

Praying with Priests with Father Michael Denk

Interview: Father Norm Douglas

Fr. Michael: Hi, I'm Fr. Michael Denk. I'm here at St. Matthias in Parma, Ohio, and I am delighted to have Father Norm Douglas as my guest today. We are continuing the series I am calling, "*Praying with Priests*". We're going to learn some wisdom from Fr. Norm Douglas about his experience of prayer life. As always with these interviews, they're just very candid and open and you get to hear kind of like behind the scenes of what it's like for a priest to pray with God. So, welcome Father.

Fr. Norm Douglas: Hey, it is great to be here with you knowing you through these years and having this great connection.

Fr. Michael: We have a good connection. His first assignment his was Saint Barnabas in Northfield, and that was my first assignment of Saint Barnabas Northfield, so we had a similar experience of going to a wonderful parish of people and getting to be like a puppy dog at that first assignment.

Fr. Norm Douglas: So fresh and at the same time this coming June it will be 50 years for me, but what I love and its grace from God, it's still fresh.

Fr. Michael: Fifty years.

Fr. Norm Douglas: I'm an old guy.

Fr. Michael: Wow, that's amazing. How old were you and you got ordained?

Fr. Norm Douglas: Twenty seven.

Fr. Michael: That's almost the minimum.

Fr. Norm Douglas: Almost. Well yes, in the old days you could maybe get it at 26. If anybody needs to do the arithmetic, this next week I'm 77, and still loving it and still working.

Fr. Michael: A lot of guys retire at 75.

Fr. Norm Douglas: Talk about prayer, you know as I prayed about this, at 75, I could have retired. A lot of my classmates, there were 26 of us ordained. Big class and still about 16 alive and in Ministry and just about all of them did retire. They help out at parishes on weekends, but they can avoid administration, avoid all the headaches that you might get, but for me the prayer was, this has been my hobby for 50 years and I love it and still do and still have the energy and everything and the grace from God to be able to do it.

Fr. Michael: And it's use it or lose it, I think. Some of the guys retire. There's something about keeping it going.

I want to start off asking just about your first memories of God and I also want to say that we have a very interesting thing with Father Norm. He is a convert to the faith, so I don't know how that works or where your spirituality or what your relationship or teaching was of God, but try to think back as far as you can. What was your first experience and thought of God?

Fr. Norm Douglas: A couple things. First, I belong to Disciples of Christ denomination in North Akron. I lived near there. I went on my own. My Mom was uncomfortable. Partly, she was a single parent and she felt self-conscious, but she encouraged me that I would go to church. I went to that church every week from the time I was about six until about fourteen when a lot of people established their independence from God; that was me.

Anyway, going back, I know I loved Sunday School. I remember because you had Sunday School before church and there were things you did and little stories and everything. But probably the moment that is significant for me, different than a lot of Catholics the way they grew up, I was baptized in third grade. Their tradition believed not in infant baptism but be baptized at an older age, but even there the notion was, you should be aware of that you should be ready to make a commitment. The church council, or the board, had to talk about me, because I was only third grade; they usually didn't have somebody baptized as early as third grade because you're not ready to make this kind of commitment. I was one who was always into it, able to express myself, had a deep love for Jesus already, and so they had this Board Meeting and they decided that, you know, he's ready. I was baptized on Easter Sunday in April, 1955, at the age of eight.

Fr. Michael: Wow, you chose to do it. That's so cool. Do you remember it?

Fr. Norm Douglas: Absolutely. I mean there's something beautiful about that I appreciate the traditional Catholic from the very beginning, that relationship with the Lord. But remembering that and at that they also have the pool that was behind the altar and so you got in and there was water up to your chest and then the minister would immerse you in the water backwards, holding your back three times, in the name of Father and Son and the Holy Spirit. That was very powerful. The other thing about it was my mom came. My mom, I think, that was her first glimpse that maybe religion could be something positive and good.

Fr. Michael: Really. But you went at six years old, did somebody else take you? Maybe a friend?

Fr. Norm Douglas: Yes, there was only one street, a busy street, and she would go with me and walk me across that street then go back home. The rest of it, there were no worries. I mean I had to walk on the sidewalk. Today we'd be very worried about letting a six-year-old you know go, but back then that wasn't an issue.

Fr. Michael: Single mother. Tell me about that.

Fr. Norm Douglas: A little background for me. I was born in Los Angeles, CA. My mom and dad had been married for about 13 years, when she would conceive me. Well, they were having some marital difficulties already, in part because a couple years earlier they had a child that died after three or four months, so that was creating a little added tension to their marriage. Well, my mom got pregnant with me and my dad, my biological dad chose to skip town. Years later I found out from Ancestry.com after he died, but she never saw him again. She didn't know where he went and so she had the baby, me, she was raising me already as a single parent and doing that and doing that well. Then four years, later she met a man, a schoolteacher from Akron Ohio, and they connected and brought us back from sunny Southern California to Akron Ohio, in the month of December. That was not a good omen for my mother to come back. After four years, he had an issue with alcoholism, so she separated from him, which I am really grateful for and raised me on her own.

Fr. Michael: You were born in LA and then came here?

Fr. Norm Douglas: Yes, born in LA.

Fr. Michael: Interesting because there's just such an Akron legend. I never knew that. I never knew you were born outside of Akron. So, as a child you felt that closeness with God. What was that like? Not every child wants to go to PSR.

