

Fr. Matthew Gembrowski Interview

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SPEAKERS

Father Matthew Gembrowski, Mark Prindiville, Trevor Colosky

Father Matthew Gembrowski 00:02

It's not been recording? Good thing you checked now.

Mark Prindiville 00:07

Yeah, yeah. I saw it blinking and I thought that that was it but all right. Thankfully we didn't get that far.

Father Matthew Gembrowski 00:13

Let's just start over,

Mark Prindiville 00:14

Would you, would you mind once again stating your full name for us, please?

Father Matthew Gembrowski 00:18

Yes. My name is Father Matthew John Gembrowski.

Mark Prindiville 00:22

And your role within the diocese?

Father Matthew Gembrowski 00:24

I am Parochial Vicar at St. Brigid of Kildare parish in Midland, and also Parochial Vicar at St. Mary University parish in Mount Pleasant, on the campus of Central Michigan University.

Mark Prindiville 00:38

And then not to change it up on questions, but for those of us that may not necessarily know what is a parochial vicar compared to, say a pastor?

Father Matthew Gembrowski 00:46

A Parochial Vicar is just a term in canon law, that it's a very fancy term for assistant priest. That's just the name for it. So I do not, I am not ultimately responsible for the care of a parish. The pastor is and

my role is to assist him. It's very common for people to get, once they're ordained, they start out as parochial vicars to kind of learn the ropes from an older guy. So Father, Andy Booms is my pastor, and I support him in the role of with both parishes. So I'm the parochial vicar, the assistant priest.

Mark Prindiville 01:18

And what did you do prior to joining the priesthood?

Father Matthew Gembrowski 01:21

Prior to joining the priesthood, a very short life, I was in high school. So I entered the high school...sorry, I entered the seminary immediately after high school. I graduated from Nouvel Catholic Central in Saginaw in 2015. And then I was sent by Bishop Cistone to St. John Vianney college seminary on the campus of the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota. So keep all those saints straight. I was there for four years. I graduated in 2019, with a double major in Philosophy and Catholic studies, and then minors in Business and Theology. After that, we were kind of in between bishops, Bishop Cistone had died and I believe 2018 or 2019, and Bishop Hurley, Walter Hurley was our apostolic administrator. And he sent me to Mundelein Seminary in the Archdiocese of Chicago. So I was there for four years. I graduated in 2023, with a Masters of Divinity and a Baccalaureate in Sacred Theology, which is a pontifical degree, it just recognized by the Vatican. And then I was ordained a week later on May 13, 2023, as a priest.

Mark Prindiville 01:33

Thanks. All right. And again, can you repeat who is your confirmation saint?

Father Matthew Gembrowski 02:34

My confirmation saint was St. Timothy, I was confirmed, I believe, when I was in the fourth or sixth grade.

Mark Prindiville 02:41

And were there any other saints that you believe have been influential in your life?

Father Matthew Gembrowski 02:44

So when I began the college seminary, we were at our initiation, which was when we put on the cassock & surplice for the first time, which was about a month into the school year. Uh, we were told to pick some saints that we thought would be good guides throughout our time in the seminary. So I chose four: St. John Paul II, St. Francis of Assisi, St. Thérèse of Lisieux, St. Michael the Archangel, because I wanted to emulate different aspects of their lives. St. John Paul II was a man of the church. And you know, the year before my parish was...my home parish of St. Josaphat, or was St. Josaphat when I was growing up, when it finally, during the merger in 2014, it merged with St. John the Baptist and Carrollton and St. Matt's in Zilwaukee to become St. John Paul II parish. Which I believe, you'll have to check this for me, John Paul was canonized in 2014. And we merged in 2014. So I believe we may have been the first Catholic parish in United States canonically named after St. John Paul II. That might be something to catch up on. It was, he was canonized in April on Divine Mercy Sunday, and we were formed in July 1. So we may be the first one in the US, that would be something to check up on. So John Paul was a man of the church, Francis of Assisi was a man of poverty, Thérèse of Lisieux was a woman of deep

communion with the Lord and spirituality, and St. Michael the Archangel fought evil when he saw it, and that's what I wanted to be and do as well.

Mark Prindiville 04:11

And what brought you into the priesthood?

