

## Father Boniface, OSB interviews

### Father Michael Denk

**Father Boniface:** Hello, my name is Father Boniface. I'm a Benedictine Priest and Monk of St. Vincent Archabbey in Latrobe, Pennsylvania, and I'm so happy to talk today with Father Michael Denk of the Diocese of Cleveland. He is going to be sharing with us his own faith journey and that is going to tie in also a little bit to the ministry that he's founded and has some similar goals as our program, "*Tracing the Footprints of Faith.*" Father Michael, it is wonderful to be with you.

**Father Michael:** Thank you Father Boniface.

**Father Boniface:** Let's turn to Our Lady for a moment and ask for her intercession for us to focus on what The Lord wants us to focus on and also for our listeners that they can hear what The Lord wants to say to them.

*Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with Thee. Blessed art Thou among women and blessed is the fruit of Thy womb, Jesus.*

**Father Michael:** *Holy Mary, Mother of God pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen.*

**Father Boniface:** Father Michael, you are a priest of the Diocese of Cleveland, ordained in 2007, and you have a ministry, ***The Prodigal Father***. Can you just tell us a little bit briefly about that? Our listeners will know this is unusual for me to open this way but, I think with the goal of your ministry being so similar to kind of what we're aiming at in a different angle in this program, I thought it would be worthwhile to highlight up front.

**Father Michael:** The ministry started about six or seven years ago with the parish where I was at. I was granted another year to stay at the parish. I was supposed to move but then given another year and because of that I didn't have a lot to do. I handed off all my ministries so I prayed and asked God, "I have one year with these people what would you like me to give to them?" Out of that He gave me this vision of really helping them have a personal encounter with God through prayer.

It was early on when apps were being developed and a lot of new media, so kind of the main thrust behind it is using the new media to help people learn how to enter into prayer, meditation and contemplation.

My thesis when I graduated the Seminary was, "*Christology and the Mystics Coming to Know, Love, and Serve Christ,*" and I used a bunch of the mystics in that. What I realized after 20 years since I've been in the Seminary is that we are very blessed as Seminarians and Priests to learn how to pray, to have a Spiritual Directors, to have the opportunity to make eight-day retreats and the Ignatian 30-day Retreat. This was a way for me to kind of break it down and make it accessible to people.

I started off by developing an Examen Prayer app and then a book called, **“Pray40Days,”** which is a 40-day challenge of guided meditation where it leads you through and teaches you different ways of meditating, Lectio Divina, Ignatian Imagination, and the Contemplative prayer of the Carmelites.

That became my gift to that parish, but it has turned out to be very fruitful. It has become much broader in terms of gifts to a lot of people throughout the country and throughout the world.

**Father Boniface:** Our listeners can find that at ***TheProdigalFather.org***. You have to spell prodigal right, I suppose. It’s p-r-o-d-i-g-a-l.

Just to highlight and I’m going to make this to plant an idea for you, Father Michael, for our discussion today, but what you are describing having an encounter Christ through prayer is very much where my own heart is so, I’m very much interested in looking into the ministry that you developed here.

It is really my interest in interviewing priests, in this program is to understand what that was like. How did you encounter The Lord? How did you develop a relationship with Him? What’s the experience of that like? What were the outside structures? What was the inner experience of that encounter and then what were the consequences of that word that lead you in your life?

That’s really what I focus on in all of these conversations to kind of provide the lived data that you are providing a method for prayers for parishioners to actually practice and hopefully have that kind of experience for themselves.

If you would be willing to maybe lead us into how your faith developed. Did you grow up in a Catholic family? How did Christ become really alive for you? How did you encounter Him as a living person? How has your faith journey developed?

**Father Michael:** I grew up with a very practicing Catholic family. There are six of us siblings. I had a miracle at my birth and that has come into play numerous times throughout my life when I look back on my life. From the very beginning God was at work.

