

## Monsignor Chester Paul Michael

Born in October 1916, Chester Paul Michael was the fourth son of Luther and Carrie Michael, loving and hardworking parents who made their living farming the land in the rural community surrounding Berkeley Springs, West Virginia. Like the rest of their Berkeley Springs neighbors, the Michael family lived a simple, humble life; they had few possessions, but appreciated deep ties to their faith, their family, and their community.

As a boy, Chester spent much of his time helping his father work the farm. He was also a strong academic student and spent many hours reading in his free time. Chester's mother Carrie passed her deep devotion to her Catholic faith to her son, and throughout his childhood, she often introduced him as "my son, who will become a priest someday!"

The Michael family was close-knit, and Chester was extremely close to his siblings. Tragically, as a young boy, he witnessed the death of his brother Belmont from an illness that led to asphyxiation. While the loss of Belmont affected the entire Michael family throughout their lives, for Chester, it was a defining moment, one which directly influenced his motivation to become a cleric.

*Grace is something that we need to ask God for often,  
it has a short shelf life..*

In 1932, at the age of sixteen, Chester began his preparation for the priesthood at St. Charles Seminary in Maryland. He had been a brilliant student in Berkeley Springs, skipping grades and winning honors, but the transition seminary life at St. Charles was a challenge. Eventually, the young seminarian connected with a few of his classmates, but the years at St. Charles were a lonely time for Chester. The most important lessons he learned at St. Charles were to rely on God's help in times of trial, and to embrace being "poor in spirit," which prepared him for his later ministry to the poor and marginalized.

Chester transferred to the Theological College of Catholic University of America to continue his seminary studies in 1935. Under the Sulpician Fathers, he began his studies in philosophy; he was also introduced to the writings of the great saints of the Church, including the works of Saint Teresa of Lisieux. He later devoted his priesthood to St. Teresa, and throughout his life, he often asked for her intercessory help and prayer. Chester's interest in spiritual direction also began at Catholic University, and it was here that he first acquainted himself with the study of spirituality.

Father Chester Michael was ordained into the priesthood in April 1942, in the Diocese of Richmond, Virginia. Father Chet's first assignment as a newly ordained priest was to the original St. Mary Catholic Church in Richmond, where he was recruited by Bishop Peter Ireton to join the *Motor Chapel Mission Band*, also known as "St. Mary of the Highway." Using St. Mary's as their base of operations, Fr. Chet and his fellow priests introduced Catholicism to the rural areas of Virginia, sharing the good news by saying Mass, preaching, and making many friends in the rural towns where their Motor Chapel traveled. During his ten years as part of the Mission Band, Fr. Chet continued his ministry to the poor of Richmond, and St.

Mary's grew into an early center for spiritual direction and counseling during his assignment there.

*Anything Lord, Everything..*

As a young priest, Fr. Chet helped establish several social action movements, and was assigned to serve first as the diocesan Director of Rural Life, and additionally as Director of Displaced Persons and Director of Family Life. Fr. Chet temporarily established two rural Catholic communities in Virginia as part of the back-to-the-land movement led by Dorothy Day of the Catholic Worker movement. Day's daughter and son-in-law settled in a tenant home in one community, and she was a frequent visitor during the short time the community was active. He also directed the diocesan resettlement of post-war refugees and, in northern Virginia, promoted involvement in The Christophers, a social action group whose mission was to help people in need. He attended the annual convention that grew into The Christian Family Movement and helped establish its presence in Virginia, giving Cana Conferences for married couples and pre-Cana classes for engaged couples. In addition to many other advocacy efforts, Fr. Chet briefly served as pastor to his hometown parish, St. Vincent.

In 1953, Bishop Ireton assigned Fr. Chet to serve as pastor at St. Bede in Williamsburg. He brought tremendous change to his new congregation, introducing social action groups and encouraging lay participation in both the liturgy and the life of the parish. Fr. Chet continued to travel and study during this assignment, making an extensive trip to visit the Holy Land, and taking summer courses at Notre Dame under the Jungian psychologist, Fr. Josef Goldbrunne. His study of the writings of Carl Jung and Teilhard de Chardin greatly influenced his thinking, and later, his writing. He also learned much from well-known liturgists both in the US and in other countries and took great pleasure in introducing new liturgical practices and music to the St. Bede community. Feeling that they were an overlooked, forgotten group, Fr. Chet also ministered to the Catholic military community in nearby Yorktown, Virginia. As the community grew and flourished, it became necessary for them to have their own parish home. Fr. Chet oversaw the building and formation of this new satellite parish in Yorktown, which he named St. Joan of Arc.