Father Matthew Gembrowski 04:13

I had a slow discernment, but it was, I always tell people, I have a very boring vocation story. I never had one moment that was like, Oh my gosh, the heavens opened up and I had this experience. And honestly, you know, I love all the priests and Saginaw diocese. I love them all. But growing up, there wasn't one priest that I thought, wow, I really want to be like that. Or I just, you know, they were nice men. But it wasn't something that I was attracted to. But when I entered high school, I began thinking about what I wanted to do. I just felt a tug in my heart that I really couldn't explain. And I didn't want to do it. I, I thought, well, I don't want to be the weird kid, you know the religious kid. So I didn't say that, I didn't say anything to anybody, except my dad. You know, when I was like a freshman in high school, and he's like, "well, you're a freshman in high school. So relax." But that's stuck with me throughout high school, and so, again I was...I just felt like I had a serious personality and I felt if this is what God is asking me to do, I don't want to waste time in my life, either. My plan was either be a priest or be married by 23 and have a lot of kids. That was my goal. Just cause I come from a big family, there's eight of us siblings, and I really enjoyed that. I just loved being with them all the time. So that's what I wanted, I didn't want to waste time in my life. So I approached Bishop Cistone, I believe in the fall of 2014, about joining the seminary the next year. And I, I didn't realize how uncommon that was, I think they thought it was a godsend because most guys don't come right out of the, come out of high school, unsolicited and say, "Hey, I'd like to sign up." You know, usually it's like kind of chasing guys down. Are you thinking about this? I wasn't on anyone's radar. I think I didn't know any seminarians. I never talked about it with other people. I just approached the vocation director, and I think I want to sign up. So it was really during my time in the seminary where I gave it a shot, in college. And just more and more the Lord worked on my heart, something that I felt like I had to do, I had to be a priest. That's not you're not free if you do that, right. But it was, while I was maturing, in my own life, I was maturing in my spiritual life, that became something more than just "Oh, God wants me to be a priest," and it became "holy cow! God's asked me to be a priest, and I want this I want to serve as holy people and, you know, offer the mass and this is who he's calling me to be." So that's a very vague and abstract kind of way of telling a vocation story, but just from the 40,000 feet looking down, that's the best way I could describe it.

Mark Prindiville 06:35

And you had mentioned that your home parish growing up was St. Josaphat's correct?

Father Matthew Gembrowski 06:38

St. Josaphat's, uh, Catholic Church in Carrollton.

Mark Prindiville 06:41

Carlton, thank you. Do you have any sort of fond memories growing up in that area? Any interesting stories that you'd like to share?

Father Matthew Gembrowski 06:48

Wow, maybe some again, I love all the priests in the diocese. So when we came back from Texas, I my family moved to Pearland, Texas, I believe it was 2002. We were there until 2005. So I was in kindergarten and I began kindergarten at St. Helen Catholic school in Pearland, Texas, right outside of Houston. I came back from there, or my family came back, and then I began third grade at St. Thomas Aquinas Elementary School in Saginaw. So we began when we came back looking for a parish, we were a year at St. Thomas, this person was there. And then my dad really wanted a place where his kids could become more involved, and St. Josaphat had a much more elderly population. So we got to St. Josaphat, and they wanted us doing everything, you know, a family of eight kids. So we served mass all the time. We served all the, you know, the Men's steak dinners and all this stuff. We were very active at the parish we clean up outside. And again it to me, it was just very normal. You know, this is our church. We help out at our church, but it didn't feel like it was forced or anything. Father Ron Dombroski was the pastor there until I believe about until we were formed as St. John Paul II, when Father Jim Bessert and sister Christ Gretke came in. So Sister Christ Gretke was the pastoral administrator, while Father Jim was the sacramental minister. But I fond fond memories of St. Josaphat, it's so sad to see it go. I always enjoyed our annual Fat Tuesday paczkis, which they would make, it was their thing every year, they'd make the paczkis. We made it to 100 years, I believe it was 1914 to 2014. Or maybe it was 13 to 13, I can't remember which one of those things. But we made it to our 100th anniversary until we were and then we were merged.

Mark Prindiville 08:26

Now then, on the same topic of memorable stories, what about in your journey into the priesthood? Any particular memorable stories or fond memories from your time at seminary?

