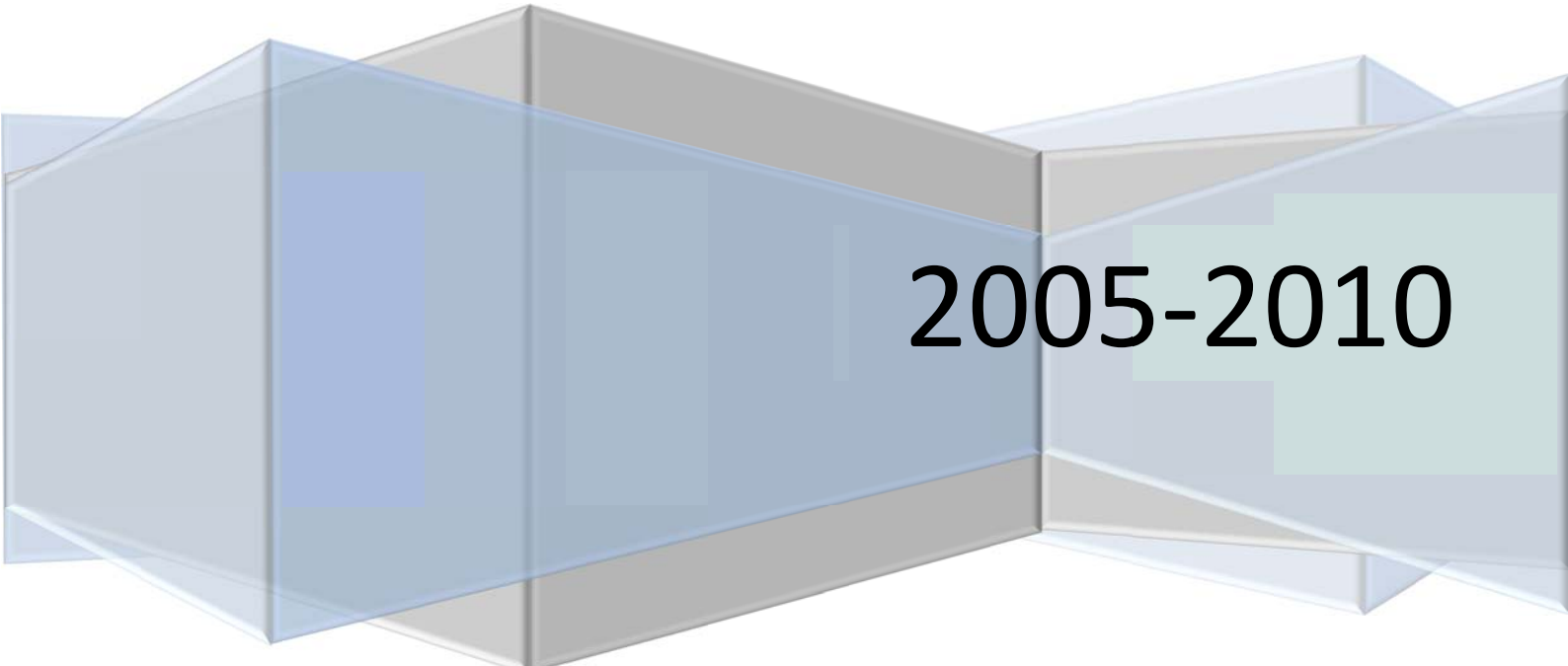




RC Diocese of Hexham & Newcastle

A Priest's Story

**A series of articles about Vocation written 2005 - 2010
by diocesan priests**



2005-2010

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written 2005 - 2010 by diocesan priests*



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A Priest's Story - 1

At 16, a priest friend said to me 'Did you ever think of becoming a priest?'

I said 'No' and he said 'I think you should think about it'. And so, I did and this idea grew on me. A year later, to the joy of my family, I took my place at the regional seminary which was at Ushaw College. Nine years later, July 25th 1948, I was ordained a priest. The years of study were happy years mainly due to student camaraderie and despite the rigours of a wartime diet and a somewhat insensitive system.

Since ordination I have worked for 35 years in parishes of my own diocese of Hexham and Newcastle. Apart from that I was seconded for 4 years to the Catholic Mission society, a kind of revivalist outfit wherein I saw the Church in different parishes all over England and Wales and including the British Army of the Rhine. This peripatetic experience rid me of my North Eastern illusion that there is no vibrant faith south of Potters Bar.

Next I was sent back to Ushaw College as Spiritual Director, a somewhat pompous title for what was a very worthwhile assignment, helping young aspirants to the priesthood to make up their minds.

At a later date I spent just over three years with the Mill Hill Missionaries in the Rift Valley, Kenya, where the patience and generosity of the African people left me increasingly impatient with Western whingeing about shortage of priests.

Questioned about my main genius, I would name Karl Rahner, Ruth Burrows and the letters of Dom John Chapman. I was delighted when Rowan Williams, asked the same question, differed only with St. John of the Cross in Rahner's place.