Fr. Norm Douglas: Here is something else that is very much a part of my experience. When I was baptized, right around that time my mom separated from my stepdad because of his issues and so I remember, and I went to Sunday school. The Sunday school teacher I considered an adult, well he was a college kid, there were about eight or nine of us in that class and I remember one time coming to class and being kind of not very positive, enthusiastic, which I always had been. I guess I still am but the Sunday school teacher said to me, "Norman, you don't seem very positive today, what's going on?" What I told him was, "I'm upset because I don't have a father." I said, "My father is in California (my mom didn't give me all the details about California until I was an adult). But my father in California, and my mom married my stepdad and she just recently separated from him, so I don't have a father. That is what is hurting me." I'll never forget what he said, and I've stayed with it for the rest of my life. He said, "You do have a Father. God is your Father, and He will never abandon you." That made a difference then and through the rest of my life.

Fr. Michael: That's beautiful and have you felt God's presence, the Father's presence in your life?

Fr. Norm Douglas: Yes, that's part of it. In fact, I have a banner that I think St. Barnabas, my first parish, the kids made that says *God you are my father and you will always be there for me*. They made this because I told them this story. I still have it in my bedroom for 50 years as a reminder for me obviously also a disciple of Christ we had personal relationships with Jesus that was important. This relationship with Jesus gave me and others a sense of God is your Father. God as you've heard the word,

“Abba,” in Aramaic means Daddy or Papa and stayed with me and that's still very much a part of me in terms of, well even the whole Trinity, just the Father who created me, who loves me, who's always there for me, Jesus who was the Lord and Savior and brother and friend. Who gave His life to show the Father's love and the Holy Spirit dwelling within me and part of me which again third grade baptism, for me that was a real consciousness of because you were being baptized Father, Son and Holy Spirit. I learned about all that stuff early on and gravitated to it and it became a rich part of my lifelong spirituality.

Fr. Michael: One of my learnings in spiritual life was that we tend to image God the Father after human fathers of course. So, I think that if you didn't have a human father that is very hard to do, but it's so beautiful that that teacher was able to do that for you at such a young age.

Fr. Norm Douglas: That teacher, 19-or 20-year-old, was a father figure to me and so were some teachers and my Boy Scout master, through the years always I'd see it. They wonderfully fathered me even though I didn't have a biological father present and wow that's made a difference through the years.

Fr. Michael: Now you do that for many, I'm sure. So, you grow from early childhood, what would be some movement in your life? Would be high school, would there be any shift from how you were as a child good or bad right? When I went to high school, it was not a positive shift. What was that like as you began to grow out of adolescence?

Fr. Norm Douglas: Fourteen growing in just another phase of adolescence for me, I had also been close to the minister and the minister's son at that time. In the Protestant Church they can be called to another church and so he and his family were called to another church in Indiana. So, I no longer had his presence and my best friend Mark, his son, who is just a grade ahead of me. They were gone, then a new minister came. I didn't know him; he didn't know me; this was just maybe not comfortable for me. It was just lower key. Obviously, I'm more enthusiastic and everything and I was already wondering about this whole God thing and is it important, so in high school, I stopped going to church all together. In doing that I still had a sense, probably in the back of my mind, not in the forefront, that God was there. I was much more concerned in high school about having lots of friends and being popular. Also, I remember in those adolescent years, eventually in high school one girl that I absolutely loved from 9th grade, by 12th grade we went to the senior prom together. To me friendship, a woman who cares about me deeply, and also maybe a certain measure of independence, like I don't need any church or anybody to tell me what to do. I can live my own life.

Fr. Michael: Do you think that was just because of a shift of going to high school?

Fr. Norm Douglas: Yes, probably the added factor that I'd been close to that minister, that may have made a difference too, but it was all of that. Even had we still been close, my center wouldn't have been as much in the Lord, understandably in high school my center was in people, like me, how I was treated in school. I was always kind of

lighthearted and funny and got attention. I got good grades; I was more wrapped up in that than any sense of God.

Fr. Michael: It would be interesting to see how we could help a high school student allow that to be an experience of God. Know the community and friendship!

Fr. Norm Douglas: You're right. When I did come back in in my college years and come back to that, I looked at those years differently like we all can. Seeing there's presence there or God at work. I didn't realize it at the time but looking back and that could be true for all of us in spirituality.

Fr. Michael: Tell me about your reversion or coming back or conversion.

Fr. Norm Douglas: I'll try to be quick with this story because it has a couple elements. For me it shows how God works through it all.

When I was in high school, we never had a car. When I was 16, I learned how to drive with my paper route money I bought a car at \$600, a 1956 Chevrolet 1962-63. That was great. I took a lot of friends to school. I was really popular even with the car but then I wrecked the car right in front of everybody in the school. I wrecked the car by running into somebody else and that was miserable and I couldn't keep the car. I remember thinking that day when I wrecked my car, I no longer had it, that was the worst day of my life.

Going forward, by my senior year, I thought now I want to double date. I was dating this gal and now I didn't have a car. A lot of friends that I allowed to double date with me, they didn't want a double date. But there was a couple, Fred and Eileen, who won the Manhood and Womanhood Cup in our senior class, just wonderful people. I knew them from classes and they clearly said, "Hey, we will double with you." So, as seniors we went to the homecoming dance; went to the new year dance; and to the prom I doubled with them. I got close to them. I had not been close to them; we were friends before but because of my car wreck we got close by the end of my senior year.

They were Catholic, going to Mass every day before public school and they asked me at Easter, "Hey, you want to come to church with us?" I said, "It's going to be too crowded," so I said, "No." They asked me a week later; they didn't give up on me. They said well, it's not going to be crowded now. I thought well I should go, but I remember thinking going more as a favor to them. They were wonderful people; I doubled with them so I should at least go.