Father Matthew Gembrowski 08:36

Yeah, I really, really enjoyed my time at the seminary. I mean, especially the college seminary, it was just a time of real growth. You know, 60s, like, I entered with 40 guys in my class, 7 of us got ordained. Yeah, most guys leave, they drop out. But it's a place and they know that in the college seminary, but it's a place where you grew in just maturity, spiritual, your spiritual life. We had a Holy Hour every day. An hour of adoration, we did service, we learned philosophy, theology. It was a time of personal growth, which was awesome. But I remember beginning there. And I remember it was our first retreat, retreat, quote, unquote, retreat. We were at a Catholic like Boy Scout camp. And it was just get to know each other kind of time. And I remember sitting down with, we all did to get in groups of four. And the rector said, "Okay, we're gonna tell our vocation stories to each other. And everyone's like, hey, okay. And I'm like, what? vocation start, we just, we just got here, there is no story, what you're talking about." And these other guys, they were telling these long stories about, oh, my gosh, this happened, and that happened. I had this prayer experience and that happened. And I felt, I was just sinking into the mud. I'm like, I am not like these people. It got to my turn after like a 45 minute story from this one guy. And they're like, what about you, Matt? Like, well, I guess I thought I should be a priest. And so I signed up and, and I'm here I...I don't know. And you know, they were really nice and shared like, "that's cool to man. That's how God works in YOUR life." I remember when I started out, I, uh, everyone had like a Jesus t-shirt and they all like these religious shirts. I didn't have anything. I remember calling my mom like, "Ma, I don't have anything. You gotta, I gotta get some sort of religious t-shirt. She's like, I got you."

So she sent me a package in the mail and opened up and it was just a sweatshirt that said St. Michael. That's all it said. And no, you know, no connotations, no connection to anything, so now you have a religious shirt. Okay. So, you know, being there, I found my stride. Ironically, all those guys who had the awesome, awesome stories, they all left. Everyone was trying to figure out who they were. And then when I got to the major seminary, I will say in both college and the major, I met the most interesting people I've ever met. Interesting, you know, bad, weird ways, but also interesting in great ways. People from all different walks of life, particularly at Mundelein coming from different ways. So I was, I lived on three West, that was my floor might take too long. Okay, I lived in three West. The guy across me was from Los Angeles, and he was a pharmaceutical salesman for 10 years, when he joined the Diocese of San Jose, he was there. The guy in the room next to him was a permanent Deacon for about 10 years, until his wife passed away. And then he wanted, and then he thought, he's like, I talked with my wife about it. She said, If I ever pass away, you, you should be a priest. And so he did. He became a priest. I never thought like, one of my best friends is from the Diocese of Las Vegas, Nevada, and I never thought I would go there, you know, but he's just big Filipino dude. And it was just awesome to see guys from all different walks of life, different nationalities, different family backgrounds, all going towards the same goal. So that's what I loved about it. It's just the, you know, I'm not a big diversity kind of guy. But it was cool to be in that environment where so many different kinds of guys.

Mark Prindiville 12:02

Now, leading up to your ordination, what are some practices or tendencies that you've picked up? Over time?

Father Matthew Gembrowski 12:08

I guess? In what area? What do you mean?

Mark Prindiville 12:13

Ah, this was a question that was given to me by somebody else. So I would assume practices in terms of "how you lived your life, how you are, what you thought being in charge of a parish should be like that, suddenly, you're realizing oh...

Father Matthew Gembrowski 12:31

Yeah

Mark Prindiville 12:31

...these are practices that are very maybe naive or anything [unintelligible].

Father Matthew Gembrowski 12:37

Well, one thing that was instilled, day one, in the college seminary and instilled continually throughout all my eight years was that prayer in your relationship with God is number one. It's number one, it is not, it's a non-negotiable. You, what is a priest that doesn't pray, right? Just useless, useless and probably going to damage people to claim to lead people to God, you don't have a relationship with yourself, yourself with the Lord, what the heck is going on? So that to me, that's the number one practice I pray every day, I have an hour of prayer, I commit to whether I didn't get it done this morning, because I don't have stuff. So I got to do it after this. Right. You know, I faithful the Liturgy of the Hours,

I say mass every day, I would hear mass, go to Mass every day in the seminary, whether that was me and five old ladies, the day after Thanksgiving, because no one had masks in one place out in Hemlock. You know, I would do that. But I tried to sit my relationship with God is first and I keep that that has kept me on the straight and narrow my whole time. So that's one thing. As far as other practices, I think that's really all encompassing is the prayer. It's like, my job is to...this was a homily I heard back in the seminary, it was people don't care if you're funny priest. They don't care if you're particularly talented. They don't care if you're the best. homilist I mean, they do. They want you to be a holy priest. That's what people want, you know, someone who has a model of holiness that, wow, I can be a saint in my life, because that guy's doing it. And that's a tragedy when guys don't, when they don't live up to, you know, the sainthood that they're called to. So that's my number one thing I get everything I do, whether it's in my prayer, or in my relationship with other people, or am I when I'm administrating in the office, and I don't know what's going on, you know, "okay, Jesus, what are you asking me to do now? How are you calling me to be holy in this moment to give others hope and encouragement and confidence that you love them and that you love me?" So that's kind of maybe a roundabout answer to your question tendencies. But to me, that's, it's number one, it has to be number one.