Fr. Chet's passionate interest in private prayer, along with his unwavering commitment to lay spirituality, social action, and congregational participation in liturgy were unheard of in the Catholic Church of the 1950s. These concepts were central to Fr. Chet's ministry at St. Bede and St. Joan of Arc; they also foreshadowed the coming changes to the modern Catholic Church.

*Just leave that to God..*

In the early 1960s, Bishop John Russell assigned Fr. Chet to serve as the founding rector of St. John Vianney Minor Seminary in Goochland County, Virginia. Fr. Chet applied his enthusiasm, passion, research, knowledge, and experience into developing the new seminary, creating an open, progressive curriculum to support the discernment and early formation of the next generation of priests. He also served as the Director of Priestly Vocations for the

Diocese of Richmond and the parish administrator of St. Mary's in Fredericksburg, and in 1961, Pope John XXIII granted Fr. Chet the title of Very Reverend Monsignor.

The Second Vatican Council opened in 1962, ushering in a time of profound renewal and change in the Catholic Church. The resulting collision of progressive and conservative forces in the church was inevitable, affecting both the global Catholic Church and the Diocese of Richmond. Fr. Chet's tenure at St. John Vianney was filled with many successes; there were also some failures. But conflicts with the traditional diocesan viewpoint increased, and finally became too much for him to surmount. Ultimately, he resigned from his position as rector in 1963.

*Whatever does the most good for the most people..*

In August 1963, Fr. Chet was assigned to Holy Comforter parish in downtown Charlottesville, along with its chapel and elementary school located in the surrounding suburbs. Embracing an updated theology from Vatican II, Fr. Chet established formation and education programs for both children and adults of the parish. In addition to formal religious education for children, he introduced Vacation Bible school, discussion groups, adult formation workshops, and speaker sessions with Catholic writers and theologians. He also introduced his parishioners to the budding Cursillo Movement, although it did not take hold at that time in the community.

Fr. Chet's ministry extended beyond the doors of Holy Comforter. He worked throughout the Charlottesville area to promote ecumenism among the multiple church communities of varying denominations. He also co-founded the Blue Ridge Chapter of Religion and Mental Health, a group of local clerics and behavioral health professionals, and helped form a Council of Churches, which worked throughout the Charlottesville region for Christian unity.

As a strong advocate for fair housing for minorities, he worked to provide housing in Charlottesville for people in need, and co-chaired the Diocesan Social Development Commission, which became known as "Peace and Justice." Along with Fr. Walter Sullivan, who would become the next bishop of the Diocese of Richmond, Fr. Chet led the commission as they took on the task of educating Catholics about racial prejudice, fair housing practices, justice for black citizens, and other social justice and human concerns issues.

Fr. Chet continued to explore Jungian theology throughout the 1960s and began writing as a way to share what he had learned. He published his first book, *The New Day of Christianity* in 1965, which included many of the retreat presentations he had given over the years. In the later 1960s, Fr. Chet began publishing *The Open Door*, a quarterly booklet dedicated to exploring Christianity spirituality, psychology, and theology. *The Open Door* introduced readers to Fr. Chet's reflections on Christ's teachings and Christian spirituality. He continued to write and distribute *The Open Door* booklets to hundreds of recipients throughout his priestly ministry.

*Give me only Your love and Your grace.  
With those, I am rich enough and desire nothing more..*

In the early 1970s, Fr. Chet allowed himself the luxury of purchasing his own small place of retreat in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia. “Chet’s Cabin”, as it came to be known, was a humble place where he could be closer to God and his beloved retreat over the years. It was a place to garden, to pray, to write, to rest, to study, to listen to music, to counsel people looking for direction, to celebrate Mass. Chet’s Cabin was a cherished meeting spot for friends, and home to innumerable family gatherings. It was also the starting point for the countless hikes he took over the years to the top of Ennis Mountain, rising behind the cabin, to watch the sunrise at dawn and to pray.