My most formative experience came almost precisely in the middle of a spell of 19 years, 1967-86, in one diocesan parish. A young assistant priest joined me who introduced me to Charismatic Renewal. This initiated a sea change in terms of my sense of God's closeness, my expectations of his activity and my own freedom of spirit.

All in all, it has added up to a life of great variety and contrast. Loneliness? No. Solitude? Yes. But aloneness is endemic to the human condition, and only the Beatific Vision will heal us.

Speaking at my own Golden Jubilee I said: " I chose celibacy trusting that in it and through it I would not become some dessicated, sub-human hominid, but an alive being, at ease in the

world, able to smell the roses and enjoy the sun, and make life-giving friendships, male and female, and through it all, turn out no worse than acceptably eccentric.” And so it has come to pass, I think.

Not wishing even to suggest any personal difficulty with the idea of married priests, I end on a light note. A priest friend, early on in his priesthood, did a turn on a local radio phone-in programme. One leading question was “I know you are a Catholic priest, and that means you are celibate. Doesn’t that in itself make you rather odd?”

Pausing for all of two seconds, the priest answered “I’m thinking of the crowds of adults who have been part of my life. The vast majority were married, or at some time did marry. I have never found any evidence that they were less odd than I am!”

I would think that for some part of his education, he was in the hands of the Jesuits!

A Priest's Story - 2

When I was a pupil at St. Joseph's school in Hebburn, we used to get the missionary priests and sisters coming to give talks to the classes. These talks were informative and I was always left thinking at the end of the class, that these people had something important to offer others.

When I left school I went to Durham University to study archaeology and during the first year, I started to think about what to do with my life and felt that although archaeology was interesting, it was focused on the past and not on the future. I believe that every Christian has a vocation to use their God given gifts to help other people enjoy life. I wanted to do something that would affect the future of people's lives for the good, to help people get something out of life.

I remembered the talks of the missionaries and I thought about how I could best use my gifts and after prayer and reflection, I applied to become a diocesan priest and started training at Ushaw and was ordained on the Feast of St. Peter & Paul in 1991.

Since ordination I have served at Holy Cross & St. Aidans, Willington Quay, St. Mary's & St. Joseph's, Newton Aycliffe and am presently at St. Joseph's, Blaydon/ St. Anne's, Winlaton. My experience of priesthood is probably based on two things : approachability and flexibility. If parishioners feel they can approach you, then the stories you hear are moving and very humbling .Flexibility is also important because no two days are the same and with fewer priests and the lifestyle of people changing, this has had an impact on parish life. Being a priest is challenging, exciting, humbling and joyful – usually all within the space of 24 hours!

A Priest's Story - 3

My parish priest played an important role in nurturing my vocation to the priesthood. I was an altar server from the age of seven and even when only 13 or 14, he would make comments to some of the younger servers, telling them that I was going to be a priest!! That I was going to go to Ushaw to train for the priesthood!!

Naturally when someone says something like that you try to rebel and put it out of your mind. But it wasn't possible because the seed had already been sown. No matter how hard I tried to think of other jobs for my future – working in a bank, even going on work experience for two weeks – thinking about becoming a teacher and sending off for brochures for colleges – it was difficult to bury the fact that you knew that what your parish priest said was probably true.

Of course the Lord works in mysterious ways and certain things seem to be put in your way to lead and guide you. To celebrate the Feast of Pentecost in 1983 the Diocesan Youth Officer organised a Youth Rally at the Lightfoot Stadium in Walker. It was a fantastic celebration that still remains with me to this day. I remember Bishop Swindlehurst and the Priests of the Diocese being present as well as a huge contingent of Ushaw students and young people from all over the diocese filling the stadium. I came home from there feeling different.

The next day happened to be a School trip to Ushaw College organised by some of the students on placement at my comprehensive school. We spent the day at Ushaw and when I look back, I returned home feeling that somehow my life felt different. Surely it wasn't just a coincidence that it was Pentecost and all this took place at the same time – when I look back I realise that the Holy Spirit was working here in a way I had never experienced before.

A short while later, after discussion with my parents, I spoke to my parish priest to tell him that I wanted to try to study for the priesthood – he probably wasn't surprised but I do know now that he was delighted at what had happened. He had planted that seed all those years ago. The Vocations Director then came to the School to see me and popped round to the home also and then that led to the Selection Advisory Conference and the Bishop's Interview and in September 1984 I began my training at Ushaw.

I am grateful to my parish priest back home for the encouragement and support he gave me. He inspired me to go forward. Since my ordination in 1990 I have thoroughly enjoyed the many different situations that my priesthood has led me into in the six parishes I have already served in and also through the other different “jobs” I currently do for the diocese. I only hope that in some small way I can do for others what my parish priest did for me all those years ago.

A Priest's Story - 4

An early memory from a childhood holiday finds us sitting on the banks of the river Tyne 'en famille' plaiting reeds, believe it or not, and the conversation got around to 'what would you like to be when you grow up?' To tell the truth I didn't know at the time. Up till then I had always wanted to be an engine driver - but my eyes weren't wide enough!

