

Canon Frank O'Sullivan RIP 21 May 1921 ~ 22 December 2020

A late vocation, Frank had been a navigator in the RAF during the 1939-45 war and entered 'Civvy Street' for a number of years before discerning his vocation to the priesthood. He was ordained in 1956 at the age of 35.

When Monsignor Hugh Hunt retired after 37 years as Parish Priest of St. Joseph's, parishioners were eager to discover what sort of a person their new pastor would be. Fr. Frank O'Sullivan was inducted on 1st May 1985 at an age when most of us are thinking about retiring. (64) His previous role had been Director of the Catholic Children's Society but he brought with him a wealth of pastoral experience including an interdenominational Team Ministry in East London.

Fr. Frank took to heart the teachings of Vatican II and saw his role as a pastor to go beyond administering the parish and providing the Sacraments, to empower the laity to play an active part in the life of the Church. His early ecumenical experiences led him to form close relationships with the other Christian churches in New Malden even to the point of persuading their ministers to invite him to speak to their congregations about his Catholic faith and what beliefs we hold in common.

His first three years at St. Joseph's were spent building up the foundations with the help of the new parish pastoral council and a religious sister who had responsibility for developing the Sacramental programmes and the Rite for Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA). In preparation for a parish mission, in 1989 he took a group of 24 parishioners to a Life in the Spirit Seminar at nearby Walton on Thames. The following year several members of the group ran a Life in the Spirit Seminar at St. Joseph's attended by around 200 people mostly from the parish. The parish mission in 1990 was great success but Frank was keen to find something that went beyond a single event. His attention had been caught by the Parish Cell System as practised by evangelical churches in South Korea and adapted by the Catholic parishes of St. Eustorgio in Milan, and St. Boniface in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. On finding that St. Boniface were running a week-long workshop on the Cells, he took a small team from the parish and went to discover what it was all about. On their return, the team members set up a Cell group which grew, over time, to thirteen groups. These met every two weeks for prayer, sharing, scripture study and discussion of a teaching with discussion points which Frank wrote himself. These were some of the first Cell groups in the country and along with further Life in the Spirit Seminars and his use of a particular RCIA course, had a catalytic effect on parish life.

Frank's energy was boundless and as well as his work in New Malden he is known even more widely for giving Marriage Encounter programmes. He also supported the Teams of our Lady groups, acting as chaplain for one of the groups and putting together a book, Word made Flesh for Teams members. His role as chaplain continued until 2019.

With no assistant priest to support him, he nevertheless instituted a 7am weekday Mass which was much valued by working parishioners of St Joseph's and also of other local Catholic churches. He would sometimes arrive on the sanctuary a little late having been up until the early hours writing talks for Cell groups!

He supposedly retired from active ministry in 1998, 13 years after arriving, and went to live in Purley where he regularly celebrated Mass for the parish of St. John the Baptist. He found time to write another book exploring one of his great interests: The Big Bang Theory. He became a founder member of ACTA (A Call to Action), a new national Catholic group campaigning for a voice for the laity in the running of the Church. It was in Purley that many of his friends were able to join in a celebration for his 95th birthday and 60th anniversary of ordination. As he approached his centenary, the diocese found a place for him at the Sunrise retirement home in Purley. Here he rejoiced in a new vocation ministering to residents, celebrating Mass and running a regular prayer/study group. He remained at Sunrise until shortly before Christmas 2020 when he was taken ill and died in hospital a few days later. He had been really looking forward to celebrating his 100th birthday in May but God decided to give him the best possible Christmas present.