convent of, you know, sisters, or monks or whatever. Except that we're not women, we're men, but priory is just another term for convent, essentially. And there are about 30-something of us who live there. It's sort of right on the corner of campus by the main front gate by Harkins. And yeah, so I live on campus, which is great because I can just walk everywhere. It's very convenient. It's nice to be on campus.

Sarah Heavren 4:49

Now to go back to when the pandemic was just starting a little over a year ago when things really took off, do you remember where you were and what you were doing when you found out that spring break was going to be extended, and how did you react to that?

Fr. Peter Gautsch, O.P. 5:03

Yes, so it's a little bit of a story, actually. So several of the students here volunteer regularly, at least in normal times, at a place called My Brother's Keeper, which is an organization which delivers furniture to the needy, as well as other things, especially like around Thanksgiving and Christmas time. They, you know, put together other things that they can deliver to those in need. But they have this big warehouse where they sort of assemble box springs and, you know, gather furniture that can be used by others, and then they sort of go out and, you know, bring it to people. And so a bunch of the students volunteer there and had been telling me for months that I should go with them on one of their, you know, day trips to go volunteer there. And so we had, we picked a day during spring break last year. And so we were, we were going, we went, but I thought it might be nice to have Mass in the morning with them. So I celebrated Mass early in the morning up in St. Dominic chapel here on campus, and then we were going to have lunch afterwards, and then come back to campus and watch Space Jam, which is a little goofy, but it's a childhood favorite of mine. And a bunch of the students had never seen it, and some have never heard of it. And so we just decided that might be a fun way to, you know, end the day after My

Brother's Keeper. So we had Mass in the morning, we went to My Brother's Keeper, it was great. We had lunch like Chick-fil-A, and we came back to campus. And right as we were about to start watching Space Jam in the Campus Ministry Center--it's sort of this big open space down here below the chapel. And right as we were about to start one of the other chaplains said, Hey, I need to talk to you. So we came into my office. And he said, Have you been checking your email today? I said no. And he said, Well, Fr. Shanley, who at the time was the president of the College, said Fr. Shanley is going to email the whole campus tonight or tomorrow and say that the students should not return from spring break for at least two weeks because of this whole Coronavirus thing. I said, Wow, that's really serious. I was hoping it wouldn't come to this. But in the, in the couple days before that there were several other schools that had been making similar decisions. And so everyone was kind of wondering whether PC might do that, too. And so, so yeah, so Fr. Michael told me, you know, that's going to happen, the students don't know yet, don't say anything until the email goes out. And they need to hear from Fr. Shanley. I said, Yes, of course. So knowing that, you know, that the whole Campus Ministry staff had been discussing all day what to do in light of this information and I was just sort of away, like, spending time with students and, you know, so then we watched Space Jam. For the reason that I think that's especially funny is that--well, funny maybe not is not the right word--but there's a scene in Space Jam, where the NBA--it's a really long story, it doesn't really matter that much. But there's this mysterious thing which is happening to some of the players in the NBA, and they're losing their talent for basketball. And they're sort of barely able to walk up, up and down the floor during game. And so everyone in the NBA is really nervous about what this might mean, is there some mysterious, unseen illness that's causing this in everyone. And so there's this scene where the commissioner of the NBA comes out in front of the press. And he says, We will not play another game in the National Basketball Association until we can ensure the safety of all of our players. Well, the reason that I remember this is because it was on that very day that that same thing happened in the real-life NBA, one of the NBA players, Rudy Gobert, tested positive for COVID during a game. They canceled, you know, they suspended the game, and canceled the rest of the season, that same day that we had seen that happened in this goofy movie. So anyway, so that's what I was doing when I found out about spring break being extended. Yeah.

Sarah Heavren 8:53

So how did that immediately affect you and your role on campus?

