

FaithLife Stories: Doug Gugger

Doug and his wife, Amy, live in Springfield and have been OMC parishioners since 2009. They have three children: Abraham, 9; Micah, 8; and John Paul, 5. Doug is a pain medicine doctor in Quakertown.

I can see now that my Catholic identity has always been a fallback in my life, even when I wasn't practicing and even when I wasn't aware of it. My mother, who was from an Italian background, was very devout and had a great influence on me. My father, who was quieter about his Catholic faith, was from a Swiss and German background.

I went through 12 years of Catholic school, including LaSalle for high school, and then Boston University for undergraduate. I couldn't stand the nuns who taught in my primary school – they were just mean people. But when I started at LaSalle in 9th grade, I found a different way of being Catholic. The Christian brothers led by example and encouraged us to find our own path to the faith. I resonated with their approach, which was one of tolerance and acceptance. They were always trying to teach what Jesus really meant rather than just preaching dogma.

But from age 17 through 28, I was not a practicing Catholic. When I told my parents I wanted to stop going to mass, my mother said, "It would make me feel better if you went, but I will treat you like an adult and let you decide." This allowed me to be stronger as an adult and allowed me to take my own journey and not someone else's.

I still had a relationship with God but I was not sure if I identified myself as Catholic. In my 20's, the sexual abuse scandals were starting to become public and I felt it was one more problem caused by the hierarchy.

I was so upset by the structure of the Church that I briefly attended an Episcopal church. Their approach seemed to be more practical, like they were actually trying to teach from the Gospels. The Catholic parish priest I was used to wasn't really speaking to the parishioners. But there were certain aspects of the Episcopal Church that didn't feel right. But ultimately, I was influenced by certain well-timed homilies here at OMC and the sense of community.

My wife came from a strong Irish Catholic background and going to church was always part of her routine, always something very important to her. In one of our conversations about religion, I challenged her to tell me why she continued to go to church. "I find great peace there," she said. "I enjoy it as meditation and a time to be with God." She told me that the Church was always bigger than those things that caused me to be upset about it.

We got married at St. Mathew's in Conshohocken. In the first five years, we had trouble getting pregnant so we started the process to adopt a baby from Ethiopia. The same day that we finally saw the first photo from Ethiopia of our baby son, Abraham, we found out Amy was pregnant. At the same time, I was serving as a Flight Surgeon attached to specific Marine and Navy squads at Willow Grove. Unexpectedly, I was plucked from my unit and sent to Afghanistan for one year with an Army nation building team. That experience, including being under fire numerous

times, accelerated my return to God and the Catholic faith. Between our adoption, the pregnancy and spending a lot of prayer time in the bunker, I felt an overwhelming sense of purpose in my life.

When I was about to deploy, we had just started coming to OMC. I remember that Father Bob made me stand up at mass and he blessed me. It was a very poignant moment, one that really created a Catholic identity for me. I did not really feel it before that because it didn't mean as much when I was younger.

I was very comfortable being fully Catholic again. One of the things that helped me was a homily preached by Father Bob. He said the Roman Catholic Church is about the people and the faith not the hierarchy. I love Pope Francis and I think that's what he is about, too. And I never felt so Catholic as when Francis was here in Philadelphia.

For years, I struggled mightily with the way the Church was treating people and the mixed messages it was sending, refusing to admit certain faults of its own. The two things that brought me back were starting a family and coming to this parish. Father Bob and Sister Christine are more accepting than anything I've experienced before. I see the Church struggling with homophobia and other people not living in traditional conformity. I believe everyone has a place in the Church and that's consistent with the teachings of Jesus. As Father Bob has said, it's not about dogma and hierarchy. As people, we are not perfect; and Francis is admitting the faults of the Church.