

Vocation Story

My first memory as regards religious vocation would be from about the time I was 6 or 7. Not that far away from our house, just in a suburban street, was a small chapel, maybe a United Reformed Church or something like that. It was just like a little brick hall and didn't look like a church as we would imagine it. I can't recall anyone going in or out of it or it ever showing any signs of life inside. Once when we were walking by I asked my Mum 'who goes there and what do they believe?' This was in pre-ecumenical days and my Mum was rather dismissive of the question and didn't really enter into the conversation. Somehow the idea of a place of worship for different people, for people who worshipped God in a different way, intrigued my young mind. It is hard to say what it was that aroused my curiosity but even to this day places of worship – Methodist Chapels, Unitarian Churches, Kingdom Halls, Mosques and Temples – still intrigue me.

When I was about 14 or 15 our family went on holiday to Salcombe in Devon, a very nice place on a beautiful estuary. One day I was sitting on the harbour wall doing nothing and there was an old fisherman nearby talking to a young boy. He was telling the boy that there is a place in the Bible describing a visitation from God and if you draw exactly what is described there you come out with a picture of a modern day space rocket in all its details. At that age, as it would, this bit of information stuck in my mind but I didn't investigate it immediately.

At this time I wasn't practicing my faith. I had ceased to practice my faith when I was about 12 or 13 when my parents stopped making me go to church. Common then, even more common nowadays. Though I wasn't practising my faith I didn't stop believing in God and the bigger questions of life continued to interest me. I got interested in all kinds of things as teenagers do – astrology, Buddhism, and various esoteric things, not in any serious way but out of curiosity. Sometimes on Saturdays I would go into central London and you would see the monks of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness (the Hare Krishna movement) chanting and clanging their symbols with their shaven heads and pony tails and orange robes around Oxford Street and Soho Square. They would give out books for free and sometimes I would look at these books. I used to wonder about their life.

One day I decided to find that passage in the Holy Bible about the space rocket. I borrowed my sisters school Bible and started searching through it. Eventually I came to the passage, chapter one of the book of Ezekiel, as many of you will know, the chariot of the lord, but I was very disappointed because it was nothing like a rocket at all. Subsequently I learnt this theory of visitors from outer space was from Erich von Daniken's book *Chariots of God's*. He was a

Swiss author much discredited now but his books were popular in the 1970s. (Coincidentally when I was in India recently I visited the Qutb Minar site in Dehli and saw The Iron Pillar of Chandragupta II, in writing this I discovered this object was a pivotal object in Daniken's theory.)

This search of the Bible, though it may seem frivolous to you, led me to discover the Wisdom literature of the Bible – particularly the book of Proverbs and the book of Ecclesiastes. Also I discovered the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel and it came to dawn on me that the wisdom I was searching for was in my own Christian Catholic tradition. I had the desire to respond to what I was reading in the Bible in a radical way, to live by it. And this put me back on the path to resuming the practice of my own faith.

I was now about 16 and I remember one day I was truanting from school – a thing possible in the 1970's but not really so today. I was just killing time and I had walked to Emerson Park. This was a very affluent leafy area of Hornchurch with large detached houses, set back from the road, a place where footballers lived. I remember walking along a road – a place I'd never been before – Burntwood Avenue – and one house stood out particularly for me because of its size and because it was painted white. I went over and read the plaque on the gate 'St. Mary's Convent, Sisters of Mercy.' I wouldn't say it was like being hit with a hammer but it was a real revelation to me. I had encountered sisters before, the headmistress of my primary school was a sister, but I had never really thought about them. Here was a place where God mattered even on a Tuesday morning, even in the suburbs of Hornchurch. That really stayed with me – that there is a place, or places, where God matters all the time and I would say that was definitely the first seed of my religious vocation and the experience was a big influence on me even though it was a building and not a person: but what that building symbolised – that there was something else.

When I left school I was working in a place with many Indians, Sikhs and Hindus. Somehow they held some kind of fascination for me, their different way of life and beliefs. Not so much intellectually but culturally – do these people really have a shrine to Ganesha the elephant God and Hanuman the monkey God in their homes and what do they believe, who are they? The extraordinary in the mundane.

I had returned to the practice of my faith by now and the idea of vocation vaguely began to grow.

One Sunday morning on the TV there was a programme for youth by Janet Street Porter and this particular episode was about people following a call to religion and they interviewed a monk of Buckfast Abbey and a Franciscan Friar.

This awakened in me for the first time the idea of religious life which I wasn't really aware of, I didn't know there were still monks and friars. About this time just in passing and I can't remember the context my mother happened to mention a book she had read when she converted to the Catholic faith: *The Man Who Got Even With God* by Fr. M. Raymond, the story of John Green Hanning, Br. Joachim – a Trappist Monk of Gethsemane Abbey. I read the book and the idea of that life and the fact that there were still monks today gripped me. In the reference section of Upminster library there was a book, *The Directory of Religious Communities in Britain and Ireland*, published in 1967 and I spent hours leafing through it – I can still almost remember word for word the entries for the Trappists and the Carthusians.

