

THE LIVES OF THE BRETHERN

GOD'S ELOQUENT MERCY

AN INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL MARY DOSCH, O.P.

Peter Gautsch, O.P.

Fr. Michael Mary Dosch, O.P., is the novice master for the Province of St. Joseph and the spiritual director for the annual U.S. National Rosary Pilgrimage to Lourdes. He entered the Dominican Order in 1998 and was ordained a priest in 2005. Originally from the coastal town of Margate, New Jersey, where he grew up surfing (he once escaped a mako shark by catching a well-timed wave), he has spent the last thirteen years landlocked in Ohio (“the toughest hurdle of my vocation was to leave the ocean behind”). After four years as parochial vicar at St. Gertrude Parish in Cincinnati and six and a half years as pastor and superior at St. Patrick Church in Columbus, he’s now back at St. Gertrude in his second year as novice master. We’re grateful to him for speaking with us. (This interview has been edited for clarity and length.)

Let’s begin at the beginning, or at least at a beginning: how did you end up a friar?

I had often thought of the priesthood and had the example of good, holy diocesan priests growing up. I always had an interest in the intellectual life; I used to think I’d join the diocese and insist on teaching. I went to the Catholic University of America to be an

electrical engineer. In the beginning of my sophomore year, the Knights of Columbus had a one-day retreat at this place called the Dominican House of Studies. The friars giving the retreat invited us back; I used to go to the Dominican House with a fair amount of regularity as a college student. I went back to south Jersey, worked for four years, and had a couple of long-term relationships—I almost married twice. But the connection was there at the House of Studies. And so even when I would go back to visit friends, I always made a point of visiting the House of Studies. Three or four years went by, and when I was looking into a vocation, I was primarily looking at the Order. I was trying to decide between the diocese and religious life—of course, if it was going to be religious life, I knew it was going to be the Dominicans.



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We Dominicans, like all religious, are bound by the three evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience, but at our profession we only pronounce obedience. What have you learned about obedience over the course of your religious life thus far?

Everything falls under obedience, including our own happiness. None of my assignments have been anything that I initially planned. Most of the things in my life have not been orchestrated, but they have been a tremendous source of my joy. I love my vocation. The only unhappy Dominicans I know are the ones who got what they lobbied for. By being obedient, we can be confident that it's in the Lord's will. And he certainly has manifested that in my life, in my assignments. God, of course, is the one who made us to be happy. So if we hear him and allow him to form us, we will find our authentic happiness.

Every friar has the experience of being a novice, but only a select few have the experience of being novice master. What's the novitiate like from the other side?

It's a great joy for me. I think that certainly in God's providence he's led me here. Part of my wanting to be a Dominican was wanting to teach, and I thoroughly enjoy teaching about that which I'm most passionate about: the Dominican vocation and priesthood. It's nothing that I ever anticipated; I never even imagined, really, this being a role that I'd be asked to do. But when Fr. Ken [Letoile, the prior provincial] asked me, of course under obedience I was going to do whatever I was being asked to do for the needs of the province. And I've enjoyed every moment of it.

What are the things you hope to instill in the novices under your charge?

Obedience. To be able to hear God's will in their life. To be formed in what it means to be a Dominican as a novice, to go with

an open mind and an open heart to the studentate to continue learning, to never have the pride of thinking they know it all, and to realize, as I often tell them, that their greatest formation is going to be after they're ordained, when they're sitting on the other side of that screen. My own experience as a young priest in the confessional was that I learned so much about God, about who God is, about the priesthood. It's a very powerful moment. The things you experience as a priest—it's like you get to live a thousand lifetimes: the number of miracles you witness, the number of conversions, the brokenness of so many people. It's a truly privileged position.

What advice do you have for people considering religious life and/or the priesthood? What are common obstacles that impede our ability to listen for God's call?

In this day and age we have a lot of people that like to be perpetual discerners. God gives us freedom, and he's always faithful. He does not usually give signs that are going to make it completely clear to us where we're supposed to go and what we're supposed to do. So the important thing is to pursue your heart's desire, to keep looking at what God's asking of you, and to pursue that zealously—go ahead and take a risk. The Lord is ever faithful, so if he doesn't want you somewhere, he's going to make it clear. But he typically wants you to make a free choice. He knows that for most people who are discerning, if they were to have a voice come out of heaven, saying, "I want you to be a Dominican," of course they would follow it. But he wants it to be a free decision, so it's not usually that transparent. Just do it!