Fr. Peter Gautsch, O.P. 8:59

Yeah, well, immediately, you know, I had been kind of expecting it for a couple of days. I thought, you know, if all these other schools are doing this, I mean, the nature of this kind of thing is that it's not going to just sort of go away. I mean, this is just going to, the writing's kind of on the wall. So I wasn't really surprised by the news. I was disappointed by it. Because it's, you know, college is meant to have students here, you know, I mean, it's so that was, that was a disappointment, but the most immediate thing was trying to sort of help students who were having a hard time with the news and just kind of be here because some of the students were around during spring break. And so we were here in Campus Ministry the day that this was announced, you know, so sort of spending time with them and trying to sort of, yeah, just be here for them, which didn't, you know, couldn't really involve too, too much other than just kind of, you know, being here. But, at the time, too, I was also teaching a theology course. And this meant that I had to move the course online. It ended up being, of course, for the rest of the

semester online. And that was, that was tricky. It was my first year teaching. So I had, I'd only gotten through a semester and a half of actual, you know, college classroom instruction that I had ever done. And so then sort of pivot and trying to figure out how to do the same thing on Zoom as sort of a little bit tricky challenge, but you know, kind of made it work.

Sarah Heavren 10:36

What did you do for your Zoom class? Did you adapt any assignments? Or did you kind of just transition what you were normally doing in person to now just an online format?

Fr. Peter Gautsch, O.P. 10:48

Mostly the latter, I did cancel one class that I sort of, I had on the syllabus. We were going to talk about something that I didn't see as really essential, but I thought it was interesting and might sort of help round out the picture of what I was trying to teach. So I was teaching a course in Christology. And there was just one sort of, you might say, episode in the history of the early Church that we were going to cover, but it wasn't really, I don't know. So I thought that it was actually an okay class to cancel, and we just sort of didn't do that material, which was fine. And I did that so that I could take a little bit of time to figure out how in the world I was going to take this class onto Zoom. But I did, I mean, I just kept lecturing on Zoom like I would have in the classroom. I tried to adapt some of the lectures to be more engaging on Zoom, because there's already a kind of lack of engagement that happens naturally when you're talking to someone over a screen, as opposed to talking to that person in-person. And so I, you know, I would make sure to sort of have like, you know, different works of art that might illustrate something that we were talking about that day, or just something going on liturgically. I mean, it was right around Lent. So there was all kinds of connections that could be made with what we were studying about Christ, and the liturgical celebration of the Church, and how that's expressed in sacred art and music. And so I would sort of try to incorporate some of those things into my Zoom lectures, mostly to keep people interested, but also to help people see that there is like, a lot of cohesion in these different domains of the intellectual life. But, so there were some adaptations like that, that I had to make. And then I certainly had to adapt the final exam, which was going to be a kind of in person, you know, hour and a half long written test. But I ended up doing a kind of take home, extended period of time, open note, group kind of test. I just basically rewrote it so that it would be just recall hiring different skills and knowledge of the students than would have been possible in the classroom, you know, so. So there's some adaptations like that, but mostly, actually, the class was able to, at least the way that I planned it was able to be transitioned onto

Sarah Heavren 13:03

You mentioned Lent. So what was Easter like doing all these different liturgies on Zoom? Yeah, I've talked to a few other friars who talked about the difference with doing a live stream Mass where no one is there, versus you know, what you're used to, doing a Mass with some people present. So what was it like going through the Triduum and Easter having to live stream everything and having campus be, you know, so--it's deserted anyway, around Easter, I guess you could say--but, yeah, knowing that students and families were just, they were all at home?

Fr. Peter Gautsch, O.P. 13:43

Yeah, it was, it was very strange. I mean, there's a few, gosh, a few things to say there. I mean, I had never been here for an Easter before. So last year, during COVID, COVID- tide, quarantine,

