

An interview with Fr. Phillip Cover as we prepare to enter into our Lenten Retreat

1. **Can you tell us something about you and your educational background?** I was born and raised in Akron, Ohio with a twin brother, a sister five years older than my brother and me and a mother and father who were models of what it means to be loving, generous, self-sacrificing parents. Additionally, I am a grateful beneficiary of a Catholic education—St. Sebastian Grade School, Archbishop Hoban High School, Borromeo College of Ohio and the Catholic University of America.
2. **I understand you have been a priest for forty-seven years. What has that experience been like?** It is difficult to put into words something that is ineffable, meaning, that the work of the Spirit who is operative in the life of every human being is so often beyond description. As a priest I have been deeply blessed, loved, suffused with the gifts of God's grace, mercy, and protective love over all these years. When I went to the seminary out of high school, it was my desire to be a parish priest with no other aspirations except to someday perhaps to be a pastor in my diocese of Lafayette-in-Indiana. That never happened. Through nine years of seminary education, while my initial desire never changed, the Spirit, following my ordination began to unfold a very different plan. It is too long of a story to be told here. In short, shortly after my ordination, my parents were both diagnosed with cancer. My bishop allowed me to have a secular job to help support them, as long as I would work in a parish on weekends. In late 1978, I was employed by Department of Justice in Washington and helped at various parishes in the Archdiocese of Baltimore since that time, including several years at St. Michael's with Fr. Bob Bozel in the early 80s. The dream I had for being a parish priest was realized in ways I never imagined. My gratitude for the ways the Spirit has led me runs deep.
3. **How were you lead into the ministry of spiritual direction?** In 1993, I enrolled in an extraordinary, intensive two-year spiritual guidance program at the Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation in Washington, D.C. The primary purpose of the program is spiritual formation in the contemplative Christian tradition. For me the program was transformative, in many ways turning my life upside down and inside out. A year later, I was invited to be part of the program's adjunct staff. I continue to teach in the program and help facilitate students move through the many program requirements.
4. **When did you begin your retreat ministry?** I began my retreat ministry at the Bon Secours Retreat and Conference Center over twenty-years ago. Since that time my ministry has grown and I have been invited to lead retreats in parishes and retreat centers throughout the country, but principally on the east coast of the US.
5. **Is there a particular way you plan to lead our Lenten, Easter, and Pentecost retreats?** The spiritual leadership and preparations for the Lenten, Easter, and Pentecost retreats has been a collaborative effort with the Evangelization committee. As you may know, there are many different kinds of retreats and many ways to facilitate them. For St. Michael's, we decided to create the retreat as a prayer-filled time of spiritual reflection. While the overall theme of our three retreats is—*"To Live as Missionary Disciples of Christ in the 21st Century,"* the focus of the Lenten retreat is around two personal questions: What Do You Want? What Does God Want? Throughout all these retreats, we will weave two threads together *relationship* and *love*—*relationship* representing the vertical, spiritual dimension between God and ourselves; and *love*, representing the horizontal direction of being missionary disciples in the world. The 90 minute retreat session will be a time of prayer, presentation, interior listening, prayerfully reflecting on a question from the presentation, and some time to ask questions.

We wanted to ensure that the retreat experience would not be limited to just the 90 minutes session, but be extended through the parish bulletin with insights from spiritual teachers and corresponding reflection questions, material on the parish web page and accounts of what it means to be a disciple of Christ from parishioners of St. Michael's catholic community.

6. **What do you see as some of the contemporary, spiritual challenges of being a disciple of Christ today?** I have pondered this question often. Let me single out one challenge with our retreat in mind. We are living in a world and culture that is increasingly becoming secular. In many respects, the Christian narrative that was such an important part of our social and cultural lives is disappearing and with it there is a loss of the source of meaning and purpose it once provided. Increasingly people are walking away from organized religion. But this does not mean people are walking away from God. What people are looking for today is a new direction, a new religious and spiritual narrative, and new ways and paths to access what alone can satisfy the deepest longings of the human heart—we call God. For us who are disciples of Christ, the challenge is at least three-fold: first, to deepen our relationship with God who is love. The spiritual teacher James Finley says that "God will not rest until we are equal to God in love;" second, to leave the secure, comfortable and familiar place in order to be taken by the Spirit and transformed into the likeness of Christ; and third, to be vulnerably present in the world in a new way, namely, to stand up to the demands of what Love (God) is calling forth from us on behalf of the life of the world.