When I was born, I had a blockage in my throat, and they had to do emergency surgery. They shaved my head to put an IV in there. Apparently before the surgery, the evening before, a couple came into the hospital who knew my parents from a Renewal that they made, Christ Renews His Parish, and they asked if they could come in to pray with me. But the hospital said, “No, it’s only immediate family.” And they said, “No, we are his brother and sister in Christ.” They snuck up into the room, laid hands on me; I was in an incubator, and they prayed over me. Marcia said to my mother and father, “You have to realize that Michael is a gift from God and with any gift you have to be willing to offer that gift back to Him.” So, they prayed over me and offered me to God.

The next day they rolled me into surgery, did the pre-op X-rays and the doctor realized that the blockage was completely gone. He came back and told my parents, “I have no way of explaining this other than a miracle.” Obviously, there was great relief and delight but that was a story that is foundational for me. Sometimes we forget the miracles in our lives. How God does encounter us and that is one of those moments that I can always look back and say, “Well from the very beginning of my life God has blessed me.”

**Father Boniface:** Maybe you will get to this but obviously you don't remember these details from first-hand experience and I'm wondering when you were told about this experience. Was that impactful for you?

**Father Michael:** I wasn't told about it until much later in life and I think what brought it up was that my mother was so horrified that my head was shaved that there were very few pictures of me when I was a newborn. I came across a couple of them one year when I was scanning all the photos online and I realized that, and she shared the story with me. I forgot to mention that that couple, Marcia and Dennis, became my Godparents. My Uncle G has passed but my Auntie Marcia's just the best Godmother you could ever hope for.

So, that story came out sometime probably in high school and it didn't hit me until I was discerning checking out the Seminary and when I was thinking about that I remember praying to God and just saying, "Lord, help me know if You want me to go." And that story came to mind in my memory that Michael you are a gift from God and any gift ought to be given back. That is what really brought me into the Seminary was remembering that story and giving my life back to God.

**Father Boniface:** I'm just thinking, Father Michael, of a comment in the teaching for "*Unbound*," by Neil Lozano, does a whole lot on the Father's blessing. That's really the focus of "*Unbound*," ultimately and he gives a whole teaching and they have elaborated that in different places about how beautiful it can be for parents to share those kinds of stories. Where a name came from, or experience of birth, little miracles that happened early in life, circumstances of the conception in some cases, or the child in utero. I say that dovetailing your story to encourage our listeners. Maybe there is a story like that in their family and they have a son or a daughter who has that kind of miracle that they wouldn't know about but that's part of God's story for your life and something when you were able to take hold of that really gave you some freedom to make the gift of yourself to Him.

**Father Michael:** Stories like that don't happen unless we initiate or ask. They do happen. I remember when I was graduating from college, we had a project where we had to interview our grandparents about their life. I went to my grandparents' house, my grandmother was dying of cancer, so I'll never forget she was lying on the couch, but they went up into the attic and brought out all these albums. They showed me their ancestors that came over with pictures of them by the boat and it would never have happened had I not been tasked with doing that.

**Father Boniface:** Wow, how beautiful. You can see God's hand already in your grandparents guiding their journey.

Sorry, I took you off on a little bit of a tangent there, Father Michael, I just thought about your experience of hearing that story. So, knowing that becomes a foundational part of your story and so beautiful, a miracle already so early in your life.

**Father Michael:** Yes and it's interesting because I didn't hear about that story until later and maybe I did but didn't remember it, but I don't remember that becoming important to me until later.

Growing up, as I mentioned, Catholic family, six kids, always in the front row pew of church. I struggled with Mass; I thought Mass was boring. I struggled with prayer like praying The Rosary. It was kind of a difficult experience and yet there was still a yearning in me to encounter God. I remember going through grade school and then into high school; I went from a very wonderful Catholic grad school to public high school, and it was a big shift for me because only one or two people from my grade school went there, everybody else to a Catholic high school. It was a very difficult time because the Youth Group in my parish had collapsed. One of the priests had gotten transferred and it just wasn't carried on and I went through a very dark time because I didn't have that culture of the faith around me. The first friend I met was an atheist in my biology class. I never knew there were atheists so that became a very difficult time in my life and yet I was still searching.