There were four of us, two and two, and not one of us dared to volunteer any response to the question. I think we would have all been content to become reed plaiters for the rest of our lives but father was in the mood to suggest other things. What I do remember is that he said: "For the boys the first calling is to the priesthood....then it would be good to be a solicitor..... or a teacher". So it wasn't surprising that my two sisters became teachers – he was a teacher and all his sisters were teachers and my brother became a solicitor so you could be tempted to guess I was trapped from the start. Not so . I thought of cars a lot – but then most priests had cars – I blew hot and cold about most things but I was too busy being young.

The most significant development was that I went to Ushaw in the early fifties as a lay student. My father had been there as a boy and he went on to university to eventually become a teacher – alas – at the same school that my brother and I attended. Neither of us acquitted ourselves very well there and as a ready solution to the embarrassing situation we were 'sent' to college – I can still hear the admonishing tone in father's voice as he said: "There they'll *make* you work". And so indeed they did.

They were glorious days of many wonderful memories the most abiding of which was the spirit of friendship and like-mindedness amongst my classmates. It gradually dawned on me that all these men were hoping to become priests. There was no great voice, no blinding flash and I suppose the voice of God was in the gentle breeze (the same one that captivated Elijah) of the unspoken support of family and friends. There were twelve of us ordained out of sixty odd who joined and left our year in the twelve years that I was there.

The early years of priesthood were spent with a wonderful Parish Priest in a busy suburban parish on Tyneside. The next four years I was directed to live with an aging priest in the rolling hills of Durham both of which circumstances equipped me well for my next assignment as chaplain in Durham Prison. It was there that I met a lad who had been an altar boy with me in my home parish at Darlington and he mused, in conversation, "I could have

become the priest and you could have ended up in here.” The old Italian proverb rushed into my mind: ‘God writes straight with crooked lines’ and I left in quiet haste thinking to myself: “You’re dangerously near the truth mate!”

My next assignment was, as Port Chaplain on the Tyne with the added responsibility of Vocations promoter for the Diocese and it came none too soon. The job on the river was always very interesting but the task of promoting Vocations gave me an opportunity to re-evaluate my own priesthood and my future. There had been too much change since 1962. My early priesthood could be best described by the fact that I had been ‘ordained in Latin’. And there had been an enormous transformation in the atmosphere of ‘church’ and I began to feel different about it all. They were delicate times but I was grateful for the opportunity to rediscover a developing priesthood from then on. The ‘Ministry to Priests’ programme gave me insights into the psychology of relationships. Understanding personality disorders provided me with an ability to see my own shortcomings and to see the possibilities of a new way ahead. It made me tolerant and more understanding of others and helped me to be aware of my own absolute need of God in my life. To share in the life of God and be graced day by day by ‘sign and sacrament’ has been the only way to survive in what had become and still is, in some circumstances, a very messy church. I hope that during those years I may have encouraged or inspired someone to take up my place in the priesthood.

Back in the parish again I served in other busy suburban situations for ten years and six years respectively and now am comfortably situated in two adjacent parishes back in the hills of Durham. People have always been my inspiration. In every community I have found good, true and lasting friends. After all, people are the bread and butter of our love of God – and Jesus gave us bread and wine to make sure we had a balanced diet. That’s what Eucharist is about.

For the rest it has been golf and sailing. At 55 years of age I was happy to discover skiing. The sailing has kept me afloat with my fellow priests in the barque of St Peter. As for the skiing - a fellow priest sums it up yearly as we take to the slopes when he says to me: “Look out for ‘fellas’ over seventy and we can hope for a few years yet.”

In the beginning celibacy was a problem - not yet the issue that it has become. The busyness of early priesthood kept us very busy. After several stressed domestic circumstances in

presbytery life and with gentle passage of the years the only comment I have to make is that, if celibacy means anything to me now, it means that I should be able to choose which woman I don't live with. I cannot conclude without a tribute to my many fond and faithful female friends.

A Priest's Story - 5

My path to priesthood? A winding path, so that often I was unable to see where it was going; a path which at one point seemed to come to a full stop. Let me explain.

I was baptised and brought up as an Anglican. At the age of 15 I began to wonder if God wanted me to be ordained. After a time of discernment, and attendance at a selection conference, I was recommended for training. A university course in theology was followed by training for pastoral work, and in 1970 I was ordained into the ministry of the Church of England.

The 1960s and 70s were an exciting time in so many ways. Not least, the fact that Anglicans were in close dialogue with Catholics. We agreed about so much; surely it would only be a matter of time before we settled our differences and healed the tragic breach which came about when Henry VIII declared his independence from the Pope. In 1992 however, the Church of England appeared to drive a further wedge between the two Churches by altering the ministry which it claims to share with the Catholic Church. In spite of warnings from Rome that the ordination of women would be a barrier to our reunion, the General Synod voted to go ahead. I was just one of many Anglicans who felt that while women would make good priests it was not up to the Church of England to make a unilateral decision. After much soul-searching I became part of the exodus from Canterbury to Rome. Far from being an exodus into a strange land however, I was quickly made to feel at home and I often thank God for leading me into this truly universal Church.

