

Ecumenical Outreach

An Interview with

Very Rev. David Carter, JCL, JV, Pastor and Rector of the Basilica of Sts. Peter and Paul
and
Kevin Doerge

May 1, 2021

Full Transcript of Interview

*On May 1, 2021, Fr. Carter interviewed **Kevin Doerge**, a Basilica parishioner who is involved in ecumenical outreach among friends. The full interview can be found on the Basilica's website along with Fr. Carter's Pastor's Notes for May 23 and May 30, 2021, accessible at stspeterandpaulbasilica.com/pastors-notes.*

Fr. David Carter

We welcome Kevin Doerge, a parishioner of the Basilica, and one who has become more and more active over the years. I first met Kevin when he was involved with our Haiti parish, and that ministry and outreach to our brothers and sisters down on the island of Hispaniola in the Caribbean. They're hurting so much. But in addition to those charitable activities, Kevin also has a rich life of faith and joins me for a lot of our Liturgy of the Hours - morning prayer, evening prayer - that we sing in the Church. So I'm grateful his for his sharing his voice in the praise of God. But in particular, he's been taking his faith kind of on the road to the community around, and we're going to talk a little bit about that today. So, Kevin, have you always had a zeal for your Catholic faith? Or have there been times in your life where your faith has waned?

Kevin Doerge

Yes, it has certainly waned. Mine's sort of an all-too-familiar, cradle Catholic millennial story, you know... brought up in the faith, kind of fallen away a little bit in high school and college. In college, I attended Mass the first couple of weekends but really didn't go back with any regularity until a year or two after graduation. But even in these in these past six or seven years, I've certainly had periods that I wasn't walking in the straightest paths, and Lord knows my many flaws and weaknesses and the times that I've veered off in the path that leads to Him, but by His infinite mercy and His infinite goodness, He always keeps reaching out and inviting me back. And you probably can't see it from this angle, but I actually have a painting there hidden away behind the St. Anthony statue. It's the one painting I own. It's Rembrandt's "The Return of the Prodigal Son", and it's a figure I've always seen myself as more than any other in the Bible. And there are many screw ups in the Bible that I can relate to. But you know, God still chose to use their fallen nature to make His love and His glory known, and I just pray that He uses me and this fallen creature to do the same.

Fr. David Carter

Well, what brought you back?

Kevin Doerge

God's grace.

Fr. David Carter

Okay.

Kevin Doerge

I suppose we could just end it right there.

Fr. David Carter

That's like St. Therese of Lisieux. Her favorite saying that all is grace. Okay, wonderful. You got an A plus. Show your work, like as in math class, right? How'd you get there?

Kevin Doerge

Yes, there's so much. I'd say what initially brought me back - and then you mentioned this - the fruit of this is with Haiti. I was a year or two removed from college and I had everything, from a worldly standpoint, that should lead to my happiness. But I wasn't happy, and I didn't have peace. I knew there was an emptiness. I mean, St. Augustine says, our hearts are restless until they rest in You, Lord. And I felt that, and then I was kind of reaching out trying to figure out what could bring me that fulfillment. I knew I'd had it in past mission trips. So I actually just was looking into going into a third world country, and there were some secular opportunities that fell through. And I remember at that point turning to God in prayer, the first genuine prayer I think I had in maybe five or six years, and I remember just saying, "Lord, I don't know if you exist. And if you do exist, I don't know if it's the means that I was taught growing up. But I do know, if you do exist, that you would take delight in my service of the poor, and for me to have an opportunity to travel for mission work." And sure enough, that prayer prompted me to go back to Mass, and it was actually right when I went to the Basilica for the first time. And it must have been, if it wasn't the first Mass, it was the second. And Father T., the former pastor of our sister parish - may he rest in peace - he was at the pulpit and in his strong Haitian accent, I probably understood five or six words throughout the homily. But I understood vividly his invitation at the end to come join and visit and join the brothers and sisters in Haiti. And, of course, we founded that that group, and that was just a way into the door. And the rest of my 20s really was just filled with discovery of all these rich traditions and encountering all the apologetics for the first time, the original actual Tradition of the Catholic faith, and reverent sacred liturgy. Recently, as you mentioned, I discovered sacred music and just the constant outpouring of the sacraments. I can't stress enough the importance of community as well. I mean, that's the purpose of the rest of the discussion. But meeting young adults who are really taking their faith seriously, growing in virtue and faith, and to my surprise, were actually somewhat normal people! Far more normal than me, at least... I should be so lucky to have such great friends. So yeah, all that's just been a great journey since, and God's grace really encapsulates all of it.