*There are a thousand roads to God..*

In 1972, after attending summer school at Villanova and the University of San Francisco, Fr. Chet decided to pursue a doctorate in theology from St. Mary University. In 1975, he was awarded a Doctorate in Sacred Theology after defending his thesis, “A Comparison of the God-Talk of Thomas Aquinas and Charles Hartshorne”.

When he returned to the Diocese of Richmond, Bishop Walter Sullivan appointed him Director of Genesis House, a new retreat center located on the grounds of St. John Vianney Seminary. Genesis House was the ideal venue for Fr. Chet to do the work that he loved the most: spiritual direction and caring for souls. His energies there were focused on ministering to Catholic laity and clergy, and ecumenical groups; he provided workshops, classes, and a variety of retreats, ranging from weekend retreats to thirty-day retreats. He was named Diocesan Director of Continuing Education for Priests, and he served on the Priests Council Committee for Priestly Life and Formation. He also traveled throughout the country, leading retreats for both Catholic groups and those of other denominations. While at Genesis House, Fr. Chet established and re-energized the Cursillo Movement in the Richmond area. He believed that attending a Cursillo weekend was a transformative experience for Catholic laity, inspiring them to become enthusiastic, active participants in their parish communities while experiencing God and deepening their faith. He continued to support the Cursillo Movement throughout his priestly ministry, serving on Cursillo Weekend teams until 2012.

In 1982, Fr. Chet published his second book, co-authored with his friend Marie Norrisey. *Arise: A Christian Psychology of Love* explored the relationship between Jungian psychology and Christian spirituality. Subsequently, he and Ms. Norrisey developed a study, known as the Prayer Project, which led to his third publication. *Prayer and Temperament* combined the findings of the Prayer Project and the Myers Briggs Type Indicator to encourage both laity and religious to match their personality type or “temperament” with prayer methods most suitable for them. It has remained Fr. Chet’s most popular book.

## *What return shall I make to the Lord after all He has done for me?*

In 1984, Fr. Chet retired as director of Genesis House and made his mountain cabin his full-time residence. He described this time as “the happiest years of my life.” After years of giving spiritual direction to countless people, Fr. Chet now focused his energy on empowering and training the laity in the practice of spiritual direction, through the development of the Spiritual Direction Institute (SDI). A culmination of his many years of study, writing, and speaking about spiritual direction, SDI became a two-year program of study, prayer, writing, retreats, and practice sessions. By 2014, over 600 people had become graduates of the program, trained to accompany others and support them on their spiritual journey. The SDI program has welcomed people of many faiths and backgrounds and is offered in four regions of the Richmond diocese. Fr. Chet’s lifelong mission to empower the laity, to bring them to full involvement in their faith community, and to give the gift of spiritual direction into their hands so that they might in turn share it with others, is the continuing work of the Spiritual Direction Institute today.

Fr. Chet continued to write *The Open Door* publications as well as other books on spirituality. His final book, *A Christian Worldview*, was published in 2002 was written in part as a response to the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. As part of his ongoing study of Jungian spirituality, he explored dream analysis and its significance to God’s spirit within us. He continued to give retreats throughout Virginia for religious orders and priests, and faithfully held his annual Holy Week retreat in Virginia to celebrate Easter, as he had done since the 1970s. Fr. Chet also assisted his fellow priests with pastoral duties and Sunday masses at churches throughout the diocese, and he continued actively facilitating SDI retreats into 2011. Perhaps most importantly, he established the Open Door Board, an instrument tasked with discerning the best ways to share and disseminate his life’s works and writings.

In his mid-90s, Fr. Chet moved to Our Lady of Peace Assisted Living Community in Charlottesville, and served as priest-in-residence to the community. He maintained an active daily schedule of ministry, and delighted in the visits from the countless friends from across the years, brother priests, clergy from other faiths, former students, and beloved family members who arrived at his door.

## *Thanks Be to God*

Fr. Chet faithfully served the Diocese of Richmond as a priest for 72 years. After a brief stay at the Little Sisters of the Poor St. Joseph’s Home in Richmond, Fr. Chet passed away at Bon Secours St. Mary Hospital in Richmond, on July 31, 2014, at the age of 97. He is buried in Berkeley Springs, next to his parents and his beloved brother Belmont.

- *Written by Felicia Rakes  
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