Becoming a Catholic did not mean that I would automatically become a priest; a period of discernment was necessary. Reflection, discussions with other Catholics, interviews with the Bishop and others followed. Eventually I was sent to Ushaw for two years' formation – an amazing time during which I came to understand and appreciate the great tradition which has shaped most of our priests. I was ordained in St Mary's Cathedral nine years ago – thanks be to God - and to my family, friends and former colleagues for their generous support throughout my journey.

Inevitably, there have been ups and downs, but I still love being a priest – a pastor, a teacher, a reconciler, someone who is called (according to the ordination rite) 'to be moulded into the likeness of Christ.' I have found that celebrating mass every day is a

particular joy. My upbringing in the Church of England and twenty-four years as one of its ministers was all part of the path that has led to priesthood in the Catholic Church. To any unmarried Catholic who is considering what he should do with his life I would say, come and see if this is what God wants for you. If it is, then you have found 'the pearl of great value' that Jesus says is worth everything

A Priest's Story - 6

The parish priest suggested to my mother that he should apply for me to go to Ushaw. I went in September 1950 and was ordained in June 1963. I adjusted to the timetable easily because I loved football and even half a game of football each day made the rest of the timetable bearable.

42 years later, appointed to 7 parishes, 3 of them as parish priest and experience of chaplaincy in hospital, school, industry, prison and the Territorial Army have made for a rich variation of ministry.

The early years were marked with excitement for the Second Vatican Council. Ushaw had prepared us well for the decrees of the Council. There were conflicts, intellectual rather than personal, with older priests. The image of the Church as the people of God was refreshing. Becoming a parish priest in 1980, there were opportunities to involve, affirm, empower the people and be enriched by their openness, spirituality, commitment and generosity. Every initiative involved a warm response, though I did not fully appreciate this at the time.

Life and ministry have changed in 10 years. This year I have not celebrated a wedding in either of our two churches. The closest contact with weddings has been two convalidations and preparation with a couple who are to marry in the Lake District. Contact with people, once so regular and inspiring, is increasingly difficult. There is evidence that many no longer desire contact with the priest. Before my arrival in the current parish, the coordinating pastor in the cluster tried, with dedicated efficiency, to bring our census up to date by asking people to grant permission to keep their names, addresses and telephone numbers. From two parishes, there were less than 100 replies and he had contacted Mass-going people.

There are several blessings. I have met many priests who would openly recognize faults and failures, yet they are the most honest, non-judgemental and caring people. Their dedication is obvious. I have worked closely with priests in the cluster and in the permanent diaconate formation team and their support and witness have been inspirational. There have been endless opportunities for growth and development; many of these have been missed but they were there. Among the greatest blessings have been people. Many live life to the full, despite difficulties, personal, physical and spiritual. Many have offered years of time and talent to the Church.

Many have grown in prayer and spirituality and many have given me love, support and generosity which have made real the Lord's promise that he will bless one hundredfold those who follow him. Seeing Him in the lives of priests and people guarantees the Lord is with us. That presence helps us to face today's challenge with faith, hope and love.

A Priest's Story - 7

" I spent most of the last war, through a scholarship, in a boarding school run by diocesan priests. When I was seventeen I decided to consult the retreat master during our annual retreat, about the possibility of becoming a priest. He advised me to forget about it at least until I had reflected much more about it, and upon what such a calling might mean.

The following year I spoke to another retreat giver and he took the opposite view. He felt that I was ready and his advice was to go ahead. The only thing he asked me to reflect upon was to be sure of my motivation. He reminded me kindly that this was not just about saving my soul.

I was the oldest of six children; my father had died when we were very young. My mother was a prayerful woman and despite needing the financial support of her eldest son, she also encouraged me to apply and as she saw it, answer God's call.

I had now begun to consider the notion of the Foreign Mission, which at that time meant China or Africa. On reflection I came to see the need to remain as near to my Mother and family as was possible.

This was the reason that I eventually arrived in this Diocese at the invitation of Bishop McCormack. I was very fortunate in my appointment with three excellent priests in the same presbytery; something which fed in me a longing for the companionship of fellow priests.

The idea of the "mission field" never left me and when the opportunity arose, following the call of John the Twenty Third in the document *Fidei Donum*, I volunteered for the Missions, and to my great joy i was accepted. Although I was very happy in this Diocese and loved being a priest, I was thrilled to find even more companionship and support among the Columban Fathers, 20,000 miles away from here. I had received a good example here in this Diocese in the Spiritual life and that eventually changed radically into a much more intensive and spirit filled reality when I stumbled upon the prayer group scene in Charismatic Renewal.

I thank God every day for the further calling I have found within my priesthood, not only to a

deeper understanding of Mission, but to a realisation that nothing can be complete or accomplished without prayer, reflection which is underpinned by a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. That has and continues to be, Good News for me.

I continue to find Him still, not only in my priestly companions but also within the friendship, love and support of the lay people I have served and walked with for over fifty years of priesthood."

A Priest's Story - 8

"Freedom literally comes from having our self-absorption challenged by the needs of others"

Stanley Hauerwas.

