

Bicentenary memories for sharing.

My very first memories are from living in a house called St George's on the corner of Church Lane in Southwick, Sussex. The house overlooked a flint-walled garden and Southwick Green. Grandfather was an invalid and confined to his bed, where I would visit him and he would read from a big yellow book with a giraffe with a knot in its neck on the front cover and other books he thought suitable for a small boy.



Grandmother ran the household and all her family of seven grown up children lived there for the duration of the war. My father had married one of these daughters, and came there when he could get leave. Grandmother was respected in Southwick and Shoreham and was indeed a Justice of the Peace as it was called; a local Magistrate. None the less, the family was lucky to have the house which did not belong to them, but to a family of Jewish origin who had gone to Canada for safety when invasion seemed imminent.

Before the war, the Chattertons had lived on Shoreham beach in two converted railway carriages. This was because when Grandfather married, he became a Catholic at the same time and as was so often the case in those days he was cut off from his own family who refused to acknowledge him. This did affect him; and his health suffered to the extent that he could not find work. He was much loved by his own wife and family, but died during the war years.

The war was omnipresent. My father, my uncles and aunts were all in the uniforms of the various Army, Navy, or Airforce services. They were scattered all over the world - no wonder the Six O'Clock News was a daily ritual. I learned my first words from the wireless; "Hong Kong - Hong Kong" not knowing what the words meant. Even the two youngest aunts, twins, were in the Land Army and wore their uniforms for work.

My uncle John was a priest of the diocese of Southwark. He was a Naval Chaplain, and away for much of the war years. In fact, he was sunk three times on convoy duties, but he and all the others who were all on active service survived the war. Thank God. The atmosphere was a calm but firm resolve to do what was necessary to win the war. No one was in any doubt that the Nazi regime was an evil one.

At that time there was no Catholic church in Shoreham so mass was celebrated in this house, and even after the war ended and Grandmother moved a short distance away mass continued in "Mrs. Chatterton's house". Still today I sometimes meet people who remember the house masses there. Of course, as a known Catholic house, others who wanted to come there for mass turned up too. Especially Canadian troops. My first toy was a hand made wooden Canadian Pacific Locomotive with 1942 hand painted on the side. It is still in the family somewhere. I would have been three going on four at the time. I think now of what happened to those young Canadian troops, wonder what became of them, and remember them in my own prayers.

When the time came, at eight years old, to go to school it had to be a boarding school as there were no catholic schools nearby. My parents chose St. George's College run by the Josephites and that was my first meeting with them. My four brothers followed, and my sister, the youngest, also went to a boarding school. My father had also become a Catholic at the time of marriage, but there was no repeat of the rejection by his family which had been so painful for Grandfather Chatterton. We were all welcomed and loved by his parents. Thank God for the change in mentality.

My memories of growing up in Sussex where we lived were all happy ones. I loved the countryside, the birds and animals, but in the way of that time. That is, we boys collected bird's eggs, and Father shot rabbits and pigeons to eat. Farming went on in an old-fashioned way as people struggled to feed the population. There had been food rationing during the war, and this continued and even had to be reintroduced at this time. To this day I retain the habits of not wasting food. I hate the casual way that some people waste now, and that has been reinforced by living in Africa among people who suffer food shortages, even starving.

My writing these memories is in response to reading the book: "Gathering the Fruits of the Years." By the Daughters of Mary and Joseph 1817-2017; and by Sisters, Associates and Friends of the DMJ. In reading, I as a Josephite, am constantly coming up to times and places and people which have reminded me that we share one Founder. It is a great gladness to recognise our common history and to feel that I have always known that we should have so much in common – we do have so much in more in common these days. I thank Sister Teresa Clements, and so many other sisters for leading the way for me to recognise these close ties. Truly Jesus' words about many brothers, sisters have come true.



It was in 1947 that I went to St. George's for the first time. One of the coincidences – no more than that – was that was the date of founding Castlecor in Ireland. But reading the accounts of those who lived there brings vividly to mind the experience of living in a boarding school run by religious at that time. The strict timetable, the

shortage of food, the friendships. Above all, the lasting friendships which can and do last for a lifetime. All, of course, in a single-sex school.