was actually my first Easter on campus. So I don't actually, I don't have experience of what it's normally like. Although, I've heard, like, you just said that most people go and see their family. But we had all of our liturgies for the Triduum, so, you know, the end of Lent, Holy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter, in the Priory chapel, and we have Mass there every day. So I think we normally would have done that. And any students who were on campus would have been able to come. There were no students allowed on campus and no visitors allowed in the Priory, so it was just us Dominicans. And the liturgies themselves, though, weren't too terribly different. We were trying to sort of do some distancing, physical distancing in the chapel amongst us. The pandemic was still really young at the time and we didn't really know what precautions were necessary or required or whatever and we knew a lot of people would be watching and so we decided to do that. And there were some changes to liturgies that were actually you know, decided from from Rome. So like the washing of the feet for example, during the Holy Thursday, Mass of the Lord's Supper, it's a traditional thing, and we didn't do that. Ordinarily, for the celebration of the Lord's Passion on Good Friday, each of us goes up and venerates the cross, there's a wooden cross that's held in front of the altar. And you know, each of us would go up and venerate it by kissing the wood of the cross. And that wasn't allowed either. So we just bowed instead. You know, so there were things like that that were modified with the liturgy. But yeah, like you said, I mean, that the strangest thing was that it was live streamed, and there were no other people there. So as a priest, it was very strange, because, you know, the Triduum liturgies, especially, you're used to having people there, you know, I mean, it's--and so it was, it was a little bit odd, although there were a number of the friars who were there. So it wasn't as if there was just nobody. But none of the public were able to come. And so that was strange and a little bit hard because I knew that not only were they not able to come to the Priory for Mass, but that you have all of these millions of people throughout the world, who are, you know, who wants to go to Mass and to worship God, and these holiest days of the year, and they're not allowed to, because of this pandemic. And, and so they're just sort of stuck at home. And many watched the live streams of the Mass. And that's fine. Although it's, it's not the same. I mean, anyone who has watched a Mass on live stream can tell you that it is just not the same as going to Mass. Partly, that's just because nothing is as good as like real life, when it's just over a screen or seen over a screen. Yeah, watching a musical performance on YouTube is not, it's just not like going to the symphony, you know, they don't really, don't really compare. And there's a certain element of that when you compare Mass in-person to live stream Mass. But of course, there's also you know, as Catholics we believe in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. And so to receive the Eucharist is extremely important. And it's a great gift that we have in our faith. And almost all Catholics throughout the world were not able to do that for a long time. And, and so that caused a real kind of, like, you know, spiritual suffering in a lot of people. And so I was aware of that, at the same time as I was, as a priest able to continue to celebrate Mass every day, you know, so it was a kind of strange, like I was, it made me more grateful for my priesthood, and the fact that I was still able to celebrate the Sacraments. At a time when so many people were not able to receive them. But then it also really kind of drew my attention to the need to really pray for people who were not able to receive the sacrament, or to worship in church together. And, you know, it's, it's a lot of people. I mean, there's a lot of things that go into, like, what the priesthood means, you know, there's a lot of, certainly, it's like, being there for people being a presence in people's lives. You know, celebrating the Sacraments is kind of, of paramount importance for a priest. And something that sometimes gets overlooked, though, is the priest's responsibility to pray for people. You know, you can even see that in Scripture talking about Christ, you know, and the Letter to the Hebrews

talks about Christ as the one true high priest, the great high priest, who makes intercession, you know, and so. In Catholic theology, we see the priesthood as a participation in the priesthood of Christ. There's scriptural basis for that. And so if that's true, then it really does belong to the priesthood, to pray for the people who are entrusted to his care for people who are suffering, you know, and so, I was really, really reminded of that, as I knew that so many people were not able to attend Mass and receive the sacraments. And, yeah, so that was, that was really, it was really poignant. I mean, I don't know, it's hard to describe it. And then at the same time, you know, being able to celebrate the sacraments. You know, it's, again, in Catholic theology, I mean, it's not just that the Mass is not just the time when like, people can get together and praise God. I mean, it is that, but it's also, you know, God acting in the world in a real way, through, you know, the Sacrifice of the Mass, you know. I mean, Christ is active and he makes he becomes present in the Eucharist, we believe. And so that was still happening because priests were still celebrating Mass, even in the absence of people, even priests who didn't livestream their Masses like at different parishes, not every parish started to live stream Mass, but the Mass was still being offered, you know, and so it's this kind of weird thing where the Mass is being offered. And so the Sacrifice of the Mass in itself is still there. It's still happening, even if people can't attend, you know. So it was just a very, very strange sort of surreal time those few months when people weren't allowed to come to Mass at all. Yeah.