I dreamt of becoming either a Cistercian or a Franciscan even though I didn't know anything about how one would become one and also I had the greatest feeling of unworthiness and even impossibility that I would ever be able to become one, but that feeling coexisted with a deep feeling, almost a certainty, that I would become one.

I used to make trips up to London to the CTS bookshop in Victoria and Westminster Cathedral Bookshop. It was there that I discovered Thomas Merton and St. Therese. Also I became interested in the English Martyrs particularly the Carthusian Martyrs of the London Charterhouse: John Houghton, Robert Lawrence and Augustine Webster.

Merton and Therese really entered into my life, it was as if I knew them as friends, that they were very close to me during this period of my life. It is funny because you couldn't really get two more different people – the cloistered nun and the man of the world. I happened to mention this to the Carmelites at New Dehli Carmel and they said there is an article in a back issue of Mount Carmel magazine on this very subject, though I haven't looked it up yet.

The writings of Merton had a big influence on me and I suppose they continue to do so. Interestingly his major works – things like *Bread in the Wilderness*, *The Ascent to Truth*, *The Climate of Monastic Prayer* and so on I find rather boring and even unreadable, but the journals and letters are something else, firstly *The Seven Storey Mountain*, the *Sign of Jonas*, and the *Secular Journal* which I read before coming to the monastery, but then the journals and letters published after I came to the monastery. I would devour each new volume of the journals as it came out, all 6 of them. Even before coming to the monastery Merton kind of influenced my thought and what he mentioned he was reading I tried also to read. From this I read James Joyce's *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* and *Dubliners* and in some way they influenced me. I remember reading his short story *Araby* from *Dubliners* for the first time and it was

amazing that someone could write *my* experience, just as it is. I know that story almost off by heart and many years later on my way to Mount Melleray I made a detour before catching the bus to visit North Richmond Street, the setting where the story takes place.

When I was 17 my family moved to Ramsgate in Kent and the church was the Benedictine Abbey of St. Augustine's – now relocated to Chilworth. They had a daily Mass there at 6.30 each evening and I could get to that every day after work, I would also be in time for most of vespers.

The monks then – now most of them dead or left – did influence me but in a subtle or indirect way, people like Fr. Laurence (who is still going) and Fr. Stephen who is dead and many others.

At this time I was doing day release from work at Canterbury College of Technology. One of teachers was Mr. McGaughey. He was an elderly man, an old style teacher that you don't get anymore or wouldn't be allowed today. He never stuck to the curriculum, in this case physics, but just talked about interesting things. Rather than teaching us about the certainties of science he would teach us about the mysteries of science and I found it fascinating. I remember him telling us about the formation of crystals, when the molecules are coming together why do they form themselves into beautiful patterns. There doesn't seem to be a scientific reason or explanation why they do that (or at least in the 1980s there wasn't). Or the mysteries of atomic, or subatomic particles, how they know the charge of their corresponding particle, and if you change the charge on one the other, however far away, will change to balance it. How, or what the medium of this communication is, is not known. Many of these ideas are in the books *God and the New Physics* by Paul Davis and the *Tao of Physics* by Fritjof Capra which I read then and which we have in our library upstairs. He taught us to have an open mind, the truth of the saying: *There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, Than are dreamt of in your philosophy*. I eventually learnt that this teacher was a good devout Catholic because I saw him at Mass one day in Canterbury.

I realised that sooner or later I would have to speak to someone about the idea of vocation but I found that extremely hard to do. Many times I would go to the door of the monastery to make an appointment but I would come away before ringing the bell. This went on for months. But eventually I just had to force myself to do it. I made an appointment to see Fr. Jerome, the parish priest. He was a very matter of fact kind of person and monk and I had great respect for him. Rather than speaking in hushed or exalted terms he told me the religious life is nothing special and it can be quite monotonous. I remember him loading up his pipe and lighting it as he was talking to me, many of the monks smoked

pipes, and I thought (even though I smoked myself then) that I wanted to go to a more observant monastery where the monks didn't smoke pipes. But now, alas, 35 years later I think it would be quite nice to be in a monastery where the monks could smoke pipes.

I spoke to him in very general terms about my feeling of vocation not daring to mention the Cistercians or monastic life which is what I really wanted to do. But then he said out of the blue, and I always take this as the work of God, 'have you ever thought of Mount St. Bernard Abbey I think you would like it there.' I jump at this and said YES.

So arrangements were made for me to visit here. I came for my first visit in January 1980, when I was 18. Fr. Paul was the guestmaster then and Br. Raphael and Fr. Matthew were the monks who worked in the GH so they were the first Cistercians I ever encountered. After a good number of years and many visits I entered the abbey in 1986.

The influences on me after I came to the monastery would be another story.