Fr. David Carter

But you showed your work.

Kevin Doerge

I showed my work.

Fr. David Carter

You get an A plus now. So I know that you've not only been interacting with those of the Catholic faith, which we would say has the fullness of the Christian revelation handed down from the Apostles, but you're also interacting with the majority of Christians in our area, especially our Protestant brothers and sisters, and that

you're involved in kind of an ecumenical prayer group. Can you describe its makeup and then also how you got involved in it?

Kevin Doerge

I don't know if I'd really call it necessarily an ecumenical prayer group, per se. Its purpose isn't really ecumenism. But it's more of a Bible study group. There are about eight to ten people who meet in a house weekly, Sunday nights for dinner, and just go through three-hour marathon Bible study sessions. And these are Christians on fire with their faith. They're striving to live out the loving message of the Gospel. And when we hear that, three hours of studying anything can sound intimidating, but it's sort of second nature to this group. They know their stuff. They have a zeal. They know their Bible. And I'm the only Catholic there and probably the first Catholic, really, that many of them have interacted with on a regular basis. And so I admit, I had some of my hesitations at first, and I even declined a number of invitations at first, mostly because they coincided with Catholic Chatt meetings that I was a part of Sunday nights. But I'm grateful for their persistence.

Fr. David Carter

That's the Catholic young adult ministry that's in the Chattanooga area.

Kevin Doerge

Yeah, in Chattanooga we're very blessed with a thriving young adult group of Catholics really striving and growing in their faith.

Fr. David Carter

So as a Catholic, what were you able to share with this group, this Bible study, that you were the only Catholic in? What were you able to share?

Kevin Doerge

I hope a lot. I hope plenty. Like I said, they really didn't have too much interactions with Catholics before that. And the first session that I went to, as fate would have it, or guess more accurately, as God's providence would have it, the middle of a study of the Book of Isaiah took us to John Chapter Six. And this was a time actually, I kind of breezed through this, I was kind of waning in my faith I was going through a rough time in my life. And I didn't have any intention of speaking up that first session. I'm like, okay, I'm just gonna, you know. I'm with this being out with friends, but I'm just gonna, you know, keep my corner myself. But as they're talking about John Chapter 6, for 5, 10, 15 minutes, I kind of just - I perk up and I posed the question: What do you think Jesus means when he says, "Truly, truly I say to you, unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you shall have no life within you. My flesh is true food, my blood is true drink. He who eats of my flesh and drinks of my blood shall have eternal life. I shall raise him on the last day."? And to my surprise, most of them actually weren't familiar with the Catholic Church's teaching on the True Presence in the Eucharist. And I saw that as a great opportunity. And before long, I was already preparing 50-, 60-, 70-slide PowerPoint presentations on the Eucharist before they even knew I was doing it. And fortunately, the topic came up. They asked me to lead a discussion. To their credit, they were very docile, open to it. They gave me the platform. They were very respectful. We had dialogue for three straight nights talking about the Eucharist. I sort of used Brant Petri's *Jesus in the Jewish Roots of the Eucharist* as a structure for that dialogue. We talked about the Eucharist as the Last Supper is the fulfillment of the Passover meal. Jesus, our paschal lamb, has been

sacrificed. Eucharist is the fulfillment of the manna. We talked at length obviously about John Chapter 6. So we've had some of those discussions and they've been open to it. They've been respectful. They've been curious. They've asked good questions. And they've even recently, back in March, had a discussion about Mary, which is usually a sticking point for a lot of Protestants. And it was again another fruitful discussion. Tyler Ross and Jimmy Olson of the parish joined us, and we had very fruitful dialogue and they asked good questions. It spurs a lot. The beauty of our Catholic faith is that it's all so beautifully woven together. And when you start having questions on some part, it all fits together with others. So it's starting the dialogue. There's many things that it covers and many barriers to kind of get over, but it's been great.

Fr. David Carter

Fantastic. How has your interaction with this group that are fellow brothers and sisters in our Christian faith - but not in the fullness of the Christian faith found in the Catholic Church - how has your interaction with them changed you?