Archbishop Fulton Sheen once wrote a book called: "*The Priest Is Not His Own*"

When I *thought* of priesthood, I didn't want the thought, firstly, and the fulfilment of the thought some years later didn't resemble in any way what I thought priesthood was all about. You might ask whether priesthood has been better or worse, but I would answer: neither, it has been different!

I came into priesthood in the 1960's, when it was as normal as going to university or taking a career, (or a job as it was called then!). When vocations directors from other countries would visit my school, I had this hankering in my soul – "*yes, be a priest!*". I didn't know any priests personally, (I always kept a safe distance from my parish priest!), and I wasn't an altar server but came from an ordinary Catholic family. This meant Mass on Sunday, and the odd Holy Hour, when I had to accompany my father (reluctantly I might add!).

I left school at 18, and got a job, thinking I'll get this silly idea of a vocation out of my system, but I never did.

I was ordained on 12 June 1971, and have never looked back since. I could never have imagined the joys of priesthood and have never regretted the decision. I have experienced all the different aspects of priesthood - parish life, school, prison and hospital chaplaincies – all experiences which have been rewarding in so many different ways.

The trust, the care, concern and love of parishioners is so unbelievable. Be honest, be straight, be open and you will survive.

St Augustine said: "*Make Humanity your way and you will arrive at God*"

The joys, hopes, co-operation and honesty of people will always keep you close to God and humble also.

I am now back in St. Andrew's Parish, Worswick St., Newcastle-upon-Tyne, and resuming a particularly rewarding part of priesthood; being a hospital chaplain, with the bonus of also being a parish priest. There is nothing like parish life to keep your feet on the ground. You

learn to take nothing for granted, because quite often there are as many views and opinions as there are parishioners.

“The priest is not an angel sent from heaven. He is a man, a member of the Church, a Christian. Remaining man and Christian he begins to speak to you the Word of God, This Word is not his own. No, he comes to you because God has told him to proclaim God’s Word. Perhaps he has not entirely understood it himself. Perhaps he adulterates it. Perhaps he falters and stammers. How else could one speak God’s Word, ordinary man that he is? But must not some one of us say something about God, about Eternal Life, about the majesty of Grace in our sanctified being; must not some one of us speak of sin, judgement and the mercy of God?”

Karl Rahner, S.J.

A Priest's Story - 9

Sunday and the folks are arriving for the 09.30 Mass. Bob asks for a notice for Amnesty International. Dora asks for an extra Coffee Morning for her 60th Wedding Anniversary. I have to apologise to the Church Cleaners for a parcel left in church by the Housekeeper's dog. Then I explain to Gerry and Chris that when I visited their mother-in-law in Ward 2, she prayed for me out of her terminal cancer. And so the welcome to Sunday Mass goes on, the people welcoming the priest and the priest welcoming his friends. We are all in this thing together.

Staff-member of the Junior Seminary, Catechetical Director, Parish Priest in North Shields, St. Cuthbert's, in charge at St. Mary's, Sunderland and now evangelizing Haydon Bridge and Haltwhistle we are still all in this thing together. We are telling our world about Jesus. There is the everyday sharing, visiting, shopping, on the street, walking the hills.

There are the Baptisms, Marriages and Funerals. It is all the same. We tell the story of Jesus. The difference is that this story is true. In fact Jesus is the truth, the way and the life.

We are gripped by the Lord Jesus. And all we want to do is to share this amazing relationship we have with the Lord. We want to share with people everywhere, just as they are, God-smacked, gospel-greedy or just not interested.

But this is my priesthood and I love it.

A Priest's Story - 10

The Harvest is great (Wonderful)

Years ago as a teenager and young man, the harvest time on our farm and locality was long and very special, without doubt the best time of the whole year.

Farming was labour intensive then. All hands, my family, extended family, Protestant and Catholic neighbours filled the fields and worked together until the harvest was saved. Then we all moved to each farm in turn, to help complete their harvest.

All that has gone over the last fifty years. Now, even very large farms are managed by one person, who contracts in all the ploughing, sowing and harvesting.

When I was ordained and came to England, the Church was labour intensive also. Gradually over the same period of years, the number of Priests has decreased, and now most of us are alone in one, two, or more Parishes. The harvest is still wonderful, but you will lead in a new way, calling in the great gifts and energy of young and old, women and men eager to play their part in establishing and nourishing, the Kingdom of God.

You have what it takes,.....Take what you have to.

A Priest's Story - 11

There is a strange
Untouchable, unseeable
Thing in me
It hungers
Grasps, strains
For something
I do not know
Far beyond
It stirs
Turns, disturbs
It brings with it
Unknown things
Unidentified longings
It reveals a vision hazy
Far far
Very far away

Years ago – somewhere in the midst of memories and time – I realized I wanted to be a Priest. I cannot share with you when I knew, because there wasn't really any moment or any day. I realize it must have been when I was very young. Nor do I remember ever making a decision or discussing it with my parents or family. It was as if it was always meant to be and that they always knew it and it didn't need any dramatic announcement. Perhaps you can understand that, from something that happened in your own life. Sometimes things are meant to be.