Well, I went and that religious sense in the background of me, or at the core of me, came right again at Mass. I didn't understand it all; some of it was in Latin, good preaching and was also the story of doubting Thomas the week after Easter. Of course, there I am thinking about doubts but, wow, it all came together at once and of course that led me on a path to eventually take what they called instructions and go forward. The key point for me, that I often share, that when I wrecked that car and thought it was the worst day of my life, it was the best day of my life where it led me.

Fr. Michael: So good for people to know how God works.

Fr. Norm Douglas: Yes, even if you don't see it at the moment, you look back. Wow!

Fr. Michael: You start going to Mass with them.

Fr. Norm Douglas: Every day, because they went every day before public high school.

Fr. Michael: Oh, you went every day. Wow.

Fr. Norm Douglas: Then we graduated in June, then in the summer we each had jobs downtown and we all went to Saint Bernard mass, the 12:10 Mass.

Fr. Michael: And you're not Catholic at this point.

Fr. Norm Douglas: No. I talked to one priest and again, there needs to be a connection. This priest was a wonderful guy, but he was very quiet very serious. I don't think he knew how to deal with me and my enthusiasm. So, it was mutual. I stopped going. Then they said that they were going to the University of Akron. The Newman Center is a Catholic student center, they've got a new priest there this fall, people say he's wonderful let's try that.

So, after summer I went to that Father Tom Dunphy. We made an immediate connection and we continued to be friends from the time I was 18, through all the way until I was 70, and he died that year when he was 86.

Fr. Michael: Where did he retire from?

Fr. Norm Douglas: He didn't retire. That is another inspiration He was still the active Pastor at St. Martin of Tours. He died in his sleep one day at age of 86.

Fr. Michael: That's amazing. Were you going to Akron?

Fr. Norm Douglas: Yes, I was going to University of Akron which is also interesting too in terms of God. I was very good in math, and I got a scholarship to Yale University; however, at Yale I still had to pay for room and board. My mom is a single mom and I couldn't pay for that. Going to Yale, I think some of that was the ego thing. I obviously didn't go, I went to the University of Akron but had that not happened, I'm not sure at Yale I'd been somewhere where I'd been called to conversion to Jesus.

Fr. Michael: That is so cool because the Newman Campus ministry is such, I think, an important part of our diocese. What I like about that is we are there; whether or not present or students may take it up but, we're there for them.

You're now going to daily Mass and you connect with Father Dunphy. Had you thought about being Catholic but didn't connect with that other priest?

Fr. Norm Douglas: I still thought about being Catholic. I was drawn to it many ways. I was reading some things in 1965. December 8th 1965, was the close of the Second Vatican Council, so I was reading all about that because I'm a reader and all these

documents they put out. I was reading and finding out more about them. That spirit of how that was and the openness the movement more toward English; the movement toward more involvement not only in ritual and the faith as a community of church but also outreach to the world a difference you could make there, all of that struck me.

When I talked to Father Tom Dunphy at the time, he had the Baltimore Catechism question answer, question answer. He said, "This is not going to work for you. OK let's look at question 3; let's look at. . . ", which I was doing with the other priest. So, we just took the themes and started talking about each of them and having these great conversations about faith, about scripture, about what was going on in life and so all that just drew me. Before the RCIA, Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, I usually call that the Roman Catholic Intelligence Agency but it's not, but anyway that back then.

Fr. Michael: You met with the priest individually.

Fr. Norm Douglas: Yes, with the priest individually but he was great. When I came in, I came in at Christmas time and so I actually made my First Communion at Midnight Mass that year and the other thing I had in addition to faith, which is important faith community because this whole group of Newman kids, they're probably 70 or 80 of them involved in from freshman to senior year, they took me under their wing. So, they were this wonderful community of faith and we were having different talks by different priests around the diocese about what was happening with the Second Vatican Council. I was getting further teaching; I was getting this community and everything; just the heart of what ideally, we know now is the way that conversion journey ought to be.

Fr. Michael: That is beautiful. How would you describe your prayer life then or was your prayer more just mass, community, and daily mass?

Fr. Norm Douglas: Probably more so. I would say that was a part of it. I think I was prayerful but more in the kind of things like before I go to bed, thank you God for the day and bless me tomorrow. A two-sentence prayer and good night. But I did love daily Mass and especially as everything was moving into English and the scripture and everything and often, they would ask me to be a Lector at that Mass and that would get me to reflect on the scripture. The other thing for me about the scripture as Disciples of Christ, I grew up very scripture-based, so I knew a lot of those scriptures. I realize better than a lot of my Catholic friends and that struck me too and those scriptures spoke to me.

Fr. Michael: This is the Year of Eucharistic Revival and one of the things I've been encouraging is daily Mass. Why did you like going to daily Mass? Some people go to Sunday Mass just to kind of check the box. Why did you like daily Mass?

Fr. Norm Douglas: I think from the beginning, you know, as I went there what I loved about it is the focus of attention wasn't so much on the priest. The Protestant church I went to, the focus of attention was on the pastor and scripture and that was all good. Here but then I didn't grow up with that consciousness for me the Last Supper was a

memorial, Father Tom Dunphy was good, the preaching was good but that added element of Eucharist, I did not grow up with that consciousness.

For me, the Last Supper was a memorial and a symbol of everything. When I came into the church and saw the richer, deeper understanding that this is the real presence of Jesus Christ so that I also hungered for that because I remember saying, "Well why can't I go now?" Father Tom Dunphy who I loved and trusted said, "No, go through this formation so you'll have a deeper understanding and experience of what you're saying yes to."