I remember one of the neighboring parishes had a Mission, I was working at a gas station, and I asked the owner if I could take off at least for an hour to leave my shift to go to the Parish Mission and come back. I remember seeking opportunities like that but just having a very difficult time in high school connecting with God.

What I didn't know then that I do now is the concept of desolation. That time period of my life was a big heavy time of desolation and that is part of why I teach that as well to help people realize that our lives don't have to be like that. We can and ought to reject that desolation and experience God's consolation.

**Father Boniface:** You made it through sounds like in some part because of the force commitment surrounded by good examples in your family. It wasn't that you were so drawn by your own experience. Desolation is hard. It's really the hard part of the spiritual life.

**Father Michael:** And I think it's especially hard if you don't know about it. I just thought that that was God and that was life and that was even faith. You're right, I was faithful and went to Mass every Sunday. When I was younger, during grade school, I believe I knew or felt the call to priesthood. I remember there was a priest, a family friend who had done a number of the family's funerals, and somebody must have said something about me that I was either thinking about priesthood or would be a good priest and I remember I really liked him. He was a lot of fun and just a very different kind of priest, but he pulled me aside at one of the family wakes and he bent down and he looked at me and he said, "Don't you ever be a priest, it's a miserable life. Be married and be happy." That's when I stopped thinking about being a priest.

It's interesting from my First Communion, I'm sorry that I'm jumping around here, but at the end of my First Communion, one of my good family friends again from the Renewal that my parents had met pulled me aside after First Communion bent down looked at me and she said to me, "Michael you would be a great priest one day." I really felt that like a lightning bolt. I remember that I didn't want to. I remember kind of looking down almost in shame. I just wanted to be married and have a family and priesthood as I mentioned, Mass, none of that seemed fun.

I've had different experiences of people being either the voice of God or not the voice of God along my life that it really impacted me.

**Father Boniface:** Can I ask you Father Michael and it may be an unfair question because it's so long ago but those words that were spoken to you, you described a little bit of the inner experience that went with them but I'm curious if you can give us any more insight into that

when that priest spoke to you that word. What happened inside of you when your family friend spoke to that word about priesthood? What was the inner response to that?

**Father Michael:** First of all, it was shocking because I really enjoyed him, and I thought if I could be a priest like this. I had a lot of esteem for him and when he said that to me I remember almost instantaneously I guess it would be, I don't know if the word is ascending to what he said or believing what he said and it created a big shift and it was almost a confirmation of my own ideas of priesthood that I didn't think it would be a very happy life.

When I went into the Seminary, I remember telling God that my initial entrance into the Seminary was, "OK God, you're calling me, I'm going to give my life to You and even if it's miserable hopefully I'll get to heaven one day." That was my entrance into priesthood. So, I guess in that moment there was a radical sadness that hit me when he said that surrounded by confusion. I'm almost just a dropping of all the affective goodness or joy I saw in him and in the priesthood.

**Father Boniface:** We know Saint Ignatius helps us understand the importance of paying attention to those inner experiences when we're discerning and that spiritual desolation, if I can describe that radical sadness, there's probably a natural desolation a non-spiritual desolation that's happening too when you have the kind of disappointment and shock of that word spoken to you, but then it seems like also, at a spiritual level, there is a real desolation that came with that word and that you kind of assented to or you accepted that word. Ignatius tells us *The words that come to us in spiritual desolation are more likely from the enemy.*

It would be different if he had said that you and you had experienced a real consolation. You can imagine some children may be in a position everybody says, "Oh you should be a priest. You should be a priest." They feel a lot of pressure and in fact The Lord is calling them to marriage and then someone speaks a word like that to them and you can imagine again at a natural and then also at a spiritual level that comes through with consolation. It becomes a clarity of lifting like a joy. Is there a closeness to The Lord that it's possible to follow Him in marriage? That could have been a path too, but that wasn't your experience.

**Father Michael:** That's interesting. I never thought of that, that that could have been a free statement. Interesting.

