

### Vocation Story 3

I am asked to share with you an “inspiration” or “inspirations”. I am invited to share with you the inspirations that have been important to me, or, more precisely, “to my own monastic journey”.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines an inspiration as “a breathing or infusion into the mind or soul; a special immediate action or influence of the spirit of God upon the human mind or soul”. So, the source of inspiration, taken in that sense, is the Holy Spirit. He is the one who breathes his graces into us. But the instruments he uses to do so are many and various.

If I begin by focusing on my very early life, what inspirations do I recall? The first inspiration I must recognise surely is in my baptism, which took place at the end of my first week of life. My father’s background was Irish Catholic. My mother was from an Evangelical Anglican family. She fell in love with the Catholic faith at the same time that she fell in love with my father and they married, when my mother was 20 and my father 21. They were wonderful, conscientious, parents, utterly devoted to their five children, four boys and a girl, the eldest of whom, a boy, died in infancy.

After the foundational event of my baptism there were many smaller daily inspirations – from the very time that the doors of perception were beginning to open for me. I was all the time receiving - from my parents - examples of the virtues, of the fruits of the Holy Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control – they made up the atmosphere, one could almost say, the very air we breathed.

But there was more to life than the virtues. Shortly after my fifth birthday Hitler chose to send his armoured divisions into Poland and Mr Chamberlain declared war. I still remember very clearly being with my mother as we looked out through our bedroom window at the night sky and saw with horror the horizon coloured an angry red where the German bombers had dropped their incendiaries only a few miles away.

In 1941 we were still at war, of course, but what I recall most vividly from that year is my second major inspiration, my first holy communion – which I received at the age of 7. I can still sing parts of the hymn we learned for that occasion.

1941 was also the year I became an altar-server. And that is perhaps where the first intimations of the possibility of a monastic journey appeared - when I first began serving mass. Without realising it, I had already come into the orbit of someone who was associated with Mount Saint Bernard. One of the curates I served mass for, over several years, was Robert, the brother of our Father Gregory, who was for many years Novice Master here.

As an altar-boy of 7, I learned to recite the words of the Latin responses of the Tridentine mass. I remember especially praying the introit with the celebrant at the beginning of mass at the foot of the altar steps. It began, after the sign of the cross, with the priest's declaration in the words of Psalm 42: "Introibo ad altare Dei," and I would reply: "Ad Deum qui laetificat juventutem meam". For me Latin had already acquired a mystique.

As I knelt there piping the Latin responses at mass, I was beginning my education in Christian iconography and hagiography. And that, too, was surely an inspiration. Straight ahead of me on either side of the tabernacle and visible behind the chrysanthemums were painted panels depicting the prophetic sacrifices of two Old Testament saints, on the left, that of Melchizedek and, on the right, Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac.

Behind the altar, on the rear wall and high above the tabernacle was a row of more recent saints, four painted figures: Pope St Gregory wearing his triple tiara, the mitred St Augustine of Canterbury, St George in shining armour and slaying a dragon, Bishop St Patrick of Armagh crushing underfoot the head of a serpent. They were a succinct and effective reminder of our European, English and Irish forebears, to whom we were indebted for the inheritance of our faith.

The apse wall to my left displayed two murals within twin arches, each illustrating a scene from the lives of St Stephen and St Gerard Majella, again scenes chosen for the light they cast on the Eucharistic sacrifice: Stephen was shown, prior to his martyrdom, surrounded by his executioners, the stone-throwers, gazing, his face like the face of an angel, into heaven at Jesus standing at the right hand of God; and the child Gerard was painted kneeling before the Archangel Michael and receiving holy communion from Michael's heavenly ciborium.

I became acquainted with the evangelists through the images of the four animals of the apocalypse, carved in dark polished wood on the sides of the pulpit.

St Therese was displayed on an adjacent wall letting fall a shower of roses on crowds of suppliants. Only years later did I realise how generously she had fulfilled her promise, of spending her heaven in doing good on earth, when I visited her basilica at Lisieux, and saw the walls inside covered with plaques inscribed with the words "Merci, Therese!"

Of course, the greatest inspiration during these years came in the form of the sacrament of Confirmation for which I became eligible at the age of 10. In those days bishops were known as "princes of the Church" and I well remember the sensation of the Bishop, arrayed in episcopal scarlet, arriving in his glossy, black limousine. We had been carefully drilled - to be able to answer the catechism questions he would put to us to ensure we were ready to receive the Holy Spirit - with that gentle slap on the cheek

What inspirations came my way during the 7 years I spent at my Salesian school? I heard a great deal about Our Lady, Help of Christians, whose prayers had scattered the Turks at the Battle of Lepanto. I heard too, of course, of Don Bosco, St John Bosco, who as a boy learned conjuring tricks for the sake of the Kingdom, walked a tightrope to bring other children to Christ, and was as prolific a dreamer as Joseph, son of Jacob. Incidentally, my form master and Latin guru in my 3<sup>rd</sup> year, was a Bradford lad who had been a childhood friend of Br Gabriel's, as I discovered years later from Br Gabriel himself.