Mark Prindiville 14:40

Makes perfect sense. Speaking of your time over, even prior to being in the priesthood itself, what were the...can you describe the different types of communities that you've served?

Father Matthew Gembrowski 14:50

Yeah. So when I was in the in the seminary, we had to have what was called, they had the four pillars of formation. So human formation, intellectual formation, spiritual formation, and then pastoral formation. So human is like, "Are you a normal human being?" Right? Can you function, alright? You're supposed to be a bridge to Christ, not an obstacle. So if you're intensely socially awkward, if you can't speak in public, if you can't manage your time, well, that's all human formation, just basically being a good human being. Intellectual, do you know your faith? Spiritual Formation, do you pray? Then pass on information was getting out into the community and doing things? So every year it would change. So in the college seminary I started out I would go to a home for, I don't know what you'd call it, but it was kids who were taken away from their parents basically...

Trevor Colosky 15:37

Like a foster care almost?

Father Matthew Gembrowski 15:39

Almost, like a home for children, like a St. Vincent's home for children they have in Saginaw. I would go there and just spend time with the kids. You know, play with them. Calm down. It's very basic. After that, I taught religious Ed in Our Lady of Guadalupe parish in St. Paul. That was school, I taught fifth grade, I believe. Then I went in Minneapolis, there was a drop-in-center for homeless people with mental handicaps. So I go there and I'd play cards...I play cards with some people. And if I won, they get really upset and leave so I would like try to play make it competitive but then lose who knows they wouldn't be upset. It says negative 10 outside and they storm outside. Oh, not good. And then in major seminary, everyone at Mundelein was assigned to a teaching parish. So you were assigned to a parish

in the Archdiocese of Chicago somewhere and that was your prayers for all four years. So I was assigned to a parish that went through a merger like we've gone through with St. Columbanus parish for two years, I was there. And then it merged with two other St. Dorothy's and St. Clotilde to become St. Moses the Black. So it was a parish on the south side of Chicago and predominantly African American parish. So gospel music, masses last an hour and 45 minutes. You know, it's, you know, Southside Chicago, so their neighborhood is really bad. And so, I mean, there were shootings outside, someone was killed on the church steps. You know, after mass just this past year, in the fall, there was I was in the gym with a with a pastor, Father Matt, another Father Matt. And we heard gunshots, come outside, there's a drive by shooting right outside the church after a Sunday mass. So to me, it was really a privilege to be serving in the black community, because I am white, in case you haven't noticed by this tape, you know, I really didn't have any connection with the black community, and then to be there with those people and you know, understandably, at the beginning, I was kind of awkward. They were kind of standoffish, but I persevered, I spent time with them, they opened up to me, I opened up to them. And it was really an eye opening experience, in terms of just their expression of spirituality. And in terms of race relations, it really taught me a lot. In some ways, things are overblown in the culture, way overblown. And in some ways, things don't receive enough attention, particularly in relation. It's a lot of it's backwards, but I really valued my time among them and I made a lot of...met a lot of awesome people in that community. So I appreciated it being there, but Moses the Black parish, it was on 71st Street and Calumet or right next to MLK drive, Southside of Chicago.

Mark Prindiville 18:09

Now, kind of taking a step back and going to re-talk about your, developing your faith life. Was there any particular family habits that helped develop this?