So, that happened and then yes, that community and everything and then the other thing is we made a lot of college retreats. Every year we make at least one. Those retreats really helped me to go deeper because it was a whole weekend and that deepened my relationship with the Lord.

Fr. Michael: That's been a huge part of my priesthood is retreats, weekend renewals and stuff like that where you really are able to spend quality time with people and form them as Disciples. To have that desire to receive the Eucharist.

One of the things I like to say to people when they say, "Why can't I receive Communion?" My thing is you can, we want everyone to receive Communion, we just have a process of initiation for that and that is the end. What would you say to encourage somebody who wants to receive, they feel kind of shunned, or bad because they can't receive about the value of some kind of formation.

Fr. Norm Douglas: This might be somebody who's thinking about becoming Catholic.

Fr. Michael: Yes.

Fr. Norm Douglas: Why can't I go now that I already have you made your decision, in the Protestant church, for Jesus Christ that's it. So, you might think, and probably initially I might have thought that a little bit. I've already decided this is Jesus, I made a commitment to Jesus, but I think when I realized that formation over time gave me a deeper experience. The reality of the real presence of Jesus Christ and what that meant. Because I know even then, and even now as a priest, I have to watch it because sometimes I could take that for granted. It's another day another Mass but, wow! This is the real presence of Christ who wants to become a part of me, who wants to be in me, who's not only my teacher and my friend, but yeah, that dwells within me through His Spirit and I had to evolve so that I'm glad when I tell people, hey give it some time for two reasons. One, because having a hunger for a while can be a good thing so you're less likely to take it for granted what a wonderful gift it is you've waited for; and two, when you do it, you can have a richer, deeper appreciation of what the experience means.

Fr. Michael: That's a good thing with the hunger too. I think people that find themselves in challenging situations where there's grave sin or something like that; it's OK to hunger for that. To spend time going to Confession, desiring to grow but to have that that desire

and that hunger. I wonder if it's extroverted thing. You're extroverted 100%. I think people think I am, but I'm a little bit more introverted. I'm more able to connect with God when I'm alone before the Blessed Sacrament or pray. I would assume it is the opposite for you when you're celebrating Mass.

Fr. Norm Douglas: Yes, I would say, obviously I experienced both but when there's a community I'm with and a context and the Mass, I have a richer, deeper feeling. Have I done Adoration and everything? Yes, and it's been touching for me, but in terms of what really converts me on a regular basis is that Mass. So even Adoration, which I value and so forth, but it leads me right back into the Mass to appreciate the Liturgy. For me, that sense of Eucharist at the Liturgy also sends me forth.

Years ago, it was this expression, but it meant more to me how to be Eucharist for the world. You've received the Eucharist how now to bring that to the world by who you are and Christ in you. All of that has been a very important part of my own spirituality.

Fr. Michael: So, you're going to daily Mass, Newman campus ministry, you become a Catholic, life is wonderful. When does the call to priesthood start?

Fr. Norm Douglas: Well, this is interesting too. It's pretty unique for me the way God wired me. I come in, I'm at Christmas midnight mass and I'm deeply touched. I'm given a rosary and I'm given one of those prayer books that helps the Latin put in English because it was still going on, I was given some other things a cross and the community very touching and very powerful. So that was December 24th, then the end of January, about six weeks later, there was a retreat that was always planned. It was the retreat for the Newman center kids at Loyola Lakes, which was a retreat center South of Akron. OK I'll go and I was still in that excited phase and everything and so I went. It was wonderful, again community probably about 35 or 40 of us, all young people wanting to grow in the Lord, especially excited about the new dimensions from the Second Vatican Council.

So, on Saturday night I went into the Chapel, still a similar Chapel there, and there I was by myself. I went in and I just prayed and said OK, it's good, stop and pray and be quiet. So, I was quiet praying and in the midst of the quiet prayer, I heard God say internal voice whatever, "I want you to be a priest." I was only six weeks a Catholic and I thought, "This is crazy. I don't even know the holy days." I sensed it and thought, "Well, knowing me maybe this is my initial enthusiasm." I tend to jump into things so maybe that's all this is but I'm really hearing this. In prayer I said, 'my Father I'll continue on University of Akron and the Newman Center if that's still there in three-and-a-half years.' It never left me ever, ever, and I remember in the course of those early months I said, "Well Lord here's another", I'm thinking that this qualifier, "I've always been a class clown, I've been goofy, I've been lighthearted, and I don't know that I'm serious enough to be a priest." Here again whether that moment or just over time, I heard the Lord say, "I want your joy that's why I'm calling you, I want your joy. Well, that's not a disqualifier!"

I then also, when I talked to Father Tom Dunphy. He said, "Oh yes, you'll bring that. It's a wonderful thing."

Fr. Michael: That's beautiful. Yes, we think these things about ourselves that is not holiness or piety or whatever, but God created us with that personality, he wants us to use that personality to reach people. That never left you and did that bring you joy or angst? What was it like to have the call?

Fr. Norm Douglas: First of all, that call, so many people in those years because I lived with the Newman Center too, so people come in and many people would say...

Fr. Michael: Your dorm was there?

Fr. Norm Douglas: Yes. They had a room downstairs for one person and I became like the maintenance man, the one who closed and locked doors and everything. You're laughing. I don't know if I'm the best maintenance man, but I cleaned pretty good. Anyway, so that's why I was there, but people coming in all the time, sometimes it was Father Tom's day off, and they'd see me and I'd say, "Oh I can have Father Tom get back to you." Then sometimes, because this is also how I'm wired that around caring about people and might say something as an 18 or 19 year old to another young person, I'd say, "Gee, he's not here. he will be here tomorrow or whatever I said. Is there anything you're struggling with? I'm glad to talk to you but I know you may want to talk to the priest. A lot of times they ended up talking to me because it was very much on their mind. Then a lot of those times and even other times people said, "Have you thought about being a priest?"