And I had ample opportunity to read about other saints, since my father had been extravagant enough to purchase a full set of the new edition of Butler's Lives of the Saints. Did they inspire me to new flights of spiritual endeavour? In a quiet way I am sure they did.

And I owe my first experience of the stirrings of an aspiration to the religious life to a saint. When I was about the age of 13 I wrote and illustrated a brief life of St Anthony of Padua for my form master, that former friend of Br Gabriel's I've already mentioned. As form master he also taught us religion. It was a simple though unique school exercise, but reading and thinking and day-dreaming about the great miracle-worker and preacher woke me up - to something within me, my vocation, I guess.

Another image of the religious life excited me when I was no more than 13 or 14. It was evoked by a sermon I heard one Sunday evening in summer. The sermon was preached by the curate in our parish, whom I have already mentioned, the younger brother of the late Fr Gregory of happy memory, novice master of a number of our senior monks. He had been reading a book by Fr Raymond OCSO of Gethsemane Abbey, entitled "The Man Who Got Even with God". Many of you will be familiar with it. As I recollect it, the book was an imaginative, somewhat romanticised, re-creation of the life of a former monk of Gethsemane, Br Joachim. The sermon highlighted a number of amusing episodes, related in the book with some irony, such as when Joachim had to go and kneel before the Abbot - to be absolved from breaking some dinner plates - which led to a bizarrely hilarious confrontation between the brother and his Abbot. But other more poignant moments were recorded, too. Besides giving a portrait of the Monk, the book also attempted to depict, with broad brush strokes, the more outstanding aspects of the Trappist life - as it was lived back in the thirties and forties in America.

As I have said, I was moved by that sermon. I went out and bought the book and I managed to get hold of another by the same author, about the Three Founders. At the same time I was reading Butler's life of St Bernard, and feasting my eyes on the colourful portraits of St Bernard and St Bruno that still stand out in my memory. Shortly afterwards, during the early 50's, Merton's first books became available in the local library and I was soon reading "Elected Silence", "The Waters of Silence", and "The Sign of Jonas". In all this, too, the first intimations of vocation were stirring.

When I told the rector of my school about my exploration of Merton he said, "Oh that's what you're reading, is it? You are very impressionable." He could never understand why I didn't want to become a Salesian.

About a year later it was the rosary that moved me. I recall the parish church being packed for Marian devotions one warm evening during the month of May. We were reciting the glorious mysteries and it may have been a combination of the heat and my surrender to the mood of the congregation, all focused on the glories of the Blessed Virgin, together with the steady mesmerizing rhythm of the tide of our prayers, whatever was the cause, I fell into a trance and it was as if I was actually there in heaven experiencing the splendour of the assumption and crowning of our Lady, Queen of Heaven, surrounded by choirs of angels and all the heavenly court.

That experience spurred me on to more urgent thought about where God was leading me and I sought out our parish priest and spoke to him. And he placed me in the care of a newly arrived curate. After that, I was soon on my knees, with my parents, before the Bishop, who accepted me, aged 16, for the diocese.

Well, that is not, of course, the end of the story of the inspirations that have been important to my monastic journey. I haven't for instance mentioned the Holy year of 1950 when I went on pilgrimage to Rome with the Catholic scouts of England and rubbed shoulders with countless habited religious and watched Pius XII carried shoulder-high down the nave of St Peter's, wafted by huge ostrich feathers.

Years later, when I had at last almost arrived at my destination and I was making overtures with a view to being received at MSB I felt the consistent presence of the Holy Spirit and his inspirations powerfully as a driving force. I felt driven – as I imagine Christ was driven by the Spirit into the desert after his baptism.

“Grace upon grace” is how I see my life during the two and a half years I spent in the Novitiate. The Holy Spirit smoothed my path after entry to such a degree that I began to wonder whether I should seek out a more challenging way of life and apply for entry into the Carthusian order where I would become a semi-hermit. When this aspiration came to nothing an elder of the community congratulated me on having escaped from the hands of the tempter. Yet another grace!

Where do I begin, where do I end, in giving a true account of the action of the Holy Spirit in my life? The Holy Spirit is breathing life into us in one way or another everywhere and all the time. The question is: are we open to his promptings? Are we aware of his kindly presence? Are we listening for that still, small voice?

Inspirations abound with every day that passes - for all of us who live here in this “paradisus claustralis”, who drink from the stream of his delight. How many inspirations we receive through living in a community of consecrated men each with his individual charisms, who have all dedicated their lives to becoming learned in the science of love! What a grace it is to be united with the Lamb of God every day in the Eucharist, to hear his holy Word throughout the day, to have the privilege of praising our God 7 times a day in the Divine Office. How blessed we are to live in an environment that turns our minds to our Creator every time we look out of the window. Let us never cease to thank the Holy Spirit for his inspirations, for all the graces he so generously lavishes on us.