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Oral interview of
Father Demetrius Dogias

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This is Diane Holt interviewing Father Demetrius Dogias of the Greek Orthodox Church for the Sacramento History Center. We are in the office of the Greek Orthodox Church on the corner of Alhambra Boulevard and F Street. Father Dogias will tell us about what it means to be Orthodox and especially Greek Orthodox today in Sacramento, as well as the rest of the nation, and a little about our own local community here. The organizations affiliated with the church and how the church has traditionally and even today played a prime role in the community as the leader in keeping the community together and in helping it early on culturally assimilate into the rest of the whole Sacramento community and even today helping new immigrants and helping those already established continue with every facet of their lives.

Diane: Father Dogias, first let me thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to give us this interview. I think, unlike many parishes of other faiths, the Greek Orthodox priest is really the father figure of our community and as such is called on every time there is a crisis of any sort of all [Father Dogias chuckles] whether it's a marital crisis or a death in the family or marriage or birth or whatever, you are constantly on call for us. Can you tell us a little bit about how you view this, the stresses or how you cope with this large parish, a little bit about the size, a little bit about your role, what you do as a Greek Orthodox priest.

Father Dogias: Well, thank you Diane, it's my pleasure to be with you today. Our parish here in Sacramento is different in that it is a very large parish, probably the largest or at least one of the very largest Orthodox parishes on the West Coast. In numbers,

approximately, at least 1100 to 1200 families that we know about, families, and probably perhaps that many more that are not particularly connected with the parish but which, but, who need the parish at various times.

Diane: And stretching for how far?

Father Dogias: Well, we stretch all the way from in the south, probably the Sacramento County line in the south, all the way up to the Oregon border from here, because we are the most northern Greek Orthodox parish in the State of California.

Diane: Is that right?

Father Dogias: Which means everything between us and Oregon we have to cover.

Diane: And there is no church, is there, between here and the Oregon border?

Father Dogias: No, we serve people in the, we have quite a number of people in the Marysville-Yuba City area, approximately 100 families or so. We have several families in Redding and Red Bluff, and in those areas up there, and we must serve them. They come to us whenever they need any kind of religious service or even anything to do with the Greek background and that kind of thing.

Diane: In return, you also go up there to give –

Father Dogias: Yes, we travel whenever we, well on a regular basis we go to Marysville once a month. But on demand so to speak, if there needs to be a funeral or a wedding we go to the other places as well, whenever we're needed.

Diane: Yes, I see.

Father Dogias: Of course, a lot of the business comes not only from the size of the parish which is distinctive, about this parish, but also from the background of Orthodox parishes in general. Different from other parishes, at least many other parishes, many other denominations, we might say is the fact that the Orthodox parishes were established in this country not only as religious centers, but also as ethnic centers, as educational centers, when a new immigrant from Greece, for instance, came to this country, there was only one place he would go and that would be to his church.

Diane: Yes.

Father Dogias: It was at the church that he found relationships, companionships, connections for learning to live in this country. The church became for him a center, a true center, for all of his life, for social concerns, for educational concerns, for athletic concerns even in many cases. So it became very much the center of his life in this country. Now of course that has changed, obviously. Our people are more in the mainstream of American society, I think, nowadays. I would say this probably started

following World War Two and has accelerated ever since. So our people are involved in many, many affairs of the greater community. Here in Sacramento, for instance, there are many of our parishioners who are very involved in the life of the, of the greater Sacramento community. On the other hand, we still have this, I don't know what you would call it, inbred, or traditional or what it is, this idea that the church is the center of our, of our lives, to a certain degree, and so people will turn to the priest, to the parish in general for any and all needs that they have.

Diane: Is this concept nourished by the new immigrants who are still coming to this country from Greece or do you think that the established parishioners maintain this feeling of the church being all important to their way of life. Do you think that the new influx of immigrants are because the church is extremely important in Greece, uh –

Father Dogias: Oh sure!

Diane: The parishes are all over, you can't stand at one point and you see how many little churches around often and if you stand in one place you see several churches, not one little shrine.