Father Matthew Gembrowski 18:19

Yes. So, I mean, my family would go to Sunday Mass, that's obviously number one. We'd go to confession every 10 weeks when on...My mom would keep a calendar. "It's been 10 weeks, everyone we're going Saturday morning." We had to think of something to say, you know. Uhm.... that's an aside, I won't tell that story, that's just an aside. We'd say the rosary once in a while together. But to me, what really stuck with me was that every Sunday, after we go to church, we'd have breakfast, come home, my dad would make us do religion homework. So he would have these workbooks that he found from like Sophia Press or somebody. And they were very easy. They were based basically on our age. So from, I was a kid until eighth grade, we had to do these workbooks, you know, a chapter every Sunday, and then we read some story about scripture or some aspects of church teaching. And then we'd have to go to our dad and explain what we learned. And he'd go over it with us. That meant a lot because my dad was teaching me, like my dad...if my dad thought this was important, I thought it was important. And then when I was in high school, we got rid of the books and my dad would just get my brother and I together and he'd go, "Okay, look up, go on the computer and look up something about Vatican II, look up this document that came out of and then come back and summarize what it was to me or look up this teaching or who was Spinoza or something like this." And then we would go over together and we watch a little video. So it was more and more I was learning about the faith, in a way that only was like a half an hour, 45 minutes on Sundays, but it was a regular part of the week and it was important to the family. So it wasn't something that was overbearing. I never felt that way about my faith growing up, it was just who I was. And it gave direction and purpose to my life. In particularly doing

this where, it was clearly a normal part not like a weird part, but normal part of family life, I look back and that really impacted me

Mark Prindiville 20:08

Now, what sorts of ministries were you involved in or maybe are currently taking part in?

Father Matthew Gembrowski 20:13

Here at the parish? So the way it's that Father Andy, so he's the pastor of St. Brigid and St. Mary's, and I'm the parochial vicar, but the way it's kind of been set up, I don't know if this is public, but it's just reality. So I am, he takes care of St. Brigid mostly with its Catholic school and a parish that's in downtown Midland. And I take care of most response, almost all the responsibilities here at St. Mary's University parish. He is canonically the pastor so he comes up once a month says the weekend masses. And if I, you know, have some big thing, some project like we're renovating the confessional that costs \$10,000. Or, you know, I want to redo the carpets or something that's a big expense, I go and clear that with him. Other than that, he gives me a long leash to run the place. So, I basically kind of a pastor in everything but name at this place. So it's very uncommon for a newly ordained because, I was just ordained five months ago, to be put in a place kind of in charge. And I know I'm not "really" in charge, Father Andy is, but for all intents and purposes, I am so. I'm involved with, there's the mass, there's the sacraments, there's pastoral counseling, but administration, you know, planning development for the future. How are we making this place sustainable? I say mass at different nursing home, I say mass at HealthSource in Saginaw once a month, I say mass for the Sisters of Mercy on Mondays in Saginaw. I teach a class once a week at St. Brigid Catholic school on the sacraments. So I'm just involved in a lot of things going on. That's what I didn't realize about being a pastor, you realize it from...you realize it but you don't experience it till you're there. You have a lot of different frying pans going on at once. And you have to pay attention to all of them, make sure they're being kept up. So, to say I have a schedule during the day, I'm going to do this, this, this, this and this, you just kind of have to somehow juggle all these responsibilities. And that's just something that I'm learning to do. Other priests like Father Pete Gaspeny, in Saginaw, he's my priest mentor that the diocese assigned me, he's been doing this for 40 years, you know, he is really well seasoned, I go to him for advice, and he's really able to handle it well. I am brand new, so it's taken me a while to figure out how to juggle everything.

Mark Prindiville 22:29

On that note, actually, did you...what are some behind the scenes, things that other people may not realize go when you're serving the parishes?

Father Matthew Gembrowski 22:39

Well, first is that a lot of pastoral ministry is one-on-one. That people are, a lot of people are struggling in life. We all know, we all want to put on an image that we are doing great, we don't have any problems you know, I'm okay. But that's not the majority of people, right? I don't really think it's anybody who actually. Everyone's struggling with something. And they're not going to reveal that to their co-workers and family members a lot, but they're gonna reveal to their priest. So a lot of it is dealing...dealing with, you know, helping people one-on-one with different things in their life, whether that's in confession or pastoral counseling, just making sure that people are brought into the church

community. It's very time intensive. There's that, the administrative aspects of the parish that continue throughout the week. So yes, we have daily mass and confession and adoration on Tuesdays. But okay, how am I...am I collecting all the bills? Am I making sure everyone gets paid? When a contractor comes in, and they say they did their work, I go in and I have to check, "did they actually do their work?" And if they didn't, I have to call them back and say, "Why didn't you do your work?" You know. Managing employees, development for the future as "what's our vision? How are we going to sustain ourselves in the future?" A lot of it is like, it's like running a small business, although I don't like to make that comparison, because we're a community of faith, like we are all disciples trying to follow the Lord Jesus. But as far as administrating, that, that requires significant amount of work. So a lot of it is the individual ministry that people, which, again, anybody calls, whether it's a poor person asking for money, or whether it's somebody who's really distressed and wants to talk, we handle all those things, as well as the administrative side.