Towards the end of the ten years of secondary education, I had the growing knowledge that God wanted me to be a Josephite myself. So, I talked to a Josephite who I liked and trusted, and he gave me the tried and tested advice to make a novena to St. Joseph and see what I still thought about it. I have always been grateful to God for this vocation which has brought happiness and fulfilment. Only twice more have I felt that God was calling me to a specific task. Once was a call to go to Africa which later on, I was able to do too. That has shaped my life, and greatly shaped my vocation. "Like a wind-shaped bush on a Devon cliff," I once described how the process felt.

One last vivid memory of that time is of reading: "The Phenomenon of Man" by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, the Jesuit priest and anthropologist, and knowing that this was how I was going to think always. A world view I could fit in with theology and any other studies.

After the Noviciate, I was sent to Cambridge, to FitzWilliam House, which was housed over a Chemist shop near the FitzWilliam museum. This was for non-collegiate students, and became a full College shortly afterwards. We lived in St. Edmund's House on Storey Way, which was a resident's House for mostly clerical students. They came from Ethiopia, the States, France, the Basque country in Spain, various dioceses in England or Scotland and various religious Orders. So, a varied group like the Church itself.

More recently, I have learnt that St. Edmund's has become a College too. I enquired, and yes, they recognise me as a former member by reason of my living there. So, I am a full member of two Colleges! Both keep in touch, and both have a spirit of inclusivity due to their unconventional origins. I am lucky to find myself heir to these fine institutions and their present determination not to lose sight of their history.

I am not academic but I very much enjoyed University life, and asked to be sent to study at the Schola Minor in Leuven. Our scholasticate in Melle had been closed, but other Belgian scholastics were studying there. I very much enjoyed that too. The same opportunity to get to know fellow students, another community and indeed another University. I feel privileged to have had the chance to live and study in two such ancient and respected seats of learning. I am very grateful to those responsible for this education. The sixties were lively years in society, and in the Church, too, there was all the excitement of Vatican II.

Soon enough I was called back to England to finish my studies at St. John's Seminary, Womersley, and to help in the running of Barrow Hills, our Prep School in Witley.

In my last year of studies for the priesthood, an event occurred which tested my faith and even my commitment. The Encyclical: 'Humanae Vitae' was published. I read the document carefully and wrote my last term paper on it. Having studied the arguments and read what I could get hold of, I realised that I could not teach this as I would have to as a newly ordained priest. Especially in the confessional, I could not.

So I could not be ordained a priest. My uncle Fr. John just 'happened' to come and visit me at the Seminary at this time, and of course asked how were things going. So, I told him that I could not go forward to the priesthood, but that did not mean I could not continue as a Josephite. He listened; he was a man I much respected – proper men as I thought of those who had been through the war. He said nothing to influence me one way or the other. So, my decision.

As things turned out, many Bishops and later many Bishop's Conferences published their own commentaries in the years that followed. It was the Belgian Bishops who in their joint statement two years later, emphasised the place of individual conscience in pastoral practice. With this understanding I felt able to go forward to the priesthood. My uncle John, by then very sick and weak from the after effects of the war, was able to come. He died a very few weeks later, but I would like to record my own gratitude and thanks to his memory.

In 1972 I was allowed to follow my desire to go to Africa, which for us Josephites meant the Congo – Zaire for most of the time I was there. We were at work in the diocese of Mweka. The Bishop was Mons. Van Rengen, and the school where I was asked to work as an English teacher was St. Joseph's in Bulongo, Kasai Province. I felt very much at home in this setting as I had never been at home in an English classroom or other school setting. The difference was the pupils, so eager to learn that teaching was a pleasure.

The political situation became more and more tense as President Mobutu began a programme he had learnt from a visit to China. He called this 'authenticite'; that is a programme based on the desire to empower the population by encouraging the people to take responsibility for all that went on in the country. His own position as Leader, too, was emphasised by song and dance. So, there was no room for outsiders in his ideal society.



One consequence for us Josephites was that all our schools were taken over by the State. Our Parishes and Community buildings were not. The Bishop asked me to go and live and work in the capital village of the Bakuba or the Bushongo as they called themselves. Fr Valere was p.p. and was on his own as the Art School had gone to the State appointee. The Bakuba are a tribal grouping very well known for their history and especially for their art. It was in 1907 that Emil Torday visited and his collections are in the British Museum. When I was there in the mid-70s it was Frere Cornet collecting for the State Museum in Kinshasa.