Sarah Heavren 20:11

What was your summer like? Did you have any plans that were compromised? Or were you trying to plan things for what it would be like having students involved in Campus Ministry upon the semester starting again?

Fr. Peter Gautsch, O.P. 20:25

Yeah, it was a lot of latter. There were a couple of trips in May that I was hoping to make. Or for our province, our priesthood ordinations are always, I think, like the second to last weekend of May, maybe the end of May, anyway, in Washington, DC. And a lot of priests from our province usually like to go down to DC to be their, to show our support our brothers being ordained, and no one from outside the Dominican House of studies was allowed to attend the ordination. So I wasn't able to go to that. I was supposed to go on a mission trip with Campus Ministry to Jamaica, I was one of the sort of chaplains, I was the chaplain who was assigned to the trip. And that got cancelled, along with every other, you know, trip anywhere sponsored by PC. I don't really remember if there were other trips I was planning on taking during the summer, I still did get to go visit my family in the summertime later in the summer, which was really nice. And although I yeah, I mean, I, you know, you have to quarantine you get back from trips like that, especially last summer, you know, so, I did spend a lot of days in quarantine after even short trip somewhere for things that came up, you know. And, you know, my grandfather died not related to COVID in August. And so I was able to actually go out to New Mexico to celebrate his funeral. But had to do, you know, long quarantine really got back. And so, in between a couple of little, you know, trips like that, and the subsequent quarantine, we were mostly preparing for a fall that was increasingly uncertain, you know. We really weren't sure whether people were going to be able to come back to campus, if so when, you know, I think as I recall, it was a delayed start, but not by too, too much. I don't actually don't really remember the details of it now. But even with students back, you know, a lot of our normal programming and stuff in

Campus Ministry was going to have to be digital. So we were really trying to just figure out how in the world are we going to do this, you know. So that was a lot of the summer.

Sarah Heavren 22:34

Were you hopeful that students would be able to return to campus in the fall?

Fr. Peter Gautsch, O.P. 22:39

Yes, yes, absolutely. Yes. Yeah, it's, it's, I mean, I really, I'm not, I'm not a big fan of doing things digitally if they can be done in person, you know, so, really, like, since this whole thing began, I mean, I understand the need for some degree of caution, especially when it was early on, and we really weren't sure how bad it was, or how easily COVID spread and all that kind of stuff, you know, like I understand the need for a certain degree of caution with all that. But th-- yeah, I mean, I just, I think that everything is better in-person. And there--my own opinion is that there is a certain degree of risk which is worth taking, in order to do things in person, you know. I mean, human being were not meant to do everything on a screen, you know. I mean, we're physical, material creatures, spiritual as well. But, you know, there's, there's a certain kind of, you know, physicality that we need, in a certain sense, you know, which is sort of taken away or badly simulated when you're trying to do things over Zoom, you know. So it's, like I said before, it's just not, nothing is quite the same, nothing works quite as well, as it does when you're in-person with someone, you know, actually able to shake someone's hand or have a conversation face to face, you know, all of that. So I was definitely hopeful that students would be back and we would be able to do as much as we could in person. So I was really happy when it was announced that students would be back even if it was going to be a couple weeks late.

Sarah Heavren 24:16

What did things look like for you in the fall semester in, you know, fulfilling your role as assistant chaplain?

Fr. Peter Gautsch, O.P. 24:24

Yeah. Well, thankfully, we were able to, largely anyway, have, continued to have Mass and confessions available, according to our normal schedule that we would have outside of COVID. We can only, we can't allow as many people in the church as we could outside of COVID for social distancing reasons. So that's hard because a lot fewer people are able to come to Mass. And a lot of people, I think, are choosing not to come to Mass as well. I mean, even sometimes we don't need our overflow seating, you know, that we've sort of set up for the purposes of, you know, potentially needing it because we can fit fewer people in the church. And there's some times when we don't need any of it. Which is sort of unheard of, I mean, given the numbers of people coming to Mass that we had before COVID. So some people are choosing not to come. In this diocese, there's still a dispensation from Sunday Mass. So, perhaps people know about that. I don't really, you know, I don't know. But, yeah, I mean, but I was glad that we were able to continue to have Mass. There were one or two times where we briefly had to suspend Masses. I disagreed with that decision, but there wasn't really anything that I could do about it. The Department of Health, sort of working closely with the College to sort of figure out, especially when, when our sort of infection numbers and rates started to climb in the fall and again, in the spring, although thankfully, you know, the Mass suspension was only in the fall. You know, the Department of Health said, like, we really don't want people congregating and that includes at