Mark Prindiville 24:25

On the same note, what is something about yourself that might surprise people?

Father Matthew Gembrowski 24:30

Thing about myself that might surprise people. I don't know. I'm kind of an open book. Like a fun fact?

Mark Prindiville 24:38

Sure.

Father Matthew Gembrowski 24:39

I guess I drive a motorcycle. It was during COVID, I got really bored. I was, I was put out in Bad Axe for a while, with Father T.J. and Bad Axe is in the middle of "Thumb," and there's nothing going on in Bad Axe in the winter lemme tell you. And so I was like all I do is sit down and read books all day and I play piano and organ and drums and stuff. So I would practice music and I go read and then I would go pray. I'm like this is boring, I gotta do something else. So I thought I thought I get a motorcycle license. That's fun. I'm the youngest of eight kids. I have a twin brother Peter. He's a, right now he's a diesel mechanic. He lives in Saginaw. I am kind of an open book, though. But yeah, it's kind of normal dude, really.

Mark Prindiville 25:18

Now this question was a request to you. And...

Father Matthew Gembrowski 25:22

For me?

Mark Prindiville 25:22

For you.

Father Matthew Gembrowski 25:23

Oh, wow.

Mark Prindiville 25:23

And they wanted me to phrase it as 'during Father Andy's sabbatical, how did it feel running St. Brigid's without "dad."

Father Matthew Gembrowski 25:30

Yes. So this is also an interesting part of it. So I was ordained in May. And I began my assignment at both parishes in July 1. Father Andy, the pastor left for sabbatical in June, and was not back until Labor Day. So I began with two parishes, 36 miles apart. So it was quite a stressful time, I'll be honest. Doing mass here, mass there. Dealing with parishioners here, administrating here in the summer. I had to hire a campus minister, I had to put on a vocations camp, cool bodies camp up in where was that? Roscommon. It was a lot. So, I just kind of stayed true to I needed to get my prayer time, you know, I needed to rely on the Lord. I need to take care of myself. Right, you know, stick with my family and friends. But it was, it was a challenge. I, one aspect, I mean, some priests have come up to me "Oh, that's not fair that to happen to you." I'm like, well, maybe it's not, but I'm grateful what happened. Because there's no way like to learn, like, you're thrown into it, you need to learn now. So it helped me to get, I think mature, even just a few months very quickly, as in what is a priority? And how do I organize my life, so I can take care of this parish. It's like having a family. You know, I'm taking care of me, you know, everything's going great. And you have a commitment to another person that you need to be there for, somebody who's counting on you. So my own personal problems, whatever they may be, or my own wants and desires, are second to this person that I'm taking care of, or this person...relationship in life. And so I was grateful for the opportunity to be on my own for that time. And I knew it wasn't forever, to really learn quickly. So I was really grateful for that, where other guys may not have an opportunity like that for four or five years after being ordained a priest, I was just thrown into it. So, stressful for sure, but I think beneficial in the long run.

Mark Prindiville 27:31

And how different is it for you to serve parishioners at mass compared to in the classroom?

Father Matthew Gembrowski 27:38

In the classroom. I, you mean the classroom in seminary? So, explain what you mean by that question, I guess.

Mark Prindiville 27:44

So this was another request that I received. From my understanding, it would be from how you were taught, I guess, to serve parishioners in the classroom setting compared to how kind of like how you were "thrown feet versus the fire self taught," as well. Like, how different was that from...like, almost like what your expectations were compared to what the reality is?

Father Matthew Gembrowski 28:07

I mean, you can only learn so much about how, a lot of our job is relationships. Relationships with people, and you can learn like people skills, that's not even a classroom thing, though, you either have the people skills, or you don't, you can develop them but not really in a classroom setting. You learn by trial and error. But we would have, okay, case studies in class like this person comes to you and, in confession, let's say they say this, what do you say? That's great in a theoretical setting like that, but