**Father Boniface:** And kind of the opposite, the family friend who said to you that you could be a priest, you just gave a little sense. You said it sort of felt like a lightning bolt. You didn't describe exactly whether that was a positive or a negative thing.

**Father Michael:** For me it wasn't a positive thing. It was something I thought in the back of my head, never wanted to, and when she said that it almost felt like a condemnation like this is your life now.

I remember even when prayers would be said during Mass for increase of priests or the priesthood I would think, "Oh no it's about me. God wants me to do this." When she said that to me, I don't know that I could describe that as consoling it was quite the opposite. I remember looking down almost with sadness or shame. Again because of just the idea I had of priests or Mass at that time.

**Father Boniface:** Like you were going to get stuck there.

**Father Michael:** Yes, this is my lot in life.

**Father Boniface:** Maybe the truth that The Lord wanted you to be able to embrace was not that you would be a priest like you imagine priesthood. Right? He wanted you to receive a word of being a priest like He imagines priesthood. Just a little different.

**Father Michael:** Which is way different. I had no idea even until I was ordained. If I could go back and tell myself what it is actually like and who He is and how He has made me to be His priest. It's such a wonderful life and that would have taken out a lot of that agony.

**Father Boniface:** Keep taking us forward from there. You had a religious practice and I know you know what I am talking about. Since The Prodigal Father, your ministry is oriented toward helping people have an experience of God in prayer. How would you describe that in your own life? You said high school was more a time of desolation. Not feeling really close to The Lord, feeling drawn away from Him and lacking faith, lack of hope. Did you have at a young age an experience of God?

**Father Michael:** I'm sure I had. I had a yearning for that experience of God. It's interesting, after I received my First Communion and, it was probably later in life. We had three boys and three girls and there were three boys in one room, and I had nowhere to get quiet. I remember that I wanted to build a little altar for my closet so I could just go in there and close the doors and have a little privacy. It was a neat thing that my father and I did together. He had me draw it out and then we built it together and I would go there and pray. That would be my place to pray. I had my First Communion statues, and prayer books, and I would go in there often times and find some solace in that space.

I don't know if I really felt Him when I was Confirmed or when I received Communion. I did love the Sacrament of Confession. I loved that I was able to go there. I rode my bike up there on a Saturday afternoon before or after the evening Mass. I remember that was a good experience for me. I loved the priests that were there, and I loved being able to go there and spill my guts and experience God's mercy.

But there was this yearning to encounter God and there was even in the Seminary. In my first few years I don't know if I knew how to pray really in the Seminary until I made my first eight-day retreat and that really transformed my life.

I did have a mystical experience first year in the Seminary. We had a wonderful priest, Father Loya. He was the spiritual director for the house, and he always encouraged us to make a Holy Hour of contemplative prayer either praying before the Blessed Sacrament with scripture or an icon.

We were on a house retreat, and I was there, and I think a lot of it was that I hadn't worked through that I was giving my life to God. I didn't know there was going to be joy and I was praying before the Blessed Sacrament very late at night and I had a moment where I was completely enwrapped in His Love. It was one of those things where you don't know how long it lasted or what happened. Even afterwards it was kind of a quick piecing together of just being in union with the Father. I would read later on, years later, about the mystics and mystical experiences and realized that I think God gave that gift to me early on in the Seminary just as a gift for me to have that glimpse of what it's like to be in union with Him.

But pretty much throughout high school and college, it was a very dry time. It wasn't for lack of wanting or trying but I don't think I had that guide or that help during those years.

**Father Boniface:** It's amazing that you entered the Seminary without that kind of experience, and I know that you are not the only one. It is really one of my goals as the Spiritual Director of for our Seminary to make sure that the guys don't leave the Seminary at least without having that kind of experience but it sounds like you had on your Eight-Day Retreats, a real encounter with The Lord. In a kind of repeatable way, we might say, in a way of developing relationship rather than just a little bit of a one-off experience of union which is beautiful, and it really strengthens us in important ways.