Mass. I thought that was, you know, uncalled for. There are studies that showed that Mass, attending Mass was extremely safe, COVID-wise, I mean, risk of transmission of COVID with proper precautions, stuff in place at Mass, extremely, extremely low. But that's the way it was, and it didn't last that long that we had to suspend the Masses, so. So I've been really grateful to be able to continue to celebrate the Sacraments for students in-person in the midst of most of this academic year. And, and the other, you know, as I mentioned, this Peer Ministry program, that I help oversee, it was also largely able to happen in person. There were some times when, you know, some of our groups had to meet on Zoom instead of in-person, and a few of our groups are just entirely on Zoom, partly for the reason that some students in those groups are remote, various reasons, but most of our groups are meeting in-person, and have been able to for most of the year, which is, I'm really, really grateful for that, for reasons I've already been rambling about. But so that, that's, yeah, we're, much of what I do directly has been able to happen in-person. So I've been very grateful for that.

Sarah Heavren 27:08

How else did the outbreak affect you? I remember hearing that there was some golf cart ministry that happened.

Fr. Peter Gautsch, O.P. 27:16

Yeah. So yes, so a couple of the other--well, one of the other friars who's here, Fr. Justin, he and I like to play music together. Sort of long story, the short version is that at the House of Studies where we do our formation for the priesthood, there were a bunch of us who got together regularly to play music. It was usually sort of Irish, you know, and folk music, and we sort of started pivoting to like bluegrass, Americana, eventually. And someone said you should record an album. And so we did. And so we have this little band. There's like seven or so of us who sort of do this actively, you know, but Fr. Justin and I are both here on campus. And so we thought, Well, you know, what might be really cheering people up in the midst of--because campus was on lockdown at this time, you know, and people on campus, were not allowed to leave campus, people off campus where most of the COVID spread was at the time, were not allowed to come onto campus. And they were told to stay in their houses, not to leave the house except for in an emergency. And, and so you have all these people who were just sort of, you know, staying put. And so Fr. Justin I thought, well, it'd be really nice--and Fr. Patrick, also, I think this might have been his idea. But it would be nice to sort of get one of the College golf carts that they sort of have for different uses, and to get our instruments and just drive around campus and off campus, and just play music for people from the golf cart, you know. Little groups of roommates and suitemates, and stuff would be outside on the quad, and we'd drive up to them and play on a song and, you know, give them a blessing and keep going. And then off campus, where a lot of students were either sick with COVID, or, you know, in quarantine, because they knew someone who had COVID, or whatever it was, I mean, they were, they were stuck in their houses. But they came out they leaned out the windows and off the balconies and stuff when we stopped in front of their house and played a song or two and, and then Fr. Peter Martyr--that's our head chaplain was also there, and was able to sort of give them a house blessing from the side box or throw holy water at the house and said a prayer of blessing. And then we go on our way. And really the purpose of it was, you know, knowing that a lot of our students were feeling very disconnected because they couldn't go anywhere or do anything or see anyone, that we would go to them. And, you know, just do something that might just cheer them up, you know, so yeah,



hopefully the response seemed to be positive and people seemed to enjoy it, you know, which is pretty much the purpose of it, just to say like, we're here, we're thinking about you. We care about you. We know this is hard, but we're, you know, we can get through this kind of thing, you know, so. So that was really fun. Yeah.

Sarah Heavren 29:51

This was now your second year at PC. So you already had the PC Advent experience and all the traditions that we have. So what was it like? witnessing what Advent was like in 2020, where students weren't even on campus compared to the liveliness that it was in your first year?