Well, the other thing that I would say, I wouldn't, don't think it was a fib, I'd say I thought about it, I mean the point is I thought about it. I didn't want to say it in there, I think again some of that is ego. What if I decided by the last year that I'm not going and I'm telling all these people? So, I said, "I'm thinking about," which was truly there but that was affirming to me, and I got real involved in those years. The 60s, everybody has different visions of them, but in the 60s I was in college 1965 to 1969.

In 1967, there were two big areas of social justice that even the church was starting to look at that I was personally involved in. One was the Civil Rights Movement. I grew up in a neighborhood in North Hill where at my Boy Scout troop everybody else was black but me. I was white so I was very aware of the racial situation, the prejudice stuff that was going on and I got involved in some of that teaching and inner-city students, adults to get their GED, their graduation, so that they could go on.

I was also involved in some other things around some of my black friends who would share with me some of the hurts that they've had helping me see prejudice when you're white you may not see.

Then the other thing I got involved in was the Peace Movement. The Vietnam War was heating up. There was a new organization in Catholicism called Pax Christi, Peace of Christ. I got involved in that. I saw some other students my age against the war but

being against the war in very violent and negative ways. Even guys coming home, you know, belittling them and putting them down. Pax Christi reminded me I was against the war but very caring about the people who are there. Even believing, though I disagreed with some of those in government, I didn't turn around and hate them. I knew that especially Thomas Merton, who was alive then, that whole thing if I'm going to be for peace, I have to be consistent about that. Not with violence, not with violent attitudes. So, in those two movements the meaning and purpose to what I was doing with others and the enthusiasm of doing that and seeing it was so important engaged me a lot.

Fr. Michael: What a gift. I feel so bad for students that don't have that experience that you had. What a wonderful culture to grow up and mature and become who you were.

What was the final I'm going to do this priesthood thing? I'm going to go to the Seminary at least. What was that like?

Fr. Norm Douglas: I remember after I graduated and I had been up to the Seminary and had some hesitation because at the time, it's different now, it was much more somber. The halls were dark, you had to be in bed at a certain time, but they liked lights out for everybody at 10:00 pm and I'm a night owl. You could only go out on walks a couple times, be off the property briefly, you couldn't spend time; it kind of was like prison. Here I am, I was enthusiastic, I was involved in the Peace Movement and the black/white movement. I was going to different cities real involved giving talks. So, a little hesitant but again Father Tom Dunphy my ongoing mentor all the way until I was 70 that he said, "Norm, you're not going there because you want to be in the Seminary the rest of your life, you're going there because you hear God calling you to be a priest. Deal with whatever you have, keep focused on that call and Norman, I see you find the positive that's there. You tend to be that way." Some Seminarians who left were coming very negative and bitter.

I did that and I went and then I was in a class, a lot of them had been in since 8th grade because it was a high school Seminary, so they were with each other over 8 years. I got in there and made friends easily and then that community and that spirit and the good things and remember part of prayer life too. Look for the good. What's here to appreciate. How Lord You want to touch me deeply in the goodness of how you work in and through all of this.

Fr. Michael: One of the things I like to teach is the Examen Prayer and that's the first step is gratitude and it's important that we look for it. It's not always evident, sometimes we have to have that look.

Did you learn how to pray in the Seminary?

Fr. Norm Douglas: Yes, but for me I had to learn and grow. We read The Office and the prayers every day in a group, we'd go in the Chapel and some of that, with my temperament especially, because even as a younger person, even at Newman we did a lot of spontaneous prayer and I found that a little bit difficult. OK, I have to get into it but

kind of the rote nature of it wasn't what I was drawn to, but even there, what I would try to do is maybe find one sentence or one Psalm and look at it. Just going on and on about it, just didn't do it as much for me, so I did that. I was in there five years and by the third year I was in the Seminary they were starting to move to small prayer groups. The small prayer groups would come together once a week. They would talk about their spirituality and what was happening, and I love that. That connection stayed with me too, and in fact, the whole 50 years I've been a priest, I've always been in the small group of other priests to meet monthly and to talk about what's going in our life. In a way, part of it is The Examen by looking at being grateful, looking at what's positive, looking at the Lord where, maybe for me, I call it an ego check, He's going to check me out. Maybe I wasn't as open to you, maybe not just in what I did or didn't do but, the mindset was I'd get caught up in pride there. I always say, "Lord, humble me but try to do it gently." I was glad we had that and the discipline of that and for me the reminder that I still do that because of Lectio Divina.

I still like to reflect on the scriptures the night before I preach, the night before obviously for the weekend. Just spending some time with scripture, listening to it, seeing what it's saying to me, what I need to hear. Where it's maybe calling me to look at something in my life. When I think about OK, I'm going to preach to these other people, what do they need to hear? Kind of that sense of OK, Lord, first of all, what do I need here because probably I can pass it on to them. So that's all been a rich part of it.

Fr. Michael: I like teaching people Lectio Divina because you can do that with any passage. It could be the daily readings, it could be the Sunday Mass. Even if you go to Sunday Mass sometimes it's hard for people because it is more of a structured experience to look for some moment of grace, to listen for some word of God. Like what can I take with me? Maybe the homily is not that great sure but, you hear all these readings, you hear all this. The word of God just being poured out. Just one thing.