when someone comes to you, they're an individual and every individual is unique. You don't have cases of people, I really think this is what Pope Francis is trying to get at, when he talks about being pastoral, first, you know, smelling like the sheep, not everyone uses that quote, that it's you have to see people, you can't see cases, right? That otherwise you're really disconnected. And yeah, so I knew that in the seminary, but then you don't experience it until you're there. It's like being married. I don't want to make a commitment to be married because you don't know what it's like until you can't turn back. Right? You have to make the commitment. And then you figure out what it's like. Same thing in the priesthood, I have to make the commitment to be a priest before I can find out what it's like. At the seminary in Chicago, a bunch...Saginaw is a rural diocese, mostly. And it, at the seminary, we had guys from rural diocese, and then some from big urban diocese. Atlanta, Las Vegas, Grand Rapids, Chicago, New York, a lot of them. And a lot of the people that would, they would have come in to give us talks about parish life would be from the Archdiocese of Chicago. And so they would talk about parishes, as if you had a team, a staff of 30, a parish of 6000 people, you know, you'll have a team for this and a team for that. And I, the rural guys, I'd be like, "Hey, how does this you know, if it's just you and one other person, how does this you know, apply?" And they wouldn't really know how to respond. So Well, a lot of it is just you got to know who you are and what the requirements are. And you just trust in the Lord and move forward. I mean, he's not going to abandon you if you're faithful to Him. So and I found that true myself.

Mark Prindiville 30:10

And what do you believe, in these modern times, are some challenges that Catholics are facing, as well as unique challenges that are facing the parishioners that you serve?

Father Matthew Gembrowski 30:23

Okay. Catholics in general? I mean, one is just something everyone's experiencing is increased polarization, largely driven by social media. I mean, that is a fact. Our...people spend so much time, I do, others do, on their phones, and on listening to what other people faraway are writing and thinking and saying, rather than their own individual communities, that people get into their own separate camps. So that's happening in the church for real, whether you have people on the far left or the far right. That's one thing, but I think the major problem, honestly, is spiritual apathy, and just lack of care. It's very easy in our culture today to be materialistic and secular, and when the idea of religion comes up to go, "Yeah, I don't know if that's great. That works for you. Okay. Yeah, I don't know." But do you think about it objectively, God exists or he doesn't. There's no middle ground, right? Either I have an eternal soul, or I don't. And this is like, a life changing, you know, reality. If it's true, holy cow, I gotta change my life, right? But because of materialism, that we're always distracted by things going on, whether it's our phone, or just the new things that are coming out, or just the general comfort that everyone has. Whereas in the past, people had, they couldn't rely on the world, they had to rely on the Lord right? Now, things are so easy because of our modern culture, that we just rely on material things, we forget, you know, who am I, you know, what is my life about? Where am I going? What's my eternal destiny? The apathy is everywhere. It's particularly in, you know, America and a first world country. What's interesting now, in 2023, the church, the Catholic church is growing at a faster rate than it ever has in the history of the world. Which people think what? You know, we walk around here, we're closing parishes, we're, you know, consolidating, how's that possible? We see it from a North American, it's particularly Midwestern standpoint, people are leaving the state...state of Michigan, people are

materialistic and secular. We look at Europe, it's the same thing. Africa, East Asia are exploding in the faith, people are going to the church and droves to the fact that, you know, by 2050, I think it'll be 75% of all Catholics are from Africa. Because of just the difference in culture, their culture is much more conducive to faith, to religion. They're not influenced, and they don't want to be influenced by first world, materialism and secularism. And this is what Pope Francis talks about ideological colonization. And a lot of people ignore this, when he talks about, you know, America in particular will send out its culture to other countries, particularly Africa, like our values, let's say LGBT stuff, you know, we're trying to push it on them for diversity, equity itself, which is not part of them, right? They don't, they don't buy into that a lot of the ideology. And we're kind of pushing it on them, where that's a lot of our lack of faith comes from materialism where they don't have it. So the apathy, the spiritual apathy, to me is a big problem that the church...Catholics are facing today. On a college campus, that is all the much stronger. You...I think I told us to like my first homily here, like, you know, on this campus, you're gonna learn a lot of things, you'll be fed a lot of things, people are trying to grab your attention all the time. Listen to me, listen to me, come over here. And a lot of what you're going to be fed is nonsense. Like, it's people driven by ideologies, who want you to think a certain way that they think, right because of their own goals. At least here at St. Mary's, we're gonna feed you with the truth. Right? Jesus said, I am the WAY and the TRUTH and the LIFE, right? And the truth is good for us. If my life corresponds with reality, that's good. It helps me to flourish. And so we're just here to give people the truth when a lot of...and college campuses, you're being...a lot of people are being indoctrinated by professors who are, have a certain ideology that leans one way. Is that everybody? No, is that a lot of people? Yes. And so that's what we really have to fight here at CMU to give people an alternative to one of the ideologies that are being spoon fed in classes, but also an alternative to social media to isolation to depression and anxiety that all those things breed to give people a spiritual home. So that's what we're trying to do here at St. Mary. That's a long roundabout answer to your question. Is that okay?