As novice master, you're now living at our priory in Cincinnati for the third time in your Dominican life. What's your opinion of Skyline Chili?

Chocolate meat sauce over soggy spaghetti doesn't do it for me. I come from New Jersey, the land of diners—I know what cheap, good, tasty food is supposed to be like.

In the context of the Order's worldwide mission, the four Dominican provinces in the United States are somewhat unique in the extent of our parochial commitments—you yourself have spent almost eleven years in parish ministry. Our Order was founded for preaching for the salvation of souls; how does parish ministry lend itself well to that mission? What do you see as the classic features of a Dominican parish?

The parish sacramental life is the basic means of sanctification for most people in ordinary circumstances. Our history as American Dominicans is that we came to a mission territory and established certain institutions, many of which were parishes, in order to build up the faith in the service of the local ordinary. So it makes sense to see that we established so many. But one thing we have to consider as Dominicans is: is this parish particularly Dominican? Most of our parishes are centers of preaching, a holy preaching. There's a dynamic community, and people see that and will travel in; they're often "destination parishes." But this isn't in competition with other parishes. It's actually meant to enliven the local diocese. At St. Patrick's [in Columbus] you see that: it's the downtown parish, which often under normal circumstances withers and dies. But it has a great vibrancy, and I think people go there for something particular. You see leaders of the local Church coming from there; you see a number of local vocations. There's a vibrant youth ministry, confession ministry, etc. So for all of our parishes, there has to be something unique and distinctive.

They also have to be places that allow the entirety of Dominican life to flourish in the community, which means that even though there's a parish, other friars assigned there are doing other apostolates. I think Fr. Tom [Blau] and now Fr. Stephen

Dominic [Hayes]'s jobs—preaching missions within the diocese—are ideal: the itinerant preaching where you get to sleep in your own bed most of the time, and you're serving the greater diocese with a real need—both preaching and being able to live in community.

What are some distinctive characteristics of Dominican preaching?

It's for the salvation of souls. It's always going to be teleological. It's always going to be a proclamation of the Good News, much more so than moral exhortation. It's definitely a gift of the charism, because even sometimes when I try to evaluate one of our preachers who might not seem to me to be very good compared to a diocesan priest who might be quite good, people often respond to the Dominican. God's grace is clearly at work too. Our preaching tends to be doctrinal. We never step away from the core elements of the faith. A Dominican is always eager and ready to preach on the Trinity, for example, when others might be afraid to speak about that mystery. Sometimes it's hard to place a finger on the charism, but you can see that it's at work, because so many Dominicans preach differently, and yet there's always something distinctive. There is a real action of the Spirit.

Where's your favorite surf spot?

Margate, New Jersey, my hometown. It's an ocean break, and it can be problematic, but under ideal circumstances—when there's a good sandbar, and a nice hurricane way out at sea, and a gentle offshore wind—you can't beat it.

I'd like to ask you about Lourdes. Every year six million people make pilgrimage to Lourdes, yourself and your annual group among them. It's now been 160 years since Mary first appeared to St. Bernadette. What's the significance of Lourdes for the Church today?

Lourdes is the preeminent Marian shrine, in a way. The message is perennial: the need for healing and a mother's love. And everybody that goes there experiences it. It's also unique in that when Our Lady appeared, her message was for people to come here in procession, on pilgrimage—in the local dialect of St. Bernadette, procession and pilgrimage were the same word—and to have a church built here at the grotto. And she picked a place that's beautiful: there's the river that flows right by it, there's the grotto. It's beautiful in all the different seasons of the year. So it attracts a great number of people.

And of course you hear the stories of miracles. Everybody that goes there experiences our Mother's love. Very few walk away cured, but most people will walk away saying that they've experienced some sort of miracle. People often go doubting or having all these expectations and hopes, and they experience Our Lady's Son in the sacraments. Many of these miracles actually happen in the confessional, in the sense of true conversions of heart. People come angry with their disease, and they see people who are so much sicker than they are, and then confess their change of heart and go home changed.

Another thing about the miracles is that most of them don't happen with the water. A lot of them do, but most of the miracles happen in the Eucharistic procession and at the blessing of the sick at Benediction. In fact, the seventieth approved miracle was just announced. I was there; on the feast day of Our Lady of Lourdes, after the international Mass, the bishop of Tarbes-et-Lourdes came up and proclaimed the seventieth miracle. A sister from France who had crippling sciatica for a long time was cured back in 2008. She's still alive today.

Yes, I was actually a bit surprised to hear that this was the seventieth miracle—that seems a small number compared to how many stories of miraculous healings there are out there.