**Father Michael:** It was my Eight-Day Retreats retreat where there was a Jesuit priest, Fr. Bob Welsh, a wonderful, gentle, hilarious just everything you could think about a good priest being. I kept hearing about this Ignatius exercises Eight-Day Retreats. It's funny because my mother actually had met him at a parish retreat and she said to him, "Father Welsh do you know anything about the Ignatian Eight-Day Retreat?" He looks at her and said, "Yes, I am a Jesuit and I'm the president and I know something about that."

We met, talked a couple of times, and we had a beautiful house, a small little countryside thing that the Jesuits owned on a pond, and it worked out one summer that he arranged for me to have the place to myself for eight days straight. He came out every day, celebrated Mass, heard my Confession, gave me spiritual direction, and was such a wonderful fatherly figure. It was during that time that I only knew God as God, I didn't know God as a personal Father, Son, Holy Spirit. It was really during that retreat that I got to know God the Father and that's where it's obviously with The Prodigal Father taking on a whole big part of my spirituality and my life.

**Father Boniface:** Can you say a little bit more about that, how that developed?

**Father Michael:** Yes, this would be interesting for the listeners too. He asked me when we were meeting about my prayer and who I pray to and who I felt most comfortable with praying with God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit. To be honest, as I mentioned, I just prayed to God. So, he said, "Who do you feel the most comfortable with?" I said, "Probably Jesus." I did not have a good image of God the Father. I had the classic, not that the God the Father in the Old Testament is different than the new, but the classic thing people say, "God the Father is very stern, very judgmental, very punishing, very whatever." That was my image of God the Father. He asked me about my life and my childhood, and he said, "I think you might have a little distorted image of who God the Father is." As we all do because we model God on human beings. He tasked me with asking Jesus to tell me what the Father was like.

What was interesting with Father Welsh when he talked to Jesus, he would have a full-on conversation with Him right there while I was with him. He would just look at the chair and Jesus was there, and I thought, "Wow." I did not know how to do that. I only knew structured prayer. I didn't know how to even talk to God really. That's what he tasked me with that was my desire you pray every day, a desire or a grace for Jesus to share, to tell me about the Father.

I remember praying the first day and asking Him and as you make a Jesuit Retreat, usually you have four or five Holy Hours a day. I prayed all the Holy Hours asked Jesus to tell me what the Father is like, and nothing happened. Then the second day he did it again. Gave me

different scripture passages and nothing happens. I'm starting to freak out and panic and I finally said to Jesus, "You must tell me something. I can't go to him again with nothing to say."

After the third day, he said to me, "I think you need to relax. You're trying so hard, but you just need to relax. What do you do for a hobby or for fun?"

I said, "I play guitar or photography, I paint, I like movies." He said, "Go see a movie."

I said, "I can't this is my Eight-Day Retreat, I can't go see a movie."

He said, "Are you the Director, or am I?"

This was back in the day before smartphones, all we had was the paper. I pull up movies in the paper and we have an Art House Theater and there was a film called *Spring, Summer, Winter, Autumn, Spring*. I love Nature so I thought maybe this will be a good movie and who knows maybe God will speak to me.

I drive there and on the way there I am asking Jesus, "Jesus, please show me what the Father is like." I get there to watch the movie and the movie starts and it is entirely in Korean with no subtitles.

**Father Boniface:** No way.

**Father Michael:** Yes, but it turns out to be about this Medicine Man in the middle of this island where people are coming to him, and they bring people to be healed. One morning he wakes up and there is a child that is left on his doorstep, and he adopts that child. He takes him in and raises him. That child is the center of his life now. He delights in that child, everything he does he can't get enough of.

As I left the film and I was driving home I said, "Jesus were you trying to tell me something there?" I said, "I'll try again." I looked over at my passenger seat and I tried to imagine Jesus was there and I said, "Jesus what is the Father like?" Father Boniface, for the first time I saw His face and the look on His face was like He has been waiting my whole life for me to ask that question because that is what He wants to share with me. He wants to tell me what the Father is like.

He went on describing God the Father with words and then images. It was interesting because He would say, "The Father is so patient with you". Then I saw an image from the movie of the father, that Medicine Man, being very patient, teaching the kid just how to draw with his hands on the dock.

