

Fr. Jeff - A brief profile

I was born in Leeds in 1945. My parents were not practising Christians and I guess they could be called 'lapsed Baptists'. My only experience of church services was when I was in the cubs and the scouts. Through my involvement with the scouts I was for a brief time a regular attendee at St. Aidan's C of E church in Leeds. My attendance at church ended when I left the scouts at the age of 14 or so.

I cannot say that my school days were the happiest of my life - in fact I did not enjoy school at all and I left when I was 15. In 1960 it was fairly easy to get a job, and I left school on the last Friday of Term and began working the following Monday.

The firm I went to work for rented radios and televisions and I started as the 'office junior'. Opening the mail, making the tea, relief switchboard operator etc. etc. I soon saw that if I was to get on in the office I would need some qualifications. The firm were happy to grant me day release, and I also started studying accountancy at night school.

As the years went on I moved to the Costing Department, Internal Audit and finally to Assistant Accountant. In 1967 the company decided to centralise all its administration and accountancy functions in Croydon and they asked me to move down to the South and work in the Head Office. In 1970 the Head Office moved to Crawley in Sussex.

During the early 1970's I was designated as the 'Special Investigations Accountant' to act as a trouble shooter for the Financial Director and also to begin the process of transferring the accountancy operations to the computer. I left the company in 1975 when I entered the Seminary.

From the time I was 14 until my mid twenties I would say that I was an agnostic - I certainly never entered a church - unless it was as a tourist!

All this changed in 1972 when I was in Paris. Yes, it was as a tourist that I entered the Cathedral of Notre Dame, but I came out a Catholic though at that time I had no idea what it would mean. In that Cathedral I had a 'Damascus Road' type of experience, and I knew that God existed and He wanted me for something.

On my return to England I made contact with a Catholic Priest, (Fr. Kenneth McCarthy), who was parish priest of Our Lady, Queen of Heaven, at Langley Green, Crawley, and began the process of instruction to be received into the Church. I was baptised in a quiet ceremony with only Fr. McCarthy and my godparents present, two days later I was Confirmed by Bishop Michael Bowen during his visitation to the parish.

During the next year or so I began to feel that maybe God was calling me to the priesthood. I had a preliminary chat with Fr. Barry Wymes who was the Vocations Director, and decided to wait for a year or so before taking the matter further. In 1975 I felt that God was still calling me, so I made a formal application to study for the priesthood. I had an interview with Fr. Wymes and with Bishop Bowen and was accepted as a student for the priesthood.

My studies were to be at St. John's Seminary, Womersley. Because of my advanced age - then 30 - and the qualifications I had, it was agreed that I could complete the course in 4 years rather than the usual 6. In some ways this meant that I had to do 6 years work in 4, for there were not very many subjects I could drop.

I had a good time at the Seminary, and I quite enjoyed the regimented life - not having to make any decisions was quite a change from the life I had been living before. I enjoyed my studies and I don't seem to have upset the staff too much - except for 'playing Mahler too loud'. The staff at the Seminary thought that I would be suitable to go on and do further studies - and they had suggested that I should study Biblical Theology - which was a subject I was interested in, and had produced an essay on the title 'Son of God' for my Southampton certificate in theology. However, Bishop Cormac did not want a Biblical Theologian and asked me if I would study Canon Law.

I agreed, and was ordained to the Priesthood on the 31st May 1979 and began my studies in Canon Law at St. Paul's University, Ottawa, Canada in September of that year, After 2 years I obtain both a Church Degree Licence in Canon Law from St. Paul's University and a Civil Degree - Master in Canon Law from the University of Ottawa.

On my return to the Diocese in 1981, I was appointed as an assistant priest at St. Mary's, Preston Park, Brighton and also as Associate Judicial Vicar with an office in Bishop's House, Hove. One day when Bishop Cormac and I were having a walk on the South Downs he asked me if I would like to teach Canon Law at the Seminary. This I did from 1984 till 1988.

In 1986 I moved to St. Patrick's, Woodingdean, Brighton as Parish Priest, and was now the Judicial Vicar of the Diocese. In 1989 I wrote a letter to Bishop Cormac expressing some concern at the state of the Diocesan finances. He asked if I was willing to help sort the problem, I said yes, and was appointed as Chairman of the Diocesan Finance Committee. I position I held for over 15 years.

In 1992 I returned to St. Mary's but this time as Parish Priest. I found it difficult to combine my work with finance and the parish - St. Mary's was a large parish with a very young congregation, so in 1997 I moved to St. Edward the Confessor at Keymer.

When Bishop Kieran arrived he asked me take over from Fr. Tony Whale as the Dean of the Cathedral at Arundel. I had been at the Cathedral for 10 months when I was diagnosed with prostate cancer - this really meant that for the next 2 years I was only working there part time - and as a result of operations, drugs and radiotherapy spent much of my time resting. I decided that I needed a complete rest and from January until August of this year I have not been involved in parish work except by helping out at the occasional parish. I must say that by August I was ready to return to parish life - although not wanting all the other jobs that I seem to accumulate.

I was very happy when Bishop Kieran asked me to come here to Knaphill. I have certainly enjoyed my first two months here and the very warm welcome I have received. I have been very impressed by the dedicated involvement of so many parishioners, and I look forward to us all working together to build up the Kingdom of God in our area.

Fr. Jeff