[Counter 50]

Father Dogias: Well, it's, it's, it's difficult to say. I, my own generation, my own age, I am sort of between the first generation and the present generation of newcomers, but

from what I can judge, the present newcomers, and of course, there is a great many of them, since the change in the, you may recall that some years ago they changed the immigration laws so that immigrants could come from Greece almost without any reference to numbers, so that we've had a great influx in the last ten or fifteen years. That has changed our, the coloration of our parishes to a certain degree. They are not really the same, as my parents were, and my grandparents were. When my parents and grandparents and everybody else's for that matter, came to this country, they were very concerned in maintaining their identity. They wanted to maintain their language. They wanted to maintain their particular form of Christianity and so they did this through the church. This is why the churches were established, to a great degree. The present day immigrant, however, is coming to this country and is finding the church all set for him, it's already there, he doesn't have to worry about doing that, and so he spends a great deal of his time worrying and pursuing financial stability. There is nothing wrong with that, the point is that it is a whole different outlook, and so –

Diane: He is also more well educated?

Father Dogias: He's more well educated –

Diane: A different class of immigrant than –

Father Dogias: That's correct, yes.

Diane: Than first came over [hard to hear, counter 62]

Father Dogias: And so the church to him becomes a place that he goes when he needs a wedding, when he needs to baptize his children. Also, we have another peculiar, in terms of peculiar, in terms of unique, function that parishes do in this country, that the Greek Orthodox parishes do, and that is we act sort of as a, representatives of the Greek government. Because, for instance, when such immigrants, or even those who have been here for a long time, need to have some sort of a, a legal paper for business in Greece, in many, many instance, the priest's signature on a certificate of whatever fact is legal tender so to speak, in Greece.

Diane: Oh, I see.

Father Dogias: So that and in many other cases, for instance, the Counsel General of Greece in San Francisco will require from someone who is petitioning him for some legal purpose, will require the signature from the priest of the local parish saying that this indeed is so and so and that he does reside, etc., in other words the, the priests' very often in other words acts as sort of a notary public.

Diane: Oh, I see.

Father Dogias: For the Republic of Greece, and so we have that function also. There are many people in this country for instance, who, older Greeks who are, did work in

Greece and now are in some kind of a retirement, some sort of a pension that they receive from Greece, and in order to keep receiving that they must be, the fact that they are still alive, every six months must be certified by the local priest, they accept the priest's word.

Diane: Is that so?

Father Dogias: Yes, so that's another little thing that we have, that probably we will always have.

Diane: Yes.

Father Dogias: Because as I say, the priests, Greece itself, look upon the priest and the diaspora, the outside of Greece in other words, as sort of agents to certify different things that need to be done.

Diane: However, at this point you're thankfully disassociated from the political turmoil, I would assume, in Greece as was not true in the early 1920's when this parish first became established, the priests were so closely allied with the political turmoil that we were unfortunately, new priests were coming and going every year.

Father Dogias: Well unfortunately, that was true in this parish as well as in most parishes in the United States. Greece in the 1920s of course, was a hotbed of agitation between monarchists on the one hand and republicans on the other hand, and those, those

political differences, and if you know Greeks, you know that they, they take their politics very seriously.

Diane: Yes. {She chuckles}

Father Dogias: Right. So, those political differences in the homeland were faithfully, unfortunately, reflected in this country and there are many instances of, even though we had problems in this parish, there are many instances in many parishes of things even being worse. For instance, there are many places where parishes would split and there would be one parish of monarchists and there would be another parish of republicans, and to this day there are still some parishes, there are small towns in the United States such as Canton, Ohio, for instance, for an example, where there are two Greek Orthodox parishes, where they have no reason to be there, except for the fact that they're descended from the 1920s when the parish split and they still maintain. Fortunately to this day, this in this decade, and I would say in the last 20 years or so that, that has not happened, and the further we go, the more this is true. Our lives are not governed by what happened in Greece. As a matter of fact, the fact is that ecclesiastically, we are not; we have nothing to do with the Church of Greece, this parish, indeed the diocese of San Francisco, of which we are part, as well as the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North and South America, of which the diocese is a part, is actually a section of the Ecumenical Patriarch and Patriarchate of Constantinople, in Istanbul. So we are not really ecclesiastically tied in with the Church of Greece at all.