Then He would say, "The Father is gentle." Then there would be a scene of the father in the movie taking the child and placing him gently into this boat to take him around in the water.

With each of these images I'd get an image from the film but then an image of my childhood that was the opposite. My father who I love, wonderful adventurous man, but not the most patient man in the world, not the gentlest man in the world.

So, I had images of the opposite and what He was revealing to me is that the image of God the Father that I had is not who the Father is. The whole drive home He spoke to me. "The Father is gentle, the Father is patient, the Father is kind, the Father delights in you, the Father believes in you, hopes in you, endures."



I get back home to that house I was staying at and at that time I was working throughout the Seminary doing a lot of wedding videos and it occurred to me that it was Corinthians 13. *Love is patient, love is kind, believes in you, hopes in you, endures in you. Love will never fail.* I realized that God the Father is Love and if He's Love, He is all of those qualities.

From then on that's where this idea of The Prodigal Father sunk deep into my heart and then began to unfold throughout my Seminarian Priesthood.

**Father Boniface:** So beautiful. I direct Retreats like that, Father Michael, and I can't say that I've sent someone to the movies before and I'll bet that Father Welsh was like, "Wow, that was great!" Try to reproduce that one. Sent to a movie. You picked the movie, Korean and no subtitles and then the Father unfolds His reality through this movie. Oh my gosh, that's amazing.

I mentioned as we were getting started, the program that I like to focus on inner experience and things like that because there are certain things in external experience which are not really repeatable because God loves us all uniquely. Whether it's the miracle at your birth or that experience of how He revealed Himself but what is common to everyone is who the Father is. He's not a different Father for you than for me. He is a Father just like you described so beautifully. He had to reveal Himself especially in those areas perhaps where you had some distortion around His identity.

If I can kind of direct you into that inner experience. You said things with real confidence when you described them, "He was there. I saw His face. He spoke these words to me. He showed those images."

If I can just open the door for you to describe how you knew it was Him. How did you know that it was Him not just your own thoughts, not something else?

**Father Michael:** That's the great thing when I direct people as well. That's a question they will often have, "How do I know this is not me saying this to myself?" It's cliché but you know it. You know it when you know it.

It's hard looking back because I don't know what I saw. To get technical, I am sure it was an interior locution. Maybe it was exterior? I'm not sure but the surge, the wellspring of joy in me and wonder and awe and healing and desire is like God meeting my desire beyond what I couldn't hope or fathom when asking Jesus, "What is the Father like."

I think too, the other thing that probably helps me know and trust that it was Him, the joy in His face and in His eyes and the sense that yes in all my years of struggle too, all those years of high school and college of desolation, I mean spiritual and non-spiritual but hard desolation for years to finally see His face and the joy and then the truth of who the Father is, it just unlocks me. It was beyond anything that I could hope or imagine God the Father being and that He actually wants to be that personally for me, my Father. It was just sheer joy and it lasted. I guess one of the other fruits of it is lasting. From then on, I firmly believe that that's who God the Father is. I'm not even tempted to think otherwise of Him.

**Father Boniface:** If I can just offer some of Ignatius' vocabulary: *Our hearts inflamed with love lifted up above every creature, spiritual joy, tears, increase in faith, increase in hope, inner peace, stillness.*

It sounds like a combination of those. The inner peace or the increase in faith that conviction, I know what I know. That is a real grace of faith. That is striking us with that inner conviction. The spiritual joy as you mentioned. Hearts so uplifted and that even the love that is there, the peace that that leaves you with and then as you mentioned, the lasting quality is another one of those signs of God's presence, not just a flash in the pan as it were.

Wow, what an incredible experience and that really took hold of your heart and obviously set your relationship with God in a whole new way. You had a few more days in Retreat I suppose to kind of work that out and share that with your director and solidify that experience.

**Father Michael:** Yes, and it has been a wonderful continuous revelation ever since coming to know, just to have that love of Him.