There are about seven thousand in the files that are undergoing investigation. The miracle has to be something truly stupendous in order to be considered. There's a long examination process by the medical bureau of Lourdes, and then the final decision of whether it's a miracle or not gets sent back to the person's diocese. Sometimes there are bureaucratic holdups, or sometimes medical records can't be released because there's a lawsuit or what have you. The people that work there see miracles all the time, but not necessarily the kind that can be testified to.

Have you seen any miracles on your own pilgrimages there?

Yes, little Colleen was there with her twin sister and her mother. She'd broken her elbow badly in a trampoline accident; a larger child fell on top of her, and her elbow snapped. It was set by the doctor, but it wasn't healing. The doctor removed the pins in hope that the swelling would go down, and he was going to reset it later. He wouldn't have let her go on the trip except that her mother was a medical doctor. So they made the trip, and her arm was in a sling. As soon as they got there they went in the baths. They very carefully lowered little Colleen into the water first, and then her twin sister and her mother went in. When her mother came out past the curtain, Colleen was bending her arm, saying, "My arm feels strong." Cured in an instant. My sister, who had joined me on that trip, told me very excitedly that little Colleen had been healed. And I thought, "Oh, it was probably a sprained wrist or something and she was actually fine. No big deal." It wasn't until a year later that her mother told me the full story. I thought, "Why wasn't this proclaimed to everybody? Why didn't we announce this to the pilgrimage?" It was a great lesson, because miracles happen at Lourdes all the time, and people don't know about it. They happen right under your nose.

Sometimes the miracles are remote. People bring back water, or people pray—I've had people write their petitions down, and after I've gone to Lourdes and dropped their petitions off

at the grotto, I've come back and heard that there had been an astounding change of health that they were attributing to Our Lady of Lourdes. It definitely happens.

But again, most people don't have physical healings—Our Lady calls people to Lourdes primarily for a change of heart. What God wants for us is our eternal happiness. When I went to Lourdes for the first time, before I entered the Order, I was hoping for various physical ailments to be cured, and I would maybe have taken that as a sign of my vocation. But what happened instead was something that's hard to articulate—a confirmation of my own discernment and just an opening of all the doors to lead me to my Dominican vocation. And I would not give up my vocation for the healing of all of my illnesses combined. So something greater happened there than physical healing.

People's lives are changed: the love of Our Lady is sort of concretized in their minds. There's a sense that they've been to their Mother's home and can now share that with other people. So nobody that goes with an open heart leaves unchanged, even if for most people that doesn't mean a physical healing.

We friars have a beautiful chant at Compline during Lent, which begins: Media vita in morte sumus: quem quærimus adiutorem nisi te, Domine? "In the midst of life we are in death. To whom do we look for help but to you, Lord?" How has this been true in your own experiences with suffering and with death?

Well, I believe powerfully in God's mercy, because it has been the darkest moments that have been the most grace-filled. The death of my sister when I was twenty-four, and then having to raise my nephew and niece in their last teenage years, was so foundational for my own vocation. And now, within my vocation, my recognition of the Lord's mercy has helped me so much in helping other people. St. Thomas talks about God most eloquently manifesting his power by mercy—by reaching down into imperfections, trials, and tribulations, and drawing out something

good and beautiful. Suffering has always been where I've seen God write most eloquently his love for us.

You were commissioned by the Holy Father as a Missionary of Mercy. What are common misconceptions about mercy? What do you wish more people knew about mercy?

People often limit mercy to just forgiveness. But we intuitively understand that it's more. "Lord, have mercy on me"—we'll pray that when we're suffering, not just when we've sinned. Mercy is this great manifestation of God's power in the midst of evil. It is so beautiful, so eloquent, that God is able to write straight with crooked lines, that he's able to reach down into any sort of imperfection, into evil itself. In some ways it's a new creation *ex nihilo*, that God is able to reach down into wickedness and sin and draw out something good.

The greatest emblem of this, of course, is the crucifix: from the worst thing we've ever done—nailed the God-man to the tree—God takes this evil and from it draws our salvation. If he can do that with the worst thing that we've ever done, what can he not do with my illness? What can he not do with my sinfulness? What can he not do with my handicaps? Whatever the case may be: if we authentically trust more and more in God's mercy, we can be more supple instruments in his hands to proclaim the good news to the far corners of the world for the salvation of souls.

Br. Peter Gautsch entered the Order of Preachers in 2011. Before joining the Order, he studied theology and music at the University of Notre Dame.