[Counter 100]

Of course there are, naturally there are certain emotional ties on the part of our people and many of our people of course are originally from Greece or at least descended from immigrants, but at least from a juridical viewpoint we really have no ties with the Church of Greece, so that, that has helped also. We are, we are really, as time goes by we are not being effected by political changes in Greece; and of course, another help to that is not only time but the fact that our own people are becoming involved in politics in this country. So our thoughts and our concerns and our thinking is very much taken up with what happens in politics in this country, and not necessarily what happens in politics in Greece.

Diane: Yes. What about the training that priests receive to become Greek Orthodox priests. Are they required to spend some time in the country of Greece to be fluent in Greek? What kind of training do you need?

Father Dogias: Well, we have, unfortunately, we only have one school in this country. Actually there are several Orthodox schools, but our own Archdiocese of which this parish is a part, has only one theological school and that's the Holy Cross Greek Orthodox Theological School in Brookline, Massachusetts, just outside of Boston. And that is a three year program of theological studies that is preceded, however, by four years of college. You can either go to Hellenic College which is a part of the Holy Cross, the whole complex of Holy Cross and receive your college education and then go for

another three years at the same location, or you can have, you can receive, if you wish, you may receive your college education at some other place and then go to Holy Cross for the following three years. All told in other words, if you went, it is about a seven year program. That represents a change from when I was at the school. I graduated from there in 1963 and in my days it was a six year program. However, over the years it has been, there was a necessity discovered to have another year added. There is no obligation for any of the students from Holy Cross to go to Greece. Some of them do, as a matter of fact a great many of them do, not necessarily only for the language problem, because we still find ourselves, of course, needing to speak Greek as fluently as possible because many of our parishioners still speak only Greek, although most of them understand English, many of them do not speak English.

Diane: Many of them refuse to.

Father Dogias: Yes, or many refuse to.

Diane: Or to admit that they understand English.

Father Dogias: That's true, that's true. But as I was saying, not only do they go to Greece for that reason, but they also go to Greece for their studies. Greece has some very famous theological schools at the University of Athens, as well as the University of Thessaloniki. They are two very famous theological schools that are attended not only by Orthodox seminaries from this country but from all over the world. So that they do find

it, they do find themselves going there. However, there is no necessity for that, there is nothing that says they have to do that. It's all, it's just like any other school, you know –

Diane: Yes.

Father Dogias: If one applies oneself, one can get a great deal out of it. When I went to the school, for instance, I went directly out of high school, and when I went I knew very little Greek. However, I was able to apply myself while I was there and I picked up and of course over the years in the parishes, I have been able to get better at it. I'm not, I'm not perfect in Greek by any chance, by any means, but at least I can, I think I can converse pretty well.

Diane: Oh I think you do.

Father Dogias: And uh, we still need to do that. There are very few parishes in this country where the need for the priest to speak Greek is not strong. Most of them, 90% of them still need a priest who speaks Greek pretty well.

Diane: Yes. What is the, how does a young man as yourself, leaving high school, entering the priesthood, what is the ladder that they follow and from the seminary and from the young man that starts out working maybe in the church with some of the youth groups, where do they go from there? There's, in our religion a priest may have a family, may be married –

Father Dogias: Yes.

Diane: To a certain level, isn't that correct?

Father Dogias: That's right. We have, well most young men who come out of the seminary nowadays, after having going, after having completed seven years of study, as I said, all seven years, at Brookline, or perhaps four years somewhere else and the three years of Theological study at Brookline, at any rate, after having completed that period of study, most young men chose either to go, as we mentioned before, some of them go to Greece for further studies, a great many of them however, go into parishes as lay assistants. There are various terms used, parish lay assistant, parish's assistant, in other words, going to a parish to take charge perhaps of the youth program, perhaps as a chanter, perhaps as a secretary, to do many of the things that need doing and, but however, which free the priest so that he can concentrate on more spiritual matters. During that time, obviously they usually look for a wife. Because as you know, in the Orthodox Church the, a certain part of the clergy may be married.