Fr. Norm Douglas: Yes, I've often done that for myself and others because there are a lot of people today who say, "Oh man, Catholic Church." Too many people have left our church unfortunately for a number of reasons. Maybe their lack of understanding, maybe things that bothered them and hurt them but, being able to go back and see that richness and see. Just like you said a homily. Can you find one thing instead of listening and griping the whole time? Back to that appreciative why, I call it appreciative inquiry, what in this homily, what in this Mass, what in this relationship am I first of all called to appreciate? To be aware of that and grateful for that.

Fr. Michael: I want to hear more about the small groups. When the seminary began doing that and then as priests, I think we're blessed and encouraged to do that. I think that's a really important thing for lay people too. One of the things that I love to foster here at Saint Matthias is having that group that you come together regularly with to pray together. And some people don't know how to pray together, that could be an awkward experience for them. What would be your encouragement or thoughts or what did you learn about just praying together.

Fr. Norm Douglas: I think in part, and we have some groups we want to develop further that we are also seeing people see the value of that especially coming out of retreats and things like that. I think one of the things is sometimes you can use Lectio Divina or something like that; or I know for us ok, take a look if you meet once a week, once a month, let's stop it and quiet value that quiet. I need it OK, what's something over this last month as you now talk about it that struck you? Maybe God spoke to you that may be challenged and that will go around and share some of what that is. So, the sharing of spirituality in the spiritual journey obviously is really valuable. The other thing we will try to do that too is right now, where you are what are, what are you thankful for? What do you look at that your life and see what's good because that's important also. Too often in our culture, whether it is politically or religiously, we can be looking at what's negative, what don't you like, what are your complaints? There's a place to look at that but even there instead of looking at what's negative, where's an area that you see we all need growth, or we need to be stretched. Putting it in that language rather than what don't you like or what's the possibility you like to see to make it better.

Fr. Michael: I like that too of beginning with gratitude. I think there's a wisdom of Saint Ignatius starting with gratitude because it puts you in a proper disposition where you're aware of God's love, of God's Providence and graciousness that then you can begin to, out of love, look at areas that you know you've been away or converted and then it doesn't come as a self-condemnation or that it can be any good thing too but it's a general prompting of God to say, hey, I want to be closer to you in this area of your life.

Fr. Norm Douglas: And believe that this Divine Presence can work through positive stuff and difficult stuff.

I use this as an example when I went back and thought that car wrecking was the worst day of my life. What evolved ended up being the best day. A lot of things we look at and see ok, this happened, whatever, can some good come out of this; or what can we see from this; or how can I grow from this and just the value of doing that. The value of storytelling. Just like you're hearing me, you're pulling out of me some stories and in those groups' different things like, what touched you or we've asked where and how did you first realize God or Jesus was somebody real and different in your life. That kind of sharing also builds one another up.

Fr. Michael: To hear each other's stories. When I was in the Seminary, I did a video of the Seminarians that were there, and I'd never heard each other's vocation stories. We would go out and give them to Parishes all the time, but it was neat to hear each other's. I think that helps you discover God in places in your life that you maybe didn't expect or think.

So, you do still pray in in groups with priests you know and with lay people too?

Fr. Norm Douglas: Absolutely. I have been with the priest group all these years. There have been different groups. The Emmaus group, the Jesu Caritas and some other one in small groups and they have a format but a format that isn't meant to stifle but draw

people out in terms of what they're looking at and what their hope for and how they want to grow and praying for one another and spending an hour before the Blessed Sacrament together when we have that once a month session.

One of the things we've done, I've been at this parish, Saint Vincent, for eight years. All our groups, the Parish Council, the various Commissions, Finance Council, we spend a good 20-25 minutes in prayer. Usually, we may use the coming Sunday scripture and we'll look at it read it, we may use something else, and then ask people to take some quiet time reading this and then maybe even a little Lectio Divina and then we're going to break you up and pair people off with one other person. Talk for a few minutes about what struck you and what's hitting you then after that come back and the whole group anybody who wants to share something from the reflection or from your one-on-one dialogue. That's really a rich way we've really mentioned that all the groups the Commissions, Evangelization, Finance whatever are meant to have a spiritual foundation rather than let's get the quick prayer done. Also, in all those groups afterward when we're done, we take some quiet time who or what do you want to pray for? Then like Prayers of the Faithful, take that quiet moment. You need that quiet moment first. Settle, think, who then anybody who wants to offer a prayer intention and then we close with the Our Father.

Fr. Michael: Give me a sense of your own personal prayer as a priest. We heard about the conversion and call and even seminary but now you become a priest. How does the priest pray?

Fr. Norm Douglas: It's interesting. It has not changed through the years but, it it's evolved somewhat. I think the first few years I was prayerful but my enthusiasm and all the ministries I was doing, was God at work in that, yes, but sometimes I think OK God was at work and that's my prayer. I would pray The Office but sometimes there, I'd run through it or maybe I'd skip a part of it and not really be as well drawn to it.

Through the years I think I've come to realize even the Office, I do try to do something similar. OK, Norm, this whole section, stop for a moment, what's here in this that you need to pray or meditate about. Not just run through it.

Fr. Michael: Real quick for our viewers. You mentioned The Office a couple of times. Some people might not know what that is, but the Divine Office is the Liturgy of the Hours that priests and religious were obligated to pray that. The idea is if you're a monk, they do all seven. We do five different times during the day where we pray The Divine Office. I did that once in the Travis monastery they get up in the middle of night 2:00 am and then they do it three times for midday, that was too much for me.

Fr. Norm Douglas: Yes, I get you.

