

# My Vocation

by Fr Robert Igo OSB



Where does my vocation story begin? I suppose it began when I joined the choir at the local Anglican parish and it grew in a steady and unspectacular way until today. My father, a Catholic, though non-practicing, married my mother, an Anglican, who very much practiced her faith. She had readily agreed, from the outset of their married life, that the children would be brought up in the Catholic faith and so my sister, three years older than myself, was duly baptised a Catholic. When I was born the newly appointed parish priest noted that I was the offspring of a 'mixed marriage' and said that in his opinion I was conceived in sin. This observation was not welcomed by my father, who responded that if it was in sin that I was conceived then I would be baptised in sin so I was baptised in the local Anglican Church.

This inauspicious beginning to Christian discipleship proved to be the way God worked in my life and it was while preparing to receive confirmation that I became gripped by the idea of a possible vocation to priesthood. We were fortunate in this Anglican parish because it was considered to be a 'training parish' and so there were always plenty of curates, sometimes as many as four or five and their example and dedication to praying the Divine Office, pastoral work and the celebration of the Eucharist made a deep impression upon me. Eventually my father returned to the practice of his faith and so I accompanied him to the early Mass at the Catholic parish, getting home just in time to go with my mother and sister to the Anglican Church. For reasons that I never quite got to know my grandmother went to the local Baptist Church midweek and in my early years I accompanied her mainly because there was a woman who gave me sweets, but I think it was from that faith community that I learnt the power and importance of good preaching and a love of the scriptures. Thus were my ecumenical beginnings in the Christian faith, an experience that I have never regretted and always valued.

The sense of vocation intensified when I discovered the presence of religious life within the Anglican Communion. Thanks to one of the Anglican priests I got to know, and attended retreats at the Community of the Resurrection, Mirfield in West

Yorkshire. A whole new world was opened up and I discovered the beauty of the daily round of prayer lived in community and with it the deepening importance of a solid life of prayer. This was strengthened by my contact with the Sisters of the Love of God, an Anglican contemplative community in Oxford. These sisters taught me much, especially Sr. Benedicta Ward SLG who was for many years a spiritual guide and friend.

Having been accepted for the priesthood by the Diocese of Manchester I went to Chichester Theological College where I gained much valuable pastoral experience in Portsmouth dockland, as well as a love of the Fathers of the Church. The reading of the Fathers opened me to the influence of monastic spirituality and a seed was thus sown. On completion of my studies I was ordained and was appointed to serve a curacy in Oldham, Lancashire. I suppose like all young newly ordained it was something of a baptism of fire. The parish priest was an interesting character and in his own odd way taught me much, particularly the importance of visiting and once again the discipline of praying the Divine Office. No matter what the weather we would be in the cold parish Church at 6.30am each morning to pray Morning Prayer followed by a period of meditation and then Mass. We returned every evening at 5.30pm to pray Evening Prayer together. He insisted that I visit thirty homes each week and on a Sunday afternoon when I had to present him with a list of all the families I had visited during the week. He would then check that I had actually done so! He was obviously very concerned about my pastoral formation.

After three years I moved to St Ignatius, Sunderland and had by then joined an association of priests called the Company of Mission Priests, now officially affiliated to the Vincentians. These priests lived a form of community life sharing financial resources and praying the Divine Office

together. CMP had been formed just after the Second World War so that poor inner city parishes, where married priests with children might be reluctant to minister, would be ministered too. I was blessed with the Anglican priests who I lived with and got to know in the Company of Mission Priests and after almost four years in Sunderland I was asked to go to Hartlepool, to a parish that had undergone a bit of a difficult time. Mark Stapleford, now Fr Thomas of Ealing Abbey, went with me and we were soon joined by Charles Everitt, now Fr Gabriel. It was an exciting time with lots of hard work, but much fun as well. So what went wrong you might ask? What led to Ampleforth and entry into the Catholic Church?

In reality nothing went wrong, things simply came together. It was precipitated by the then Bishop of Durham, David Jenkins, who did not seem to believe in much, except his own unorthodox opinions. Slowly the three of us, independently came to the realisation that there was only one logical thing to do. Often I have reflected back and wished that the parishioners in Hartlepool had been angry with us for leaving and entering the Catholic Church because it would have meant the parting would have been easier. But typical of North Eastern loyalty they stuck by us attending our professions and ordinations. The decision to enter communion with the Catholic Church gave me also the much needed opportunity to explore the possibility of a monastic vocation.

Little did I know when I entered Ampleforth in 1988 that I would be asked to come to Zimbabwe where I have been for the past eighteen years. As for life in Zimbabwe, well that is another story, but the journey continues an ever unfolding journey into the mystery of God's call. Who would have thought from Anglican choir boy to making a monastic foundation in Africa? God's great!