Fr. Peter Gautsch, O.P. 30:16

Yeah, that's right. Students left at the beginning of Advent, didn't they? Right before. Yeah. I mean, one of the big events that we'd like to do during Advent is Lessons and Carols, which I went to last year, and it was lovely. I mean, there's choir and instruments, and, you know, Christmas and Advent tunes, and they sing parts of Handel's Messiah, and it's just really a lovely thing. And we weren't able to do that this year. So that was, you know, sad. But, you know, I don't, I don't remember sort of this year thinking any feeling, any sort of particular, you know, anger, or anything about the fact that students weren't there. I mean, I knew that that was kind of the plan all along, was for students to go home at Thanksgiving and, you know, to come back sometime in the spring. So, I think maybe, because it wasn't a sort of sudden thing that was different, it wasn't, it wasn't as jarring, you know, to deal with that. You know, we were still plenty busy in Campus Ministry and everything after students had gone home, because we were trying to do things digitally. But, you know, so it was a lot of kind of checking in with students and sort of encouraging them to get the rest they needed after a very bizarre and exhausting semester. And, you know, just sort of trying to stay connected with prayer and sort of be a resource for them spiritually, however, possible at a distance. Yeah, you know, Advent, I've always, I've always really loved Advent. It's an especially contemplative liturgical season, I think. And so, the fact that campus was a little bit quieter, it did sort of, it was a, it was a little bit of a reminder of that, you know, Advent is a really good time to sort of spend more time in silence and, you know, kind of contemplation and reflection. So, it was, you know, it was an unusual Advent, but, but still beautiful in its own way, I think, you know.

Sarah Heavren 32:27

What was your winter break like? Were you planning things for the spring semester?

Fr. Peter Gautsch, O.P. 32:33

A little bit. Yeah, although I wanted to make sure to get some rest, too. I mean, yeah, the fall semester was just very strange. And certainly, about the time students went home at Thanksgiving, they pretty much all seemed exhausted, like they really needed a break. And, you know, we on staff were feeling similarly, you know, we really kind of needed a break. So I made sure to take some time away from campus ministry stuff and away from, you know, work for lack of a better term. And I was able to go visit my family for a little bit longer this time, actually, than usual. Usually, I have to take about a week and a half. And I combined this visit with my annual retreat. So I went to Nashville where my family's from, and I went to like a little retreat house run by the Nashville Dominican Sisters and was there for a week and got to be with my family for Christmas Day, which I have not done since I had entered the order in 2011. So it

was my first Christmas Day with my family in 10 years, which was really nice. And I got to celebrate midnight Mass at a nearby Parish, and it was just, it was really, it was a good time to be with them. So I was really grateful for that. Although I did have to quarantine again, when I go back, but not for quite as long that time. And yeah, but it was, you know, family visit and some time to prepare for the new semester.

Sarah Heavren 34:03

How do you think things are going so far in the spring?

Fr. Peter Gautsch, O.P. 34:05

I think they're going fine. The spring break would have been about a week or two ago. And so I think, you know, I certainly was feeling pretty tired at that point. And I think a lot of students were too because they're so used to having a spring break at that point, you know, and it really wasn't there. And you know, there was a little bit of a, there was a little bit of nervousness about COVID numbers going up again this semester. Some people were referring to it as an outbreak, although I don't think that's probably quite accurate since they had it much more under control, you know. So the numbers were increasing, but I didn't get the sense that we were in any real danger of, you know, getting shut down or anything. But, yeah, I mean, I think at this point, I haven't really checked our COVID numbers or anything but I think at this point things are, they seem okay. The feel on campus seems pretty much fine. Weather is getting nice people, are, you know, got midterms behind them, it's nice to have nice weather, a little bit of a break for a lot of people workwise with schoolwork. And I don't get the sense that, you know, there's a real panic at the moment about COVID spreading, for most people anyway. And it seems, you know, a lot of people are beginning to get vaccinated, at least some are getting vaccinated. So, you know, I, at least for myself, but I think for some others, you know, the end is kind of in sight. You know, I mean, even the administration is talking about the possibility of a pretty much normal fall. So I think people are feeling more optimistic, certainly than they were at this time last year. Yeah.