[Counter 150]

Father Dogias: For instance, when I was about to graduate from the school, I knew that that was something that I had to consider. In the Orthodox Church a deacon, we have three steps in the clergy. Let me start that way, we have three steps in the clergy. We

have deacons, we have priests or presbyters is actually the technical term, and bishops. Now deacons and priests may be married. Bishops are not married. However, even for the candidate for the, to be a deacon or a priest to be married, he must do that prior to his ordination. In other words, the marriage must take place before he is ordained. So this is a decision that every seminarian and every graduate seminarian has to, has to make. Is he going to be, is he going to be a celibate priest or is he going to be a married priest? If he is going to be a celibate priest, uh, then he knows that once he is ordained he can never be married afterwards, because the ordination must be the ultimate dedication and there can be no other, no marriage afterwards. The priest, the candidate who is thinking about being a married priest must know that he has to get married, as I said, prior to his ordination and that he can never become a bishop. The bishops are elected from the celibate clergy. Very rarely, especially in the Greek people, the Greek speaking part of the church, it is very rare, but it sometimes happens that a widower priest can be elected bishop, but that's a very rare occurrence. In the Russian church it happens more often. But in most cases in other words, when you are a young man and you are thinking of that, you consider that your, that if you are going to be married, that you are not going to rise to that position. That's all there is to that. You also consider that if, if God should decide that your wife should die, then you can't, there is no remarriage, you are left as a widower for the rest of your life. So there are the considerations we must take. Then once you've done that, and once, let's say you have married, then you enter the clergy, first being ordained a deacon. Then afterwards, it could be a period of time, it could be one day, it could be two years, depending on the situation, you are ordained a priest or a presbyter. The practice nowadays, usually, is that such new priests, newly ordained

priests are usually sent to large parishes as assistants. The Archdiocese has found that when this is possible and I will explain that in a minute, when this is possible, that seems to be most effective. It gives the young priest an opportunity to get into the life of a parish, find out what it is really like, you know, after having learned about it, in the books, now he really gets down to the nitty-gritty of finding out what the life is really like outside of the “white tower” so to speak of the seminary.

Diane: That’s right.

Father Dogias: And that’s very effective. In my own personal case, I was an assistant when I first began for two years, and I found it to be very, very useful for me in my career. But of course, I did say when it is possible. Unfortunately, it is not always possible, because we have a growing shortage of priests. What’s happening in our Archdiocese is the same that is happening in many other denominations, and that is that the vocations for the clergy so to speak, the desire for young men to become priest is not keeping up with the attrition rate. With the men that are retiring. Our theological school began operation in 1937. The first graduates left, came out of the school in 1942. Now if you, 1942, this is 1985, that was 40 some years ago which means that those young men in 1942 are now going, getting to the period of retirement. They are in their 60s and they’re getting to retire. Unfortunately as they are retiring, we are not replacing them, and so we are, we do have a very definite problem of not having enough clergy. So as I said, it is nice when the young priest can be sent to, as an assistant, but that isn’t always possible and sometimes young priests fresh out of the seminary have to be sent directly to a

parish. Of course, when that happens, usually it is not a larger parish. Usually it is a smaller parish.

Diane: Yes.

Father Dogias: Usually the larger parishes are staffed by clergy who are experienced and whom the Bishops believe can handle the situation.

Diane: Yes. Do you see any of the young men coming through the ranks as altar boys and Sunday school, and do you see much of a hope that some of these young men will become priests?

Father Dogias: Oh I think so, I think so. I think, I think that it has happened to me, in my priesthood. I've seen, I, there are several, two or three, fellow priests of mine who originally were altar boys of mine. So it's a, that's nice to see. I think that happens. I think we need to do a selling job, though. I mean, I think we need to tell young men, that to let them know what the, what serving the parish is really like.

[Counter 200]

Father Dogias: It's not necessarily what they have heard. It is a very honorable and very commendable position. Helping people and trying to do the work of the Lord, is something that perhaps they should look into. We need to do a selling job.