Mark Prindiville 34:48

No, that was a very, very well thought out. Very meaty answer. I appreciate that. Kind of on that note, how would, how would you describe your experience with serving parishioners that are based at a university campus.

Father Matthew Gembrowski 35:05

It's very different from a from the rest of my time. So in the seminary, or coming back home, I'd always be in Saginaw on breaks. And so I would go to daily Mass and Saginaw, or go to my home parish, and it was all older people. I mean, hardly anyone my own age goes to mass, or, eh, practices their faith. I think it's going to change because a lot of people see that, wow, the world as it is now is kind of morally bankrupt. And all this stuff that I'm like, this promise will give me life only sucks my life away. But I'd always be around old people. And now I'm around people who are younger than me, I'm only 26, right? And they're younger than me, or my own age. And so that's very different to, you know, in my mind, I'm still a kid, right? I'm just, I'm just kind of Matt. And I'm just, I'm just a guy, right? I maybe Father Matt to all the students here. But to me, I'm just Matt, right? And to be in a position where somebody is looking up to you and going, what do I do? You know, how do I hear God's voice in my life, that is a really big difference for me. To have that different dynamic, I love it. I love being with people who are clearly actively seeking out their faith. For instance, we have 11 people in RCIA right now. And oftentimes, you'll have people in RCIA, who are getting married to a Catholic and they need to become Catholic.

So they join it. And it's kind of like a hostage situation. Like you have to be here. It's not the case for anyone in our program. Everyone wants to be there. And they're actively pursuing it. And they're sacrificing their time to come to know the Lord in an authentic way. So that's really refreshing to see, particularly among young people, that they're saying, I don't want this, which is out the rest of the world what it's offering. I want the truth. I want the Lord Jesus. So that's been great. I really enjoy my time up here.

Mark Prindiville 36:54

And our final question, what is something that you've been most looking forward to since your ordination?

Father Matthew Gembrowski 37:01

I mean, it's the, it's the basics that everyone talks about all the ga...everyone gets ordained. I love saying mass. I love celebrating the sacraments and preaching. I particularly, and I've been pushing the Sacrament of Confession, which to me is so powerful in my own life. It has been. I try to go to confession every two or three weeks. I, Father Randy Kelly, shout out, he's my confessor down in Saginaw, he's retired priest. Yeah, you know, confession is, it's an encounter with the living Jesus, who often we, when I look at myself, a lot of people just see their failures and their sins and all the things wrong with them. And when the Lord looks at somebody, they see a beloved son, a beloved daughter, and confession is a time where I can own my mistakes. I don't make excuses. And I say, This is who I am, right? These are the things I've done. And instead of like a wagging finger at me or a stick to punish me, it is my beloved son, right? The Lord takes us in his arms, he forgives us our sins, and we're given new life, which so many people are dying for, to have a new beginning. But unfortunately, I think at this diocese, and in the church in general, in North America, confession has been neglected. It's not been pushed as a major priority for people. So we have confession every day here, we're in the middle of renovating our confessional to make it more beautiful and a place people want to be rather than a penance to go in itself. But the sacrament of confession to me is very powerful. Already, in the first few months, I've had several powerful experiences with people really starting a new point in their life. So I believe if, you know, uh, making that the sacraments have to be first they have to be available for people, they have to be the foundation of everything we do at a parish. So the regular celebration of the sacraments, that the primary ways by which Grace has dispensed to us. That's from the Catechism. It's the church. Like if we don't believe what we're doing, how we expect other people to believe it. So to make those priorities has been something that I've been trying to do and I love doing, I look forward to doing it every day.

Mark Prindiville 39:05

Again, Father, Matt, thank you so much for taking the time to speak with us and being part of this oral history project. Do you have any final words that you want to say to your, I don't wanna say listeners, but those that are listening to this current audio.

Father Matthew Gembrowski 39:17

Well sorry for rambling, because that was a lot of rambling. No, the one, not advice, the one thing I leave everybody, pray. If your life is bad, you know, if you are, I just want to see where Jesus is in my life. Do you pray? No. Pray! Like, develop a relationship with Jesus, you will not regret it. He is the Lord

of all, he's the savior of the world. You make a relationship with Him, you will not regret it. It is what we're all made for.

Mark Prindiville 39:46

Excellent. Thank you again, so much. Really appreciate that.

Father Matthew Gembrowski 39:48

Thank you, sir.