Fr. Michael: You feel like you just got doing your work or whatever you're doing now you have to stop.

Fr. Norm Douglas: I was not destined to be a monk but I'm glad there are those that's their charism and what they bring to the church.

For me probably the other thing is probably a lot of it comes out of The Examen and Lectio Divina.

I'm older now I can say you know I'm forgetful sometimes. Tell you what folks, I don't know what is going to happen to me. Those two resources are almost blended together, but I really like that it really values spending the time and especially, I'm more of a night person than morning person. I will pray in the morning because I have a 6:28 AM mass so I spend some time in prayer to prepare for that. Then in the evening looking back at the day with that whole thing what to be grateful for, where Lord, were you speaking to me I didn't realize at the time. I don't always do this but sometimes taking the time to look at my schedule for the next day. OK God what do I need to be prepared for? Not only in terms of this meeting but in a spiritual kind of way. Life centered kind of prayer is good for me.

I think the other thing that I do not as well, it's a very important part of prayer, the centering prayer, the quiet. I will do that but what helps me there, there's so much that you can get online, and I've used the last two years since it started a program called Hallow. I really like Hallow. That really helped me to enrich even my night prayer. The readings often have different days of scripture, talks about the life of a saint, this and that. That would lead me, or in the middle of that, into a deeper quiet prayer.

The thing I had done even before that is often find a Catholic song that's done. I've always loved that one what is it the Ignatian? Lord give you, I give you my liberty.

Fr. Michael: "Take Lord Receive."

Fr. Norm Douglas: Thank you. "Take Lord Receive," or other ones and sometimes just quiet listening to that and letting that speak to me and then I can go into some quiet prayers centering because that helps.

Fr. Michael: That's great to know. So, you know how to use the Hallow app. That's a wonderful resource for people.

Fr. Norm Douglas: I encourage people to consider that. There are other ones too that you can see and tap into but Hallow has been good for me.

Fr. Michael: I want to talk about the personal dimension of God. We believe in a Trinity three persons, one being. How do you relate to The Father, The Son, The Holy Spirit?

Fr. Norm Douglas: First, I can say that as I've shared my life, that's been important for me and conscious of that. Again, I grew up with a deep love for Jesus and Amen and I'm glad there's a focus on Jesus and listening to Him and what it means to be his Disciple, but I really think, not putting that down, it's obviously great and some people don't even do that. But to me a richer fuller sense of Trinity not as a doctrine to be memorized but what is that calling me to an experience of life and where and how

because I'm very life centered is The Father, The Son and The Spirit speaking to me in life and being open to that.

I've already shared the big one as you know is the one that the Sunday school teacher in third grade said, "God is your father." I've had that sense because people do call me father and I'm always kind of struck by that and what that means. Knowing that for me because I've never had one father throughout but sometimes the Father, God, works through people. Whether it was that Sunday school teacher, Father Tom Dunphy, or even some young people who inspired me and in a sense Father even though they call me Father. That sense of where do I need fathering and what does that mean for me?

I think it means for me, first of all, God you created me and you want to continue to father me, to guide me to give me a deeper sense of your fatherhood as Creator of the world even now. I know for some it would blow their minds probably, Creator of the universe and not these telescopes and what they do now, but the part that God You are the Father, You are the Father Creator of the universe, of me, of other people.

The other thing about father helps me to have a sense of a God: you are Father and Creator of every human being on earth. Not only the Christians who follow Jesus, obviously we want people to have that fuller sense but, we're all part of one family. You love us, you want us to see that you want to Father us into that we're part of one family and how do we be conscious of that.

Then for me Jesus, I love that expression in scripture, Jesus is the visible image of the invisible God. Do we need this God? How do we better understand from the love and the compassion and the guidance and the challenge of Jesus and the giving of His life?

One of the things that helped me in Jesus, and I get this could be controversial but I have been uncomfortable and I'll explain why. When we simply say, "Jesus died for your sins," here is how I understand it and how I share it doesn't take away from that, it just gives it a deeper dimension. I believe God sent His Son Jesus to love, to love humanity and to love to the point of whatever loving meant, whatever the consequences of love would be. Jesus loved to the point of willing to die for our sins and for us having a vital sense of God. It's not just dying, it's not just sin that makes Him love us in some way, it's loving completely and when we love completely, like Jesus, then if we're going to love we're going to be vulnerable. We're going to be open and somehow that Jesus on the cross, again would transform even seeing the cross as a Catholic, was that, wow! God Jesus, that is how much you love. You love, you gave it all, that's what you forgive. It's not love. it's that forgiveness, it's that goodness that helps transfer me by you, Jesus and in terms of how I pass that on.

The Holy Spirit, I think years ago, there was a movement bit called the Charismatic Renewal. I was part of that. Probably the best part of that is a sense of there's a spirit within us. I often speak of it in the Creed, the life-giving spirit. That Spirit that wants to give us life. Also, the one Spirit that unites us. The Spirit wants to help each of us to be vital and come together in a deeper unity and believing again that Spirit dwells in us.

I'm being really simplistic about this, it's not just this but, I think of the God the Father, who created us and was over us, Jesus as that part God who is with us, walking on the journey, and the Spirit who was in us and brings us together.

People ask me, "Who do you turn to? The Father?" I used to go crazy with that. It just happens naturally and sometimes it's just Father, Son, and Spirit, your presence in all those ways. Touch me now, work through me now, help me now.