Diane: Yes. Do you find nowadays that young men who are not of Greek extraction whose parents did not come from Greece, or are not of Greek heritage are becoming Greek priests, which –

Father Dogias: Yes, that is happening more often. As a matter of fact that is happening not only in Greek Archdiocese, in other words, our particular Archdiocese that this parish belongs too, but many of the other Archdioceses. The Syrian Archdiocese or, now it is called the Antiochian Archdiocese, and the Orthodox Church of America which was originally the Russian Tripolian, all the groups are having more converts become priests. Converts from families as you say, that really have no connection, not only did they not have any connection with the Orthodox religious background, but no connection with the ethnic background. In other words, those ethnic groups as normally thought of as Orthodox; Greek, Russians, Serbians, etc.

Diane: Yes.

Father Dogias: They seem to becoming one might say from left field, in other words, from people, young men who are obviously religiously oriented and spiritually interested and have discovered that whatever their faith was before it had not satisfied them and have chosen the Orthodox faith and from there have gone on and have wanted to become priests, and have done so. In our own Archdiocese we have another of them. As a matter of fact, right here in this parish, my co-pastor is a, was originally a Mormon, from

Southern California, who in his studies at Salt Lake City and in various other places determined that Mormonism was not satisfying his needs and he found the Orthodox Church. He was converted in Los Angeles in the cathedral there, St. Sofia, and eventually was married and in order to try and learn some Greek, he, instead of going to seminary here in the United States, he dedicated himself to the point of going to Greece to the University of Thessaloniki for his theological study, which, of course, obviously took a great deal of sacrifice.

Diane: Oh I betcha, yes.

Father Dogias: And a great deal of dedication. But he did it! And now he is, as I say, my co-pastor here, and he is doing quite well.

Diane: Yes.

Father Dogias: And he is not unique. There are quite a number of people of that sort.

Diane: Well, of course, I would guess that a fair number of young people even within this parish, as nationally, are probably marrying outside of the Greek American community. Isn't it somewhat close to 60% or something like that?

Father Dogias: It is more than that. It is 80%. In this parish, I recently did sort of a private little survey of my own, because I had heard, what I considered to be astounding

numbers from Bishop Anthony, he was our Bishop in San Francisco. I did a little survey of my own marriage records here, and in the period of time that I've been here, which is since August of 1981, 80% of our marriages —

Diane: 80%!

Father Dogias: 80% have been between Orthodox and non-Orthodox, Orthodox and people who are of a non-Greek background and a non-Orthodox background.

Fortunately, if that's the proper phraseology, fortunately, most of them are within the Church. In other words, we, our rate of keeping these people who are married, Orthodox people who are married to a non-Orthodox is very good. Nonetheless, it is a fact that we have this kind of mixed marriage rates. So obviously, we have to, we have to take account of that and offer services and be able to serve the needs which are very obviously different needs than let's say the couple that is both from a Greek background.

Diane: Yes.

Father Dogias: And to try to serve all the needs. We have a very different parish. We have many, many different groups in this parish. We have people who have just come from Greece, we have people who have been here from Greece for 50 and 60 and 70 years, some of them. We have people who are from a non-Greek background completely. We have those who speak very little English and a great deal of Greek. We

have those who speak very little Greek and a great deal of English. Some who speak no Greek at all. Some who speak no English at all.

Diane: Of all different age groups.

Father Dogias: Of all different age groups.

Diane: And all different intellects or interests and educational backgrounds.

[Counter 250]

Father Dogias: That's right, all intellectual backgrounds, from all kinds of backgrounds.

Diane: And you have a club for each one of them, it seems to me. There is an organization for everyone.

Father Dogias: It would seem so, and we have to, well we try and serve all their needs, you see.

Diane: Yes, what are some of your organizations? I know many are affiliated with the church. Some only meet here at the church, so somehow they are –

Father Dogias: Yeah, we have – well there is actually, there are sort of two classes of organizations, one might say, two groups. There are the parochially affiliated groups, such as the Philoptochos which is the ladies auxiliary so to speak, and of course our Sunday school, and the choir and the various youth groups. We have a GOYA which means of course, the Greek Orthodox Youth of America. We have a junior choir. We have a YAL, which is Young Adult League, we have a young married group which also meets with the YAL, and all of those sort of affiliates, organizations which are very close –

Diane: And the Greek School.