Sarah Heavren 35:49

So over the course of this last year, have you discovered any new hobbies or pursuit any new interests?

Fr. Peter Gautsch, O.P. 35:58

Hmm. I don't know about new hobbies. Yeah, I don't know. I mean, I'm trying to, you know, walk more. That's not really a new hobby. It's just like, I just can't sit at a desk all day. It's not, it's not good. So. Yeah, I don't know. I mentioned music before. I've been playing a lot of guitar in my free time, trying to just work on different things. And, you know, but I've been playing guitar for a really long time. So it's not really a new hobby. It's just, you know, doing it more now than I did a couple years ago. But, yeah, I don't know, I guess, I guess not really, any new hobbies.

Sarah Heavren 36:48

What have been the greatest challenges that you've faced?

Fr. Peter Gautsch, O.P. 36:59

I don't really know. It's hard to--yeah, I mean, because there's things which are sort of mundane challenges of, you know, just so much time looking at a computer screen, it's like, hard on the eyes. You know, it's just kind of like, there are some challenges about, you know, trying to--how to say this? I guess, you know, not getting, trying not to get worked up or whatever, at, you know, decisions about COVID precautions that I think are unreasonable, you know, because there certainly have been some decisions that, you know, and policies and stuff that I don't think make much sense or did and, but that's not really a serious thing. You know, I mean, it's, that's, if that's like, your greatest challenge, you disagree with someone about whatever it is, like that, again, it's not that big a deal. So I don't know. I mean, there's just sort of standard kinds of challenges that come with any academic year and any kind of like, you know, ministry to students on the campus, you know, but, you know, God is good. I mean, yeah, we're, yeah, I don't know, that's not a very good answer to your question, I guess. But.

Sarah Heavren 38:22

So I guess, you were starting to get a taste of what normal PC life is like, but in your, you know, short time here, so far, what are the aspects of normal PC life that you missed the most?

Fr. Peter Gautsch, O.P. 38:50

I miss, I mean, you know, there's a lot. I don't know if, I don't know if I can rank them exactly. But just various parts of sort of having normal campus existence, you know, being able to you know, like something like going to My Brother's Keeper with students, you know, we can't take students anywhere off campus on trips or service or anything like that, you know. So that kind of thing I sort of miss. You know, I miss strange things about like, being able to see people's faces, you know, I guess maybe that's not strange. But, you know, like, there are, there are times when, you know, I've only seen a student, even students I know, well, but I've only seen some student for months, wearing a mask. And then, you know, if I see the student sort of take their mask off real quick to take a drink of water, it's like, oh, yeah, that's, that's not quite what I remember you looking like actually. You know, like, that's very strange, you know, so I don't, I kind of miss not having to sort of, you know, try to remember what someone's face looks like, you know. I miss--one thing that was a little bit difficult this year was, you know, I mentioned I'm the chaplain for our women's basketball team, which means that ordinarily, I'd like to pop into practice a couple times a week and just say hello. And, you know, I was able to travel with the team for a couple of away games, for a few away games last year, which was really great. You know, I mean, I get to sort of sit on the bench, at the end of the bench and, you know, just sort of that they know that there's a friar, a priest there supporting them. And then I was also, when I would travel with the team, I'd say Mass each morning for whoever wanted to come. And, and that was really, really nice. Because of NCAA rules, none of that was allowed this year. I was only able to attend two games. It was at the Big East Tournament, like a few weeks ago, and I was not able to interact with the team at all, but to wave from way up high in the arena, you know. So that, I missed that, because I really do like my role as their chaplain. So I'm looking forward to being able to do that, again. I miss having a full church for Mass. You know, people being able to kind of participate more easily in Mass, you know, like, people are not really singing, for example, and that kind of thing at church. So I just sort of miss the more active participation in the Sacraments on the part of the student body. Yeah.