Kevin Doerge

First and foremost, they really walked with me. Like I said, I was I was broken when I went there, and I'll spare you another ramble and leave out those details. But they just loved me and they walked with me. I think often our approach to evangelization is as an argument to be one, and we saw this with some perhaps less than ideally charitable, Catholic-Protestant debates in the early 90s, which - don't get me wrong - I actually really enjoy watching. There's some good substance to them. But it's really not an approach that works for evangelization with friends. And so they just loved me. We established that relationship. I'm forever changed just from that alone. But on top of that, once we established that, we had these open dialogues. I mean, they challenged me. It's not just, you have your belief, we have ours. They'll really question things, and it's helped me to better understand my faith. If I give a response to something that's not satisfactory, they'll poke out any holes in it. And many times they ask me questions that I just don't have a response to. Now, I certainly don't want to just start ignorantly spewing heresy. So it always leads me to research and understand and ultimately just better see the wisdom in our certain Church teachings. And I think some of my friends in the group may not be thrilled with this answer. But ironically, probably the number one fruit of my interaction with the Protestant friend group is a greater devotion to the Eucharist and to Mary, through those topics, through prayer, and through study, and just immersing myself in studying those. Because of their questions, it really helped me grow in my own Catholic faith.

Fr. David Carter

Wow, that's awesome. So I hear you saying, they led with the heart and not with the head. And that drew you in at a time when you were needing fellowship. And of course, that's one of the big lessons we can learn from our Protestant brothers. They do fellowship so well. For some reason, we sometimes struggle as Catholics, and I don't know why that is. But we oftentimes can be in relationship with them, struggle with the fellowship side of church coming to church, and it's just me and Jesus, and, you know, we don't know anybody else that goes to church. They definitely have that gift of gathering people together. And we can definitely learn from that. But also in I hear you saying, in apologetics, you have to lead with the heart, in relationship, not just with the head. The heart leads to the to the head because, you know, the heart has to be formed by the will, or the intellect. But you have to have some kind of compassion and empathy and accompaniment. I think that's fantastic.

Kevin Doerge

Yeah, nobody cares how much you know until they know how much you care.

Fr. David Carter

Would you say that it's worthwhile, then, that we interact and have relationships with our brothers and sisters in the Protestant faith?

Kevin Doerge

No, no at all. I don't know why we've been having this discussion. No, obviously, absolutely, I do. Iron sharpens iron. And rather than using my own words, I'll just turn to those who are more wise than me and just turn to the Catechism, how it talks about unity and articles 820 and 821. It says:

"Christ bestowed unity on his Church from the beginning. This unity, we believe, subsists in the Catholic Church as something she can never lose, and we hope that it will continue to increase until the end of time.' Christ always gives his Church the gift of unity, but the Church must always pray and work to maintain, reinforce, and perfect the unity that Christ wills for her. This is why Jesus himself prayed at the hour of his Passion, and does not cease praying to his Father, for the unity of his disciples: 'That they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be one in us, . . . so that the world may know that you have sent me.' The desire to recover the unity of all Christians is a gift of Christ and a call of the Holy Spirit."

And then it talks in the next section about how we go about doing that. It talks about prayer in common because the change of heart and holiness of life, along with public and private prayer for the unity of Christians, should be regarded as the soul of the whole ecumenical movements and merits the name, spiritual ecumenism. Yeah, it talks about fraternal knowledge of each other, of spending time. And so it's vital to our faith and that's certainly not to embrace some form of relativism or reductionism of our faith. I mean, that section right before talks about the wounds of disunity and some of the terrible damage that's been caused by the separation - not to not to downplay any heresies, schism, apostasy or anything like that. But we believe we have the fullness of faith in the Catholic Church. And we must be firm in that. But we do so with charity.

And if I can make a real quick plug to a YouTube video, there's this this Catholic priest.... It's called "Salvation outside of the Catholic Church with Priest David Carter". He may or may not be as well-known as Father Mike Schmitz, but he's a pretty cool dude. That's a great, great video. I think I just actually came across it yesterday. He talks about what that means, that fullness of faith we have in the Church. And out of charity, we have to share that we can't downplay the gravity of these differences. And remember, that perfect unity exists within the Catholic Church.

Fr. David Carter

We should desire that our neighbor should know Jesus, and that our neighbors should know Jesus in His fullness. We should desire that all people be Catholic, not to browbeat, but to elevate. I think that's the key there. Well, awesome. Well, Kevin, thank you so much for all your work in that area, your inspiration, and following the lead of the Holy Spirit. And thanks to God for His grace, which all is grace, that you have responded to. Thanks for sharing that with us today.

Kevin Doerge

All right. Thank you, Father.

The video of the interview is available on the Basilica's website on the Catholic Social Teaching page.