Father Dogias: And the Greek School, and all those things which are very closely tied into the church. Then of course, we have what we normally refer to as fraternal organizations. Not fraternal in the classic sense, but they are clubs in other words, who are really not affiliated to the church at all. As a matter of fact, their connection with the church is that they meet somewhere on the grounds.

Diane: They meet here, right here.

Father Dogias: And of course then, most of the members are also members of the parish.

Diane: Yes.

Father Dogias: But the point is, legally, theoretically they have no connection with the parish. And of those groups, there is quite a number of those, most of, there are two of those groups that are sort of Pan-Hellenic, in other words they have members from different parts of Greece and that's AHEPA, the American Hellenic Educational Progressive Association and the GAPA which is the Greek American Progressive Association. There is a whole history as to why there should be two of them. But that's another –

Diane: Who never go to each other's picnics or anything.

Father Dogias: That's right. We don't need to go into that right now. [Diane chuckles] And then there are a whole bunch of groups that are based on coming from a certain part of Greece. For instance, there is a club for the Macedonians, there is one for the Messinians, there is one for the Athenians, there is one for the Peloponnesians, for the Roumeliotis, for those from Eperios, from all over, from different parts of Greece. We have, as you can see, we have quite a variety of those kinds groups as well.

Diane: And those are still thriving?

Father Dogias: In this parish they are. Which is one unusual point, in many places these groups, and specifically the ones that are based on membership from only parts of Greece, such as the Macedonians, Messinians, there. In many parishes, those groups are

going, are falling by the wayside. They are disappearing. On the East Coast, where I come from originally, there is very little of that happening anymore. The AHEPA is still around, of course. The GAPA tends to be disappearing, but as a rule, they are not thriving. However, in this parish, that's something that is unusual about this parish, where not only are they thriving, but ready, those kinds of things.

Diane: Yes. What do you see, Father, as the future of Orthodoxy today, as either a cohesive process of becoming larger or what, how do you see Orthodox, your Greek Orthodoxy, is it going to remain basically ethnically Greek do you think? Or with the number of intermarriages and with the number of people reaching out into various parts of the community will it also, Greek Orthodox reach out?

Father Dogias: Well, I, I, let me first say that I don't think, I don't ever think that the ethnic identity will completely disappear, because I think we like our food, and we like our dancing, and we like our music and that's fine. There is no problem with that. So, I think that will always be there. However, I do not think that the church per se will be promoting it as perhaps, perhaps we have done in the past. As we have done, as we do now, for instance. But I think that the church will eventually promote the main thing that it has, and of course, that is the faith. We Orthodox believe that we have the true faith of Christ. Well, if that's the case then what we have to do is, is make sure that that is what we are promoting so to speak. The Orthodox faith is very distinctive in a great many ways. Both in its teachings and its appearance and its atmosphere and its outlook and its philosophy, all of these things are very distinctive and very beautiful. In my opinion that

if the Orthodox faith is to exist in this country, and if it is to thrive, especially in light of the, as you mentioned yourself, and as I mentioned before, the mixed marriage rate, that we have a great many people coming into the church from non-Greek backgrounds.

[Counter 300]

Father Dogias: If we are going to thrive then we have to, pardon the expression, we have to push that.

Diane: Yes.

Father Dogias: Because no matter what else we do, someone else is always there who can do it better. You know, we can have basketball teams for our young people, but there is always a good basketball league somewhere else they can go to.

Diane: Yes.

Father Dogias: We can have dances, but there is always a dance they can go to somewhere else. What do we have that's distinctive, that's the way that I see it, and the thing that is distinctive, of course, is our faith. And if we are going to last, if we are going to thrive, then we need to do that. We need to concentrate on that. Certainly, I think there are, there is a missionary feel to this country that is tremendous, it is unbelievable. There are people who are looking for the truth. Who are looking for a

faith, and I think it's a great, there is a great possibility of things happening in this country. However, before we go out into that missionary field so to speak, we have to decide ourselves, we have to, we have to decide what we are and who we are and what we are promoting, and I think that the only way we are going last, the only way we are going to thrive is if we promote Christ and the Orthodox Church and make that our main thrust.

Diane: Thank you very much Father, this has been very informative and I appreciate your

[Speaking stops]

[Tape 1, Side 1, Counter 319]