Sarah Heavren 41:20

I've talked to a few other friars at this point. And they've talked a bit about what it's like living in the Priory. But now, all the friars are vaccinated. And when they were talking about, you know, being vaccinated and living in the Priory, they were hoping that life as normal would resume in the Priory. So now, a couple weeks after you guys have gotten the second dose, has that been true? Have things pretty much gone back to normal in the Priory?

Fr. Peter Gautsch, O.P. 41:49

In some respects, they have. I mean, they're starting to. Yeah, I mean, so, you know, we have a lot of elderly friars who live in the Priory, which was part of how it was able to be offered to all of us in the Priory, even us young guys, sort of for the, largely for the sake of the older ones. But, you know, they say, I think that the sort of outside estimate for how long it could take for this sort of full effect of the vaccine to happen in someone is about two weeks after the second dose. We're about three-ish, I think, weeks out from the second dose. And, but that, you know, since it's Lent, and Easter is right around the corner, and Lent is a time of penance, and just to be extra, you know, careful about, you know, all of that just for the sake of our older guys, the prior decided that it might be nice to sort of have our official going back to normal time be on Easter Sunday. So that's just about a week away, a little over a week at this point. And, you know, there's like smaller ways, like people are a little bit less nervous about sitting near each other at recreation, that kind of stuff. A lot of, a lot of us have not really been nervous about that all along. But some people have, people have different approaches to this, it's, you know, kind of how this sort of thing works. But, you know, we've been kind of still doing some distancing in the chapel, for example. And I think that that's going to be able to go back to normal at Easter, which I'm very grateful for because, you know, we each have our kind of assigned to place in the chapel. And I haven't been in mine in about a year now. So I miss it. So yeah, we're getting there. And, you know, after having been vaccinated, a lot of the friars seem much more kind of at ease about everything, which is really, it's nice. I think it's been good for the sort of general spirit of the community, not that things were ever really dire or anything, but it's just a little bit lighter, which is really, it's pleasant, you know, I'm grateful for it.

Sarah Heavren 43:49

Is there anything else you would like to talk about that we have not covered? Do you have any words of advice or positive messages?

Fr. Peter Gautsch, O.P. 43:59

Well, I don't know who's going to watch this, so I don't know how to give advice. But one thing that I've really been thinking about a lot in the midst of all of this, is, you know, that I think this whole thing has really reminded all of us unexpectedly, and largely unpleasantly, of the fact that there's just an awful lot that's not in our control. And that's a really difficult thing to be faced with suddenly and in difficult ways, you know. But I think there's a real spiritual opportunity to that, you know, I mean, for all of the inconveniences of the pandemic. And, for that matter, I mean, you know, the death and suffering that it's caused. I mean, I certainly don't want to overlook that. You know, amidst all of the trials of it all, I mean, it's, I think it is a real reminder that, you know, there's only so much that we can control. And so that's a kind of invitation to you know, rely more closely on God. It sort of sounds like a weird thing to say maybe, precisely because a lot of people are asking questions like, Well, why in the world would a good God allow this to happen or something, you know. And that's an important question. But we don't

often see the answers to those kinds of questions immediately. But for those with faith, you know, we know that God is goodness itself, you know, and we can't comprehend His goodness. And if He allows some kind of suffering, His goodness is so great that He can bring a greater good even out of the worst kinds of suffering. So that's been something that I've certainly been thinking a lot more about this past year, that I've tried, been trying to encourage other people to sort of pray about and think about too that, you know, there's, there's no, there's no suffering that can actually keep us from, you know, reaching out to God. And, you know, perhaps, I mean, I don't know maybe that's one of the reasons that He's allowed all of this to happen is to remind at least some people that, you know, the ultimate meaning of our lives is to draw near to God. I mean, He made us for himself. So if this whole thing has helped people to at least think about that possibility, then that's not a bad thing in itself, you know, so. Yeah.

Sarah Heavren 46:28

Thank you, Fr. Peter, for taking the time to meet with me and share what the past year has looked like for you.

Fr. Peter Gautsch, O.P. 46:34

You're very welcome. Thanks, Sarah.

Sarah Heavren 46:36

This has been Fr. Peter Gautsch sharing his pandemic experience.

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