



# My Vocation

by Fr John Fairhurst OSB

After a difficult afternoon with Year 3 or a rather trying lesson with Year 8, I do sometimes wonder how I came to be here, teaching in a prep school and a member of a Benedictine community...

At school I always loved biology and had planned to study medicine. I attended the local Catholic grammar school in my home town of St Helens run by the De La Salle Brothers and it was after being part of several retreats that I became attracted to the idea of being a priest. At first I searched for an Order I could join where I could be both priest and doctor, but it soon became clear that I would have to choose.

I opted for the Servite Friars, a small order founded in Italy with several parishes in this country. I had got to know one of the friars quite well and it seemed an obvious decision. Against much advice, I decided to join straight after A-Levels rather than go to University and spent a year's postulancy in Glasgow, learning to cook, redecorate the house and study Theology at the local seminary, as well as developing my prayer life.

Then came a more formal period as a novice in Oxford, singing the Divine Office and doing manual labour in the garden. It was here that I discovered a love of spiritual reading, but also came to the conclusion that I wasn't quite ready for a formal commitment to religious life. With the superior's blessing, I left the Order and, after a period of voluntary work, began a course in Psychology at Glasgow

University, promising that I would keep in touch and keep up my prayer life.

After completing my degree and a year working at the Royal Aircraft Establishment in Farnborough, I returned to the Servites, completed my Novitiate and was sent to Rome to study Philosophy and Theology, a fantastic time which changed my life completely; it was like starting life again, only this time in Italian!

I returned to England to find the Servite Province much changed and sadly left, applying to the Bishop of Salford who accepted me as a candidate for the priesthood. After a pastoral year at Oscott College I was ordained deacon and then priest. It was shortly before my ordination that I made my first retreat to Ampleforth. I knew Belmont Abbey a little and had planned to make my pre-ordination retreat there but a priest friend suggested Ampleforth, as it was closer. Strange how providence works.

I then began life as an assistant priest in Blackburn and then Rochdale, Lancashire, with a very experienced older priest from whom I learned a lot about pastoral ministry. I loved my parish duties, visiting the school, celebrating Mass, even organising an Italian-style procession in honour of our Lady. However, I began to miss the life in community that I had enjoyed with the Servites and in which I had been formed. I began to make regular days of recollection at Ampleforth on my day off, and finally approached Abbot

Patrick about testing my vocation at the monastery. Eventually, I spoke to my bishop and was allowed to join the novitiate, which meant a great change from a busy parish to sacristy work, plainchant lessons and the Rule of St Benedict.

I persevered, made my simple profession and to my horror was asked to begin teaching Biology in the College! It was all a bit unsettling and I went back to the diocese for a year, working in the student chaplaincy in Manchester, before returning again to the monastery and the daily round of Mass, prayer and teaching. I began to enjoy the challenge and was appointed Chaplain to St Dunstan's House and then St Margaret's. Eventually, I completed a teaching qualification and was just getting settled when, several years later, Abbot Cuthbert asked me to come to Gilling, where I have now been for nearly six wonderful years.

I have had a lot of changes in my vocation journey, many goodbyes, some regrets, but overall a sense that God was leading me and that if I left things up to Him, all would be well in the end even though I did not always see the bigger picture. It has taught me to trust God and given me a deep sense of peace. People sometimes ask if I'm happy. I repeat what a friend of mine once said, "I am deeply content...I'll leave happiness for heaven!"

So, back to finish the marking and then get ready to celebrate Mass with Year 7, wondering "what next?"