My mother and family would never have presumed that one of their family would be ordained a Priest, but I understood that they would consider it a wonderful privilege. So no doubt they would have wondered and pondered and prayed, but at no time did they intrude in my thoughts or privacy, and although Morning Prayer and nightly Rosary was part of our daily lives, there was no false piety in our home, and rarely any public discussions of our faith.

My life as a Priest has brought me so many blessings and so much joy, although it was almost 10 years after ordination, that I began to really understand the Priesthood, and to understand my own personality or any gifts I may have had. I was always comfortable in the Priesthood, always happy to be a Priest and always grateful and surprised to be allowed to be so close to our people and to serve them. As all Priests will tell you, I have always been surrounded by wonderful people who loved me into being a Priest. I will never be able to express my thanks to my parents, brothers and sisters including my two brothers who also became Priests. Have you ever thought that it is only when we grow older that we come to know our families and to appreciate their goodness, generosity, faithfulness and, if I am allowed to say it, their holiness. The girl next door in Ireland made a Chasuble from her wedding dress for me. A few years later she died leaving two little children, and one of them became a Priest and assisted at my Silver Jubilee Mass. I constantly reflect how God in his gentle ways is present to us in our journey.

Now towards the end of my life, I try to enjoy each day and to be as peaceful as the world will let me be. I hope to share with my parish God's wonderful goodness to me over the years. He is surely the God of surprises.

A few days before he died, Father George Carey, a great friend, said:

"God has given us a beautiful world".

I hope I continue to enjoy it and be grateful.

LIFE

Is only for

LOVE

TIME

Is only that

We may find

GOD

A Priest's Story - 12

I was recently attending a social club do, a karaoke evening. After I sang Ken Dodd's "Happiness" the presenter told me not to give up the day job, adding "but he only works one day a week". It is only on a Sunday (Saturday evening included) that the wide picture window allows the community to share in the priest's central and significant work, the Eucharist, Holy Mass.

Who sees the baptism of a day-old baby in danger of death at 6am? Who is there when consolation is stripped of words when visiting the family whose son committed suicide?

And when am I to find the time to complete the findings of a complicated marriage case?

The hours are what you make them. 65-70 hours wouldn't be unusual - that's a long day!

And still there's more unfinished than finished.

My call into priesthood crescendoed as a pharmacy student with a strong feeling during adoration of the Eucharist that God wanted me for something; became stronger on retreat when wearing an alb serving the Easter vigil, wondering if... not daring to complete the sentence with "I'll ever wear one as a priest". After making a commitment (the word Yes being somehow important) the decision was confirmed the following day when my mother asked me what I wanted to do and if I had thought about it & we both knew what "it" meant. I met with a spiritual director, vocations director, selection conference panel and bishop's panel (about 15 of them firing questions across the tables). The hardest part wasn't the yes but which direction? Foreign missions, religious community, diocesan? A week in Lourdes helped answer that.

I have the second of two parish council meetings this week tonight, and a somewhat ecumenical funeral tomorrow, and I have not finished my day off yet. What sustains us in this ministry, and without which the pro-life work, the preaching, the visiting, the marriage & baptism preparation work, funeral visits and sick visits would be empty, is time with God, the great, the good in deep prayer, open to discerning his will in the midst of the chaos.

There is much I could write about working with addicts, or 6 years amongst the Maasai in Kenya, (but this submission is late as it is)

Who is there at the baptism of a brain-damaged day old child? His parents of course. Who is there when lost for words with a family bereft of their mentally ill son? His family. They are the people who matter at that moment, and that is where Christ is to be found. As a fellow priest and I entered a social gathering, one parishioner commented that it felt like God himself had come in with us. The short term pay may not be brilliant but there aren't many jobs where you get that reaction. Now there's a boss you can look up to!

A Priest's Story - 13

I remember riding to school upstairs on the bus one day, when *the* question came into my head, “Did I want to be a priest?” I had no answer to this question at the time, and I successfully managed to put the question out of my head— I was probably about 14 years old. But *the* question kept recurring. I wasn’t sure about it, so I kept putting it aside. Putting it aside, however, did not seem to work for long, and *the* question kept coming back. Eventually I came to the conclusion that I needed to pursue this, to see whether I could find any answer to it.

I talked to a priest and a couple of teachers, and they all assured me that there was no rush – there was plenty of time for a decision. They suggested that I should stay on at school, and perhaps go to university. I was very happy to hear this, because I was still very unsure of my answer to *the* question. And so, off I went to university, where I studied mathematics. (Perhaps a bit of mathematical logic would succeed in making *the* question go away.) At the end of my three years at university, *the* question was still there.

Much prayer and thinking was going on all this time, and in the end it became clear that the only way to make *the* question go away was to pursue it. So off I went to the seminary. (Perhaps a bit of seminary discipline would succeed in causing *the* question to disappear.)

You are reading these words as one of a collection of pieces written by priests, so you will know that in due course I became a priest, and so *the* question must have been resolved somehow. After four years in the seminary (where the discipline had scarcely proven severe!) it was finally time to *answer the* question, because it was time to consider my suitability for ordination. The only answer that made sense was “yes”, because the persistence of the question must have meant something! God works in all sorts of different ways...