I look at priesthood much differently now in my relationship with the Father. It is not just me giving myself to a demanding God, it's me giving myself in love and being loved by Him and knowing He delights in me when no one else does.

**Father Boniface:** So beautiful. Did that really change your experience in the Seminary?

**Father Michael:** I don't know. Did it change my experience?

**Father Boniface:** Don't let me put words in your mouth. Let me allow you to tell your story. How did things unfold from there?

**Father Michael:** That was about my third year in the Seminary. It did change because my summers or anytime I had free time I wanted to be all in. I'm not just doing this because You want me to do it, I'm doing it because I want to be all in for You. It did change that. My summers became less about just working jobs and more about doing missionary trips, doing the spiritual exercises.

As I mentioned, I have done an Eight-Day Retreat every year since then. I look at my whole Master's thesis because it began after that. They also invite you if you're worthy or whatever to get a second Master of Arts. I felt that I didn't need another degree, I just need to be a priest. When they asked me, I was telling my Formator that I just don't think it's a good thing for me because I have enough on my plate. He said, "Well, if they ask you to do this it's kind of a privilege. You should do it."

I said, "OK," and I chose my topic to be in the area of Systematic Theology but specifically on the spirituality of the mystics. I always did spiritual reading, but it really set me off in terms of being so passionate and inflamed by reading all these different mystics and then beginning to incorporate them and see how they all had this connection of know, love, and serve. That just fueled me for everything, for all the other academic things. Certainly, for my thesis it gave me a wonderful focus of me impassionately learning about this topic that I otherwise might not have dived into.

**Father Boniface:** That really opened some further doors for you it sounds like as you had a chance to later share some insights into spiritual theology and the dynamics of prayer.

**Father Michael:** It helped me see that there are different approaches to the spiritual life and that every person is going to have a different way of encountering God. Even here at the

parish, it helped me realize that not everybody encounters God the way that I do. There are different ways that God touches them and reaches them and encounters them.

I think getting to read so much of the actual writings of the mystics, I was able to discover and see all the different ways that God works and draws people closer to Himself and the different ways that He gave them the ability to help give people a structure to then be able to encounter Him by having some structure like Lectio Divina as opposed to just flounder. It gave me a great experience of learning about all of that and really set the background for the ministry that I do now. Just taking from these different spiritual traditions that we have and make that accessible to people that may not be able to have these long-extended retreats of or even read the writings themselves.

**Father Boniface:** That became a real gift for you under Holy Obedience

**Father Michael:** The funny part was my first director, Father Bob McCreary, a wonderful Capuchin priest, he was a wonderful, lovely guy but demanding as heck when it came to the thesis and made me just read, and write, and process a ton. I spent a whole year and a half with him, almost two years, and then I found out later, and he was approved, the faculty said he is an Adjunct Professor, he can't be your director, so I had to start all over again with Father Woost, who is Bishop Woost now and I was so angry. But Woost was the same thing in terms of rigor, like you read a lot but he also opened me up to a whole lot more, so I really got two and a half years very focused on this topic and very grateful in hindsight that I got both of those two to be kind of my masters. You are right, both under Holy Obedience for sure.

**Father Boniface:** Wow, God has a way of throwing us curveballs.

**Father Michael:** Yes, He does. Yes, He does.

**Father Boniface:** That is beautiful. Father Michael, we're coming towards the end of our time, and I want to give you a chance to just talk a little bit more if you'd like about The Prodigal Father, the ministry that you have set up and maybe what our listeners can find there. You have given us some beautiful highlights from your own spiritual journey. Your own personal encounter with the Father and for you that was one that took place through Jesus. For you, He used a movie to help illustrate some of the points of who He is and that brought some things together in your life as you could take hold of, even more deeply perhaps, of the miracle you received when you were young. The Lord drew you through various ways into the Seminary but then it sounds like it really opened up your personal relationship with Him after you entered the Seminary. It sounds like The Prodigal Father is a way that you want to share that grace that you have received for others also to receive.

