



My Vocation

by Fr Oswald McBride OSB

The story of my vocation might seem more dramatic than it really was - though no angels or trumpets were involved! I come from a Catholic family and went to a Catholic Primary School run by nuns. Though strict, it gave us a good religious background, as did my vibrant Parish in Dover. I started being an altar server aged seven, and there was a huge group of us who did many things together, including visiting the local seminary each year. I then went to the local Grammar school. This school had a strong Anglican ethos, and this encouraged those of us who were Catholic to be thoughtful about our faith, mostly in self-defence! Perhaps the most important thing, however, was our school choir, which was rather like the Schola. We regularly sang Evensong at local churches and cathedrals, and annually went on residential visits to cathedrals, singing all the services for a week. As a boy, I was 'interested' in prayer - we often prayed together as a family at home as well as going to Mass - but I always found prayer difficult. I never really knew what I was supposed to do when I was praying, and nothing I read seemed to help, though my parish priest encouraged me to keep trying. Sacred music and especially the psalms thus came as a bit of a lifeline - Evensong (like our Vespers) was a fixed structure that I didn't have to invent, and here were the scriptures in a different way, not as you heard them at Mass.

At 16, I saw the local bishop, thinking I might have a vocation to be a priest. He was dismissive. I was studying sciences and

hoping to read Medicine, and he told me to forget it. In many ways it came as a relief, since the idea of being 'different,' being 'called' seemed rather intimidating!

So I went to Edinburgh to study Medicine. I also joined the Anglican Cathedral choir, first part-time and then singing daily. This was a formative experience in 'reshaping' my vocation. Over the years it taught me the value of shared effort, deeply shared friendships and shared worship. In some ways, the singing men became a little community, bound together by prayer and music. I gradually found that without regular prayer, based at that stage on the Book of Common Prayer (no one had told me the Roman Office even existed!), I did not have the strength to treat my patients properly, or keep my friendships and relationships healthy. Annoyingly, the vocation 'itch' would not go away, and although I thought sometimes of doing something about it, I always managed to find an excuse not to!

The crunch really came when I was 23. We were approaching the end of our studies, and many of my friends were getting engaged. At that time, I was madly in love with a girl I had known since my first year, and we discussed whether that would be right for us. Unfortunately, I had made a sort of 'bet' with God - if she said "Yes" all well and good; if "No" I would take the 'vocation thing' seriously. I was terrified when she said "No." I really couldn't see what to do next. Over the next 18 months, I did everything bad (but legal) I

could to avoid God, but He wouldn't let go. It was a little like living through Psalm 138 (the 'Hound of Heaven') in real time! Eventually, like the Prodigal Son, I realised I was making a mess of my life and gave in.

I had found the Ampleforth Abbey guidebook in my flat, and it seemed to be what I was really looking for, so after Mass one Sunday, I wrote to Abbot Patrick, asking to come and see him. I came as a guest, and two days later, having read the Rule, asked to join the Community. He was either very brave or very stupid, and said I could come as a postulant, so that the Community and I could get to know one another. Three months later, I formally joined the monastery.

Twenty years on, I can honestly say that I am grateful to God and to the Community for the life they have given me here. Obviously, a vocation does not stop when you join a monastery - it is something you have to start again, by God's grace and your own obedience, each and every day. Even though I still consider myself a 'rubbish monk' (ask the boys of St Dunstan's!) and still find prayer a real challenge, my monastic life has given me so many blessings and opportunities (alongside the trials and tribulations you get in any family) that I can really only be joyful. The only pity is that I ran away for so long!!