In none of this was there a clear sense of why God was calling me to be a priest, or of what special talents I possessed that made me suitable – there was just the question. In a very real sense, the question still remains, more than thirty years later. My life as a priest has been a response to the question, rather than an answer. I have done some studying, done some teaching, and am now engaged in parish ministry. I have been to a variety of places,

and met all sorts of people, and learned all sorts of things. But most of all I have learnt what I always knew, that there is goodness in people. If there is anything I can do to help people know that God loves them, really loves them, and not just the people they wish they were, then maybe *the* question will have found an answer. Jesus is God's resounding **yes** to us and to all our important questions.

A Priest's Story - 14

"I first thought of priesthood at the age of 9 years, but I was to be 29 before I started seminary at Ushaw College. I come from a large family and to my knowledge no one from my family has ever become a priest or entered religious life.

After school I trained as an ophthalmic nurse, a job which I really enjoyed. The idea of priesthood was constantly in the back of my mind, but I used to dismiss it. I did not feel I would ever be able to do what a priest does. When I was about 16 years old I saw a Blue Peter programme about the life of St. Teresa of Lisieux. This programme as well as further reading helped me to realise that God is in the ordinary stuff of life. I later pursued a career in mental health. As I tried to support and listen to the people I met, I realised that all human unhappiness ultimately comes from spiritual poverty. We live in an affluent society but so many people today are searching for true meaning in life.

After a particularly difficult episode in my life, I found myself in the confessional. My parish priest at the time was Fr. Michael McFadden. Having "spilled my guts" I couldn't wait to leave the confessional but Fr. Michael stopped me. He said, "I don't know why I'm saying this Stephen, but have you ever thought about being a priest?" I was stunned, and felt I couldn't leave the confessional without telling the truth. "Yes", I said.

The years of discernment which followed were taxing but blessed. I still couldn't believe that I could do what a priest is supposed to do. The very idea of being a priest and saying Mass terrified me. But when we start walking with Jesus we are never abandoned. One day I found myself answering the question of Jesus in the Gospel, "Who do you say that I am?" Amid my fears I replied "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God".

On the 25th June 2000 I was ordained alongside Fr. Jim Angus. The last seven years have passed so quickly. Diocesan priesthood is a wonderful life."

A Priest's Story - 15

Growing up, whenever I thought about priesthood I was able to dismiss it. My earliest thoughts on priesthood were in primary school. These thoughts or 'niggles' continued, at times more persistent than others. However, after leaving school they disappeared. When ideas or the thought of priesthood would return would be when I was unhappy or frustrated with work. Things would not be going the way I thought that they should.

I was lucky and had managed to secure employment with a bank upon leaving school at 16. I remained with the bank for 11 years, eventually deciding to leave in 1999. This was after I had secured a fairly good position with HSBC International. Everything I had thought I wanted and had worked hard for I now had. Then 'the niggle' returned.

I was on pilgrimage in Lourdes in 1998 and that 'the niggle' came back. I could not say that I had enjoyed my pilgrimage to Lourdes. It was my first time there as a helper. I do not know what assumptions I had created about the place of Lourdes or that of my fellow pilgrims but whatever my assumptions were they were soon challenged on many levels.

I remember toward the end of the pilgrimage, I managed to find some space for myself. I went to the grotto early in the morning/late at night. This is one of those rare moments in my life when I really felt that prayer was working. Not that I wanted to hear the answer. Me a priest - I had too much to lose.

After talking with various people, priests and my family, a formal application was made and accepted. I started seminary at Ushaw in 1999. After four years I decided that I had too many questions which remained unanswered and with the support of the college my family and Bishop Ambrose I decided to leave. The diocese gave me the space I needed to think and pray while maintaining a level of contact that I was comfortable with.

After three years 'the niggle' had returned and was as strong as ever. I re-entered seminary formation in 2006. After two further years of training I was ordained as a priest for the diocese of Hexham and Newcastle in St Cuthbert's Chapel Ushaw College. This was the bi-centennial year of celebrations. It was the late Bishop Kevin who suggested St Cuthbert's

Chapel as a venue. I was delighted to accept the invitation and the generosity and hospitality that the College could provide.

I am approaching my first anniversary on 6th June. People ask me how have I found priesthood. All I can say is that I am really enjoying my time as a priest. I don't know whether I should, but I am. With the Lord's help I hope I may continue to enjoy this ministry which he has invited me to share in. Don't be shy - give it a chance - explore the possibilities. Believe me it has been worth it.

A Priest's Story - 16

"The World War started when I was three and ended when I was nine. I believe that my vocation to the priesthood happened about that time. I think I was influenced by members of my family and not by any priest. I saw priests saying Mass but never really met them. The family on the farm was my world.

My family went to Mass every Sunday. I was the youngest, and my father and mother took turns to stay at home to mind me. I don't know why they didn't take me with them when I was old enough to walk and talk.

Everybody dressed very smartly for Mass, even if they were very poor. They had clothes which they kept specially for Holy Mass. I suspect that those Sundays at home were partly due to my parents having no money to dress me to the standard expected.