Fr. Michael: That's beautiful. What would be your encouragement to someone that hasn't had an experience like that before? I think even Mass. You hear people say that may believe the faith or they say, "I don't/didn't get anything out of Mass. I'm not getting anything out of it." Maybe there are Catholics that come Sunday after Sunday faithfully and feel that way. What would you say to encourage them or help them?

Fr. Norm Douglas: I know what I've done a lot of times, and this isn't the only thing I've done. I've encouraged them, because every Parish I've been, we've had a variety of retreats. Part of the retreats were Jesus centered but also Father, Son and Spirit centered. An experience of retreat that we've had, some that are one day, we've had some that are overnight, you go home and come back, but for me those have been wonderful opportunities and part of that is the value, the time, obviously the teachings and also the witness.

If some people hear witnesses and there again it doesn't need to be a retreat. We've had so many witnesses at Mass maybe after Communion and somebody sharing here's where I was. For example, when we do Sacramental prep, we do that with the parents of kids making their First Communion or parents of the kids who are Confirmed. In those prep, they also work with their kids directly, but we have little mini retreats, if you will, so that somebody for example First Communion coming up. There's a retreat or Evening of Recollection for the parents. What they're going to hear at that, there's going to be some prayer and everything, they're going to hear a witness by somebody who shares something like... well you know I went to church, not every week; my son two years ago made First Communion. I was drawn to that, I came to some of the things like that, and it turned me around and I realized thinking of what community is all about and seeing my son's excitement, that brought me back to the faith. They're getting a witness from somebody who says they were like a lot of them, but as they opened up and experienced this, their son and what Communion means, not only that Bread of Life that we did but the Communion of the experience of God and of one another. So, witnesses I find really helpful. Obviously, I'll talk one-on-one with people. What's also helpful because my witness is somewhat unique, I'll share some of my witness. They think, "You're the priest. You were probably born under a rock. Somebody prayed for you at two years old." None of that happened. Again, "You must have been the pious up here." No, I'm like you and I still am in some ways but here's what I experienced and discovered. They are very often moved by that example.

Fr. Michael: I guess I could take two practical things from that.

One is making a retreat. you've never done it before or if it's been years make a Renewal at your parish or seek one out. The Teens Encounter Christ, the Tech Retreat you can be an adult and do that too.

Make a retreat because you have an intense profound experience of God during the weekend and know it's a sacrifice to give up a whole weekend, but God will be far more generous with you than you are with Him. Don't be afraid to do that.

The second thing, maybe practically, is to do what we're doing here and simply ask somebody, find someone that you see is passionate about Mass or the Eucharist and ask them why. Listen and hear their story and maybe that will spark something in you.

Fr. Norm Douglas: That “why” question in anything is so valuable to get in touch with people's purpose or passion or lack thereof. For example, even if somebody comes in being critical of the church and everything I say, “I hear you. There are some things in the church I wish were different. So, joining with them, having a rapport but in a good sense, and then saying some of what I work through. Maybe I ask a question can you see even those horrible things happen that still coming to Mass in Jesus in the presence, may help you, maybe almost in spite of that. Sometimes when you look at a very weak church...hey, the church is weak, infallible and sinful, so are we. How can we come together and say, “Do we all need God's grace and mercy?” Absolutely.

Tapping into the people like that. Part of that, maybe how I say it not like they're being grilled. Help me understand why you have left or why you've gone away or what are you missing. Let's talk about that. Then they share their story, and I will sometimes say, “Well I hear you. I do hear you.” I had someone that even at other times in my life say would you like to hear what I hear that maybe relates to and they'll listen but first listen.

In the Synod, Pope Francis said we have to be a listening church. People feeling heard.

Fr. Michael: Truly listening. I think that if people listen to us like, we can find some to genuinely listen like a spiritual director or spiritual companion or friend, someone that will listen to you and just reverence your story and hear it. Then maybe too they will shine light on how God is working then we realize.

Let's wrap it up with just a final thought or word that you would like to leave our viewers with just to encourage them.

Fr. Norm Douglas: Again, that every one of us, people today, are looking for a sense of identity and mission. If every one of us and I know they have to grow into this, can see each of us, our core identity is we're a beloved child of God. No matter what, we are a beloved child of God. He loves us, can forgive us, never tires of reaching out to us all of that.

He never tires of forgiving us, yes, I'm a beloved child of God and being able to step back or talk to other people about that and how that is for them. Then that sense of mission that I have a purpose in life. People are often young people, what's my

purpose? Where am I going to go? I have to read this book. One of the greatest purposes we can have working through the other things you do is, wow! I can go through life and if I have that sense of a beloved of God in some way, I can share that with other people and touch other lives. Not coming on like gangbusters, you have to receive Jesus or else, but yes, my beloved of God and somehow a purpose that in all the various ways I can do it to help other people believe they're beloved of God and how that converts us in our relationships and in our overall purpose for daily life.

Fr. Michael: That's wonderful. Thank you.

That is my desire too with ***The Prodigal Father*** to really help people know just how loved they are.

Thanks for joining us on this series of *Praying with Priests*. You are a wonderful Joy; I think even helping us to see how God works even on the situations we think are the worst day of our life could be the best that ever happened to us. So, thank you Father Norm for everything you've done for our Diocese over the years. What a wonderful, Joyful priest to know.

Fr. Norm Douglas: I'm glad I've come to know you a few years ago.

Fr. Michael: Would you give us a final blessing.

Fr. Norm Douglas: Sure. May Almighty God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit come upon us bless us fill us with his joy his peace his goodness and love to pass it on and in the name of The Father and of The Son and of The Holy Spirit. Amen

Fr. Michael: Amen. Thank you. God Bless.

Fr. Norm Douglas: You're welcome.