**Father Michael:** First of all, to talk about the name The Prodigal Father. Sometimes when people hear The Prodigal Father, they think that I am The Prodigal Father, like The Prodigal Father Priest, but really it is God the Father. First of all, the word prodigal comes from the Latin word prodigious, which means *to give freely on a lavish scale*.

In the parable it really is the father that is the prodigal one. He gives to his sons, both of them, everything that he has. The younger son wastes it, he comes back and what does the father do? He showers him with new clothes and finest ring and sandals on his feet, slaughters the

fattened calf. The older brother is upset so he goes out to him and says, "My son, everything I have is yours."

My desire with The Prodigal Father from the very beginning was to take what I have been given and to freely give it to others. The hope with it is that I will try to offer everything for free. All of the programs are free. If you go to theprodigalfather.org website, you can see a lot on the home page, but if you click "Programs," I have a few programs there that I just would like to highlight really quick.

One is called the Examen Prayer. If you sign up for that program, you will get guided through videos on *Saint Ignatius Examen Prayer*. Saint Ignatius says that if we were to drop any prayer from our day, this should be the last one to go. So, if you are busy dropping prayers because you have to, hopefully you don't, this should be the last one to go. The reason he says that is because it helps us discern under which voice we've been, is God directing us or is Satan directing us? It always begins with gratitude. He would say too if nothing else just to spend time in gratitude.

That is one of the programs that I have. The other most popular program is called *Pray40Days*. It is a 40-day program where you can either listen to meditations or you can read them, either a physical book or online. Everything is available there. The hope is that I can take these experiences of prayer that I've had, along with my study of the mystics, is really an introduction to *The Devout Life* by Saint Francis de Sales.

What I have discovered is that, not only myself if I look at my grade/high school/college, but people in general, I don't think are ever really taught how to pray. You and I know, Father Boniface, that means not only vocal prayer but how to enter into meditative and contemplative prayer. You can read about that in the Catechism, this idea that we're called to be drawn from not only vocal prayer, but to meditative contemplative which is really experiencing heaven on Earth. *Pray40Days* will give you a daily guided meditation that will focus on a different type of prayer exercise. The one you would be most familiar with would be *Lectio Divina*, another would be *Praying with Your Imagination*, another one would be *Ignatius' Prayer Using Your Senses*, the *Carmelite idea of contemplating, so really entering into contemplative prayer*.

What I found is that people love it when they do it. It is so hard to express what this meditative and contemplative prayer is until people just try it and begin to experience it. So, that is a 40-day program that is there as well. I'm working on a Discernment of the Spirits program too.

If you did 40 days straight, you can do this any time of the year and you can start it right now, I can promise you that God will bless you and give you an encounter myself and Father Boniface may be talking about, that you will have that. He wants you to experience Him in this way and He will give you that experience.

So, check that out. It's all available online.

**Father Boniface:** Beautiful, Father Michael, thank you all of the effort that it has taken to put that together and thank you for all that you shared about your own personal spiritual journey in our program today. It's beautiful to see these truths, these realities, illustrated in the life of a real person and not remain at the level of abstract ideas. I really appreciate your taking the time and also revealing your heart in this way in your own experience.

As we wrap up our program, could you lead us in a prayer and offer a blessing?

**Father Michael:** In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Heavenly Father, we give you thanks for bringing us together today and I ask that you bless our listeners especially that they may come to know the Father's Love through what they have heard today. That they may experience You as You truly are, this unconditional loving Abba, Daddy, who is patient and gentle and kind and rejoices in them and believes in them and wants to just delight in them and I ask You, Jesus, too to be their Good Shepherd, to walk with them, to protect them from the enemy. Holy Spirit increase and give to us the Gifts of the Holy Spirit, especially the gift of piety, wonder and awe, discernment, knowledge, fear of the Lord. All the gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit and may Almighty God bless all of you, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

**Father Boniface:** Amen.

Father Michael Denk, thank you so much for sharing with us your own journey of faith. It has been wonderful to talk with you.

**Father Michael:** You as well. Thank you so much for all that you do for us priests.

<https://youtu.be/Of0Bc4cNd3U>