



My Vocation

by Fr Terence Richardson OSB

My life has been a series of calls, not straightforward. I was fortunate to be brought up in a family which took for granted the practice of the faith. As a family we would go to Mass together every Sunday, and sometimes on weekdays; we prayed night prayers together regularly though not always with great devotion. My father had been at a Benedictine school himself; his favourite uncle was an Ampleforth monk (Fr Alphonsus), and he had seven other close relatives who were monks or nuns or priests. Aged about 10, I remember going to the ordination of a cousin who is a priest of the Shrewsbury diocese. I myself was an altar server at our local church, Our Lady of Lourdes, in Southport.

So it was not surprising that the possibility of a vocation occurred to me. When I was about 11 I thought of joining the Mill Hill Missionaries: I was told to wait and get a good education. Again when I was a boy at Ampleforth I wondered about joining the diocese, or even joining the monastery, but once again I was urged to continue studying. In the sixth form I was very involved in the Rovers (a Community Service group) and with summer holiday camps similar to the modern Friendship Holiday. After A-levels I went off to Durham University to study Engineering, where I got involved in the Chaplaincy and Cathsoc.

It did not take long for me to realise that I did not want to spend my life as an Engineer, so the question of vocation surfaced again. I was still visiting Ampleforth, where my younger brother

was at the top of the school, and where I would see many of the monks I had known, particularly Fr Kieran Corcoran. I even stayed for the Easter retreat twice. Eventually I summoned up courage and made an appointment to see the Abbot, who encouraged me to join the novitiate straight after finishing my degree.

So I arrived back at Ampleforth for the novitiate retreat, aged just 21. My novice master was Fr Aidan. I grew to admire him and to love him, but there was a slight awkwardness at first because I could remember him throwing me out of his fourth-form biology class eight years earlier – an incident which fortunately he had forgotten.

I guess that when I joined I had assumed that all monks became priests. But as I learned more about the monastic life, I came to see that there were really two different but complementary vocations – one to the monastic life and another to the priesthood. I was fairly sure that God wanted me as a monk, but less sure about being a priest.

Abbot Ambrose was keen that all the monks did the studies for the priesthood even if they weren't going to be ordained, so having studied already for some years in the monastery, I was sent to Toronto for two years. It was a wonderful privilege to be studying in another country in a very lively ecumenical theological faculty.

From Toronto I returned to Ampleforth and after a year at Brunel University learning to teach Design Technology I

taught in the school and also became monastic librarian, kept the bees and ran the Fire Squad. Five years later I was appointed Housemaster of St Aidan's (then a boy's house, of course). Though I enjoyed some aspects of this, I can't say it all went well, and I had a sort of breakdown halfway through my fourth year. The crisis was as much spiritual as anything else: frankly I had been neglecting prayer and the other monastic disciplines.

Fortunately Abbot Patrick sent me to Workington for a few months where I experienced a real deepening in my spiritual life, a sort of further conversion. There I discovered God did want me to be a priest after all. I was ordained less than a year later by Cardinal Basil, who as Abbot had clothed me in the habit 18 years earlier.

I spent 20 years on parishes – mostly at Bamber Bridge and Osmotherley – living with small monastic communities. I gained a lot from the other monks and from the parishioners and friends. It was while I was on the parishes that my adopted parents died and I re-established contact with my natural mother (I was adopted as a baby). Unlike the film *Philomena*, this has proved to be a successful reunion – now I have two families! Then two years ago Abbot Cuthbert asked me (a further call) to come back to the Abbey to be the Prior and Librarian again. I am still at it, of course, but I trust God will continue to call me, and support me in whatever work he plans for me.