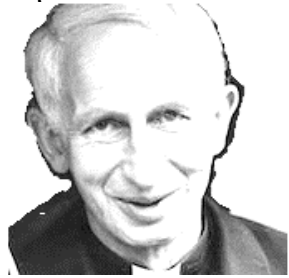


On September the 15<sup>th</sup> 1980 Father Sheridan our then Superior bumped into Archbishop Dwyer in the doorway of Worcester cathedral at 7.05 pm. They were both slightly late for a special service to mark the 1500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Saint Benedict - the cathedral being a Benedictine foundation. The big attraction for both was the appearance of Cardinal Hume who was to speak for the occasion. Archbishop Dwyer was surprised to see Fr Sheridan and said 'Ah Terry, good to see you how would like to move your community to Olton? The Capuchins are moving out at the end of the year.'



Cardinal Basil Hume

Fr. Terry was totally surprised and stammered in reply 'I would have to consult my Council and my Superior General first'. 'Well don't take too long about it' said the Archbishop, 'you have three weeks to decide.' And so it was decided after a very speedy discernment with our Superior General Fr. Grech who was due on visitation the following week, and four months later we took up residence at the Friary on January 10<sup>th</sup>.

The Capuchins left the day before, to go to Pantasaph & Erith, after 90 yrs in Solihull. For them The Friary had been important as their House of Formation but less so after that role was ceded to other houses. They were greatly loved in the parish, and many mourned their going.

As a community we were quite overawed at first, as we were following in the venerable footsteps of Capuchins, and we also found the sophistication of some parishioners a little daunting! But we should not have worried, as firstly people are people everywhere and secondly our secret weapon was Brother John who broke down many barriers for us with his natural, jovial and unassuming way with people. The parish soon started to warm to us and took us to heart and we in turn adopted them. Fr. Ted became parish priest and served faithfully in that post for 33 years. At his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday mass in 2019 several generations expressed their gratitude for his service.

Those heady days of the 1980s are very different from our present age. For a start there was no pandemic, then secondly we had a good number of students then, a factor in moving from a settled formation house in Worcester to The Friary. The students gave energy and impetus

to our community & our parish mission. Three of them founded a new parish youth group Lumen Mundi (light of the world) which continued for some 15 years and did much good. Although like all youth groups it prospered and then declined, those who belonged to it (now in their 50s) look back on that era as a Golden period in their lives, as do their parents.

The next 25 years were the age of Pope John Paul II (now saint) and as a community and as a parish we tried to follow the lead that he gave as we encouraged lay leadership at all levels in the parish. We also tried to reach out to the local community, and many people commented that they had never seen the Parish Hall so much used. And whether it was for parish concerts, children's playgroups, judo, choir practice or weight watchers the hall was never empty.



Several figures from those early days who gave loyal service to the parish and the community have now gone to their eternal reward. We think of Jack Carney who acted as our loyal doorkeeper and of Pauline Padley our first parish secretary. Both served so loyally for so many years without asking any reward. And there are so many others who are now with the Lord while their graves are in our cemetery.

Besides developments within the parish, events happened in our Congregation worldwide. In 2000 we became united with communities in India and took over responsibility for them, so regular visits from Fr. Xavier to Olton became a feature of community and parish life. Many parishioners will remember too that we had a hand in the formation of several overseas students who went on to take up important roles in our Congregation. First of these is Fr Xavier who came as a student in 1989 and later became the first head of the Indian delegation. With him was a young student from Thailand called Tidkham who later became the first Thai superior of our communities there. We also had Bro. Sylvain in 2004 who became head of Formation in Ivory Coast and more recently head of the mission community in our mother house at Betharram.

Also in 2004 we hosted a young student called Bro. Biju who now 17 years later is our parish priest and Superior at The Friary. Then in 2007 we received three young Indian students Brothers Pascal, Vincent and Wilfred. Fr. Wilfred is now in charge of our communities in England and

Fr. Vincent in charge of our parish at Great Barr while Fr.Pascal is in charge of the formation house in Mangalore.

One of the shadows never far away was the question of the Friary building. In 1980 under Archbishop Dwyer it had been understood that the Capuchins were gifting the whole campus to the Diocese but when the new Archbishop Maurice Couve de Murville came along, this agreement was deemed void by the Capuchins and a wrangle then followed for nearly 40 years, only solved in 2018 under Archbishop Longley.

But this did not stop us using the Friary for pastoral purposes. Youth retreats and increased use of the library and ground floor rooms for first communion programmes, Journey in Faith, Knights of St.Columba, SVP and adult retreat groups became common. The Friary also hosted many visiting priests, religious and bishops over the years, including Fr.Frank Carr a retired Diocesan priest who liked the ambience so much that he stayed 6 years in retirement until he died.

In 1990's & early 2000's we also hosted Iranian refugees, various asylum seekers and people with no shelter. Sadly this ministry had to come to a halt as new national safeguarding rules came into play, as we were unable to vouch for the background of many of our guests. Another factor was the deteriorating condition of some of the upstairs rooms. The planning blight that haunted us from the beginning meant that serious refurbishment was sorely needed.

As a parish we have always been blessed with a fair number of teachers, both those who work in schools & colleges and those who simply act as catechists. This has meant that for 40 years the important work of teaching the young, preparing engaged couples and inducting adults into the Christian community has been done by lay people in the parish. Visitors sometimes comment on how blessed we are. Many parishioners also have a ministry to the poor and the lonely in their work as housing mangers, social workers and therapists.

The canonisation of John Henry Newman in 2019 generated huge interest in Newman's Olton connection and the history of St.Bernards Seminary founded by Bishop Ullathorne in 1873. Newman's opening address on October 2 of that year predicted a time when Christians would have to minister in a world that seemed to operate without any reference to God or the life of the spirit.



Today in the age of the pandemic we face the challenges that Newman predicted but there is also much hope and opportunity as the awareness of human frailty has generated a fresh search for the spiritual.



Pope Francis in what would be twilight years for most people has helped the world look ahead to life after Covid and invited us to dream of what kind of world we want to shape. His message to the world **Tutti Fratelli** and his recent book **Let us Dream** co-authored with British journalist Austen Ivereigh has spelled out hopes for a world in which a more honest form of politics does not create ‘enemies’ to be scapegoated or manipulate the media.

Our feeling is that in The Friary parish there are many who share this dream and yearn for a world such as our Holy Father imagines. Our sense is that in our parish we have so many people who are generous, who are prayerful and who long for a world in which the great prayer of Mary our Mother, the Magnificat can become a reality.

Today we keep a Ruby anniversary in a world very different from that of 1981, with challenges never imagined back then, but also with resources and inspirations never thought of back then. We have treasured memories of 40 years to sustain us with the love and the prayers of people past and present to urge us on.

It is a privilege to be keeping a Jubilee in The Friary parish, and we hope that everyone will feel that the prayers we offer today, and the Jubilee flame we light will be a sign of God’s blessing for them.

We are fond of citing one of the sayings of our founder St. Michael: “Forward, always forward” and we see a jubilee as an occasion not simply to look back at the past with gratitude but to go forward in faith trusting in the God of surprises who always plans a better future than anything we could imagine.



Forward always forward.....