Such a world of its own! By then no more visitors. A tribal society in limbo. A Zairoise Sister from that area wept when she saw how things had decayed. Of course, the parish continued, the liturgy was celebrated, the parish school flourished, Fr Valere's dispensary had its quota of patients including a few lepers that he treated.

One memory may give a flavour of the village; one day in my walk round the village I stopped to talk to an elderly man in front of his house. He saw my interest in the people and invited me to come and talk again next day. Next day, I went back and he began to tell me his story. My grasp of the Bushong language was very limited but I realised he had been an important man – the Chief Justice. That meant that according to their system, he was also the Chief Executioner. They used the trial by ordeal, which existed in medieval times in many countries. He showed me the two packets of bark he used; both indistinguishable by sight alone, but: "Wingo imonyi...Wingo iwa." This one is life this one is death, he said. As he spoke the tears were rolling down his face, so perhaps it was a priest he wanted to tell rather than an anthropologist.

Although I loved Mushenge, including Fr Valere who spoke, it seemed, without a pause for two years in beautiful old-fashioned French; he was a de Meurisse whose memories went back to the First War. He remembered the German troops just riding in with their pikel helmets, and had stories from every decade since! But the bishop needed me to go and hold the fort at Bulongo where Fr Cyprian had broken a leg.

Bulongo was where I had first taught a few years before, but now the school was in the hands of the State and my job was to be the pastor. Here I learnt how to run a parish with the outlying village communities; how to work with catechists and small groups; how to organise all the sacramental programmes; how to train and encourage the readers and SVP groups, how to let other groups like the Legion of Mary find space; how to find the music for the different mass groups. And so on.

Meantime the country was going downhill economically. People were getting disillusioned. I remember a village elder, one of the parish council asking what I thought of the situation. I could only say that in our area at least there was peace, and of course the village life of farming maize, beans and manioc fed all the people as it always had done. Fishing and hunting antelopes were also bringing in food. Goats and chickens were as usual the mainstays. Better just live quietly.

In 1980 I was asked to help with the formation programme. First two years in Ilebo where we had our novitiate, then two years in Kimwenza where the scholastics lived and studied. Conditions continued to deteriorate; a breakdown really of all order. However, I had my work to do in the formation communities, and I was able to take part in teaching in a girls school in Ilebo and then in Kimwenza. Breakdown of order had resulted in the schools which had been run by the State simply failing and we were able to pick up the pieces so to speak. Teachers not paid simply stop teaching. If our schools are still going, which they are, it is because the people of that area wanted them to.

In 1984 I felt the need of a break. It gave me the opportunity to go and work in California and to catch up with my own family. My youngest brother had studied for the diocesan priesthood in Valladolid in Spain. This was one of three pre-Reformation Seminaries. One in Portugal, one in Spain, one at Douai. I had been to visit him during one of my holidays, and we had had a fantastic holiday on his motor-bike. In the days of £50 limit of Sterling, we had driven across France and Spain to get to his old country house haunts; then back via Lourdes to join the A+B pilgrimage. I hoped to have the opportunity to meet up again in Peru where he was now working in Frias, Chulucanas diocese.

At this very time, I received a message to say he and the other three priests in the car they were travelling in had had an accident and that he had not survived. At the end of my time working in California I was able to go and visit the places he had known. Especially a Sister with whom he had worked took me up into the mountains. I knew enough Spanish to celebrate the mass in local communities that he had known himself. The high mountains, the day's travel by mule or pony were for me a healing experience. I could say goodbye.

California, too, was a wonderful experience. My job was to be the Socius, assistant to the Novice Master. I had work to do and also time to help in the parish. The DMJ's had a community there in the same road and were very friendly. They could see I needed taking out of myself as well as just resting and taking in everything. Straight away I was asked to take on the Hispanic community masses, which were celebrated in various out of the way places. Hard to believe now they are so much a full part of the parish.

These, then, are the memories which have shaped me. I spent ten years later on as part of the General Team, first as Superior General for five then five as Vicar. During those years I travelled a great deal. They were years of conflict, too. What the military historians are now calling the 2nd. Shaba war.

Personally, I have found collaboration with the DMJs to be an important part of who we are. I have stood on the place of Bernadette's hermitage and looked out over the nations that she is praying for.

Now I am old I take a renewed interest in the natural world, and find many more people wanting to do the same.

God bless, Richard cj