At home, I joined the parent in charge who led the Rosary when it came to Mass time. One of my earliest memories is kneeling with my father by the open kitchen door where he had put his chair, so that he could start the Rosary when he heard the Mass-bell in the distance, two miles across country.

My mother got a missionary magazine every month. She would use this to read me bed-time stories about Saints and Martyrs and Missionaries. The story of one priest who suffered martyrdom stayed in my very young mind, and I considered him a great hero. I forgot his name. Years later, when I heard about St John Boste, I thought he must be the priest in the story.

John Boste was ordained on the Continent in 1581. He worked secretly as a priest in the North of England until he was betrayed and arrested near Durham in 1593. He was imprisoned and tortured in the Tower of London and sent back to Durham for trial in 1594. He was hanged, drawn and quartered at Dryburn on 24 July, 1594. For me, he and the missionaries were the heroes that nothing else could compare with. The picture in the missionary magazine of Bishop Shanahan of Eastern Nigeria with his long white beard made a big impression on me.

In my childish mind at that time I probably knew more about John Boste and Bishop Shanahan than about any local priest. But, around that time our parish priest, that I very

vaguely remember, died. My older brother told me that when Fr L. died he had only one shilling and sixpence. He said that he had given all his money away to the poor. I thought he must have been a wonderful person.

My older brother liked school. When I asked him what he would like to be when he was big, he would say he would like to be a priest. This was ambitious, because the family would have to pay for his education. And money was very scarce. He was about sixteen when our father died, and his ambitions had to be forgotten. Now, he had to become the farmer, the head of the household, the one who would have to see that somehow we would have food on the table every day.

There had never been a priest in our family, though there were stories from a more prosperous past which showed that this was a family ambition. They said that a great-uncle had studied for the priesthood and was due to be ordained in about a year, when he died. And my Uncle J., who visited us occasionally from London, where he was a veterinary surgeon, had been in the seminary for a while before he decided on a different career.

My father had a sister a nun, and one of my mother's sisters was also a Religious. I'm sure they were both praying for vocations in the family. It was also common at that time for families to add a prayer for vocations at the end of their Family Rosary each night. When I stayed one night at my uncle's house I heard them say that prayer.

So, when our family fortunes improved enough to pay me secondary school fees, it seemed almost natural for me to hope for a future in the priesthood.

I do not know why God seemed to call three generations of our family, and why I was the first to be ordained. The Bible says that God's mercy is from generation to generation, and Holy is his Name.

By calling me to the priesthood he has blessed me in a thousand ways. I remember the words of St Paul (Romans 11:34-36): "Who could ever know the mind of the Lord? ...All that exists comes from him; all is by him and for him. To him be glory forever! Amen." "

A Priest's Story - 17

The story of my vocation to the priesthood is fairly ordinary one; no visions or miracles, or anything like that.

I was brought up in a Catholic family. My brother and I knew that Mam and Dad cared for us, were interested in all that we did, and although there were no great shows of affection, we knew that they loved us. We became regular altar-servers and were involved in various youth activities in the parish, and further afield in the Scouts. When I was 15 years old, I received the Sacrament of Confirmation, which had been delayed by the war.

Towards the end of my secondary school education, we were encouraged to think about careers. My first idea was with the Royal Navy, but as the war was just ending, they were demobilising, not recruiting. Next I thought about Naval Architecture. The University had a degree course in that subject, with scholarships from the shipbuilders. But Dad wasn't very enthusiastic about that either. So I settled for Civil Engineering. And Dad helped me to get an offer from the University.

Meanwhile, Lent came along, and I thought it would be good to go to Mass each morning. Shortly after that, I heard that they were holding a Mission at a parish across town. It sounded interesting, and I managed to get there three nights.

Not too long after that, I was at a Scouts meeting one day, and afterwards I fell into conversation with a lad a couple of years younger than me. He told me that he was going to transfer from our school to Ushaw College to train for the priesthood. We had a long discussion about the priesthood.

After that, I began to realise that ideas of marriage, family life and a career in engineering were receding into the background, and life as a priest was appealing to me. That meeting and discussion at the Scouts turned out to be the seed of my vocation.

Mam and Dad supported me and my parish priest was enthusiastic. He contacted the Bishop, who agreed to interview me himself. He offered me twelve months' trial at Ushaw College. (After a lifetime in the priesthood, I am still waiting for the outcome of that trial!) My years at Ushaw were fruitful and happy, and I retained in my mind that certainty that God was calling me.

My time for receiving major Orders was approaching, and it was only then that I suddenly lost that sense of certainty. So I postponed my ordination to the sub-diaconate. However, I still had the desire to be ordained priest, so I was able to continue with my studies. Then, after a year of prayer and thought, the Lord gave me back my sense of certainty as suddenly and mysteriously as he had taken it away. And it has been with me ever since.

In a lifetime as a priest, I have worked continuously in parishes, along with youth work, prisons, hospitals and administrative work. There have been many joys in that time, along with occasional problems. Throughout, my strength has come from the daily Mass, the Scriptures, and prayer. My vocation has been enriched by the example and influence of many good pastoral priests; by my family; and by a host of good friends from all walks of life. I have a great deal to thank God for.