

Fr Con Botter , scj Eulogy 24th August, 2020

If COVID-19 restrictions weren't in place, I'm certain that this church would've been bursting at the seams today! As it is, we are restricted to 20 mourners with the vast majority of friends and parishioners watching this Mass on live stream, some from this diocese, some from Stockport and Marion his niece and family from Holland who would love to have been here.

Constant Alfonse Ferdinand Botter was born in Pedang, Indonesia on 10th November 1932, to Richard & Petronella Botter, who already had a daughter Hanny. At only 2 days old Constant was baptised in the local Catholic Church by Fr Mathaeus De Wolf.

Two years later a little sister, Marion was born. The family led an idyllic life in a nice home with a swimming pool, beautiful gardens and set in the mountains. Mum was at home looking after the children while Dad worked as an Engineering Manager in local industry.

At weekends they swam, played games, fished and spent quality family time together. No wonder Father Con called it heaven.

At 5 years old he with his sister Hanny, travelled down into the town to the local school where he did very well and his school reports showed a bright and intelligent boy.

Sadly, this all ended abruptly in March 1942 when Con was 10 years old. The Japanese invaded Indonesia and life was turned upside down for the family.

Together with many others, they were interned in a prisoner of war camp. At first Con was billeted with his Mum and two sisters, but when he turned 11 a short few months later, he was transferred to the men's camp.

Father Con spoke of this being a very special time. Despite the cruelties and hunger, he enjoyed this special time being with his Dad.

At 14 years of age having lost three and half years schooling, the war finally ended for them on 15th August 1945 and the inhabitants of the camps were finally free. But life in Indonesia was not what it was prior to the invasion.

As Dutch citizens, they had to return to Holland, where the Dutch resented these "refugees".

They had nowhere to live, no employment and no money. For a time the family lived on a houseboat which someone rented to them. Sadly, Con's beloved mother was unwell and through time was in hospital on a long term basis, this as a result of her time in the camps.

The family had to split up at this time.

Richard, his father had to return to his employment in Indonesia and his elder sister Hanny accompanied her Dad.

Marion his younger sister went to live with a relative in Holland while Con was sent to live with "A good Catholic" spinster lady known to the family who, although she attended Mass daily and ensured that Con attended Mass before school, had no particular "Christian" traits.

Con was miserable, but buckled down and tried to do what was asked of him. Being bullied at school was the norm for him, as his spoken Dutch was different from the traditional Dutch language and, he was behind with his schooling as he had lost so

much time in the camps. He suffered the taunts of the other children, while at the same time was sorrowful that he was not allowed to see his mother.

Sadly his mother died shortly afterwards. Con was not informed of this by the woman he lived with, but he had overheard a conversation and realised that his Mum had died and her funeral was about to take place. He cycled to where his sister Marion lived and the two children arrived at the graveside.

They were and the only people there.

The gravedigger allowed them time to be together.

The relationship with his sister Marion was protective and strong, and they loved each other very much, which remained the case all their lives.

Con found consolation in church and in particular in Our Blessed Lady. Each day he found time after school to go to church and he spoke directly to Our Blessed Lady.

He felt listened to in his sorrow. He felt that Our Lady looked after him like a mother and it was through her he was led to priesthood.

After his school years were completed Con entered the seminary to train and prepare to become a priest.

Due to personal circumstances, it was not possible for him to continue to ordination and it was through a Dutch Sacred Heart Father that he was encouraged to apply to the Sacred Heart Fathers' seminary in England.

Con joined the Sacred Heart Community in the British Province and started *again* to study for the priesthood. He also had to fulfil all the obligations required to qualify to be accepted as a British Citizen which was granted in 1953.

Con with his fellow student priests completed their journey and a date for ordination was set.

Once again, he was dealt another body-blow and his dream of becoming a priest was suspended through *his* ill health. Just weeks before his ordination date his tutors informed him that he would not be ordained.

Finally after months and in consultation with two Medical Professors, he was signed off as fit and finally he was offered a date for ordination.

Con was relieved and so happy that finally his vocation was being fulfilled and he was ordained on 24th September 1960. His Father was able to come over to join him for this momentous day.

Over the years, he covered many posts as a Sacred Heart Father, Assistant priest, Hospital Chaplain and Teacher, to name but a few.

One of his priestly roles which he enjoyed and was very suited to was as Chaplain in Wythenshawe Hospital, where his love and humanity brought great comfort to patients and families alike. Staff would call him in as he passed and say that this person or that would like to speak with him. These people would be non-Christian or Muslim.

Fr Con never left anyone wanting.

He was posted to St John Ogilvie in October 1981 to assist the Parish Priest Fr James Feeney who was very ill with leukaemia.

His energy and compassion was immediately recognised by parishioners and his care and attention for Fr Feeney was supportive while still enabling Fr Feeney to carry out his pastoral duties for as long as possible.

When Fr Feeney sadly died in April 1982, Fr Con was appointed Parish Priest.

Fr Con, a man of vision, a man ahead of his time, identified areas of need, both within the Parish and in the community.

He was instrumental in having a charity shop set up in the Village Centre which would not only offer the local residents, who were on low income, a way of accessing clothes and other goods, but would allow the income from the charity shop to be ploughed back into the Community.

It was his dream that the people were empowered and more than one person has commented that Father seemed to see something in them which they would never have recognised and brought out those skills and strengths for the good of the Parish and the community.

Others commented that, they were only a Mum, but he broke that label, trained them and gave them a sense of pride and knowledge to share with others.

Fr Con moved to St Joseph's Stockport as Parish Priest, in 1988.

Never one to sit still, he found that there were many hungry and homeless people around Stockport. He set about building a team initially to set up a soup kitchen. That then moved on to converting an unused school building belonging to the Church not only into a soup kitchen, but there was also space found to make accommodation. He also brought in medical services so that the people could have their health looked after.

He tried hard to get Social Services involved in creating something more permanent, but was unsuccessful.

But, after a few years the project was such a success that finally, the local council agreed to fund the costs and eventually, build a new purpose built accommodation with full facilities and medical support. This is still running strongly today.

Father's vision lives on.

Fr Con returned to Scotland in the late 90's to lead the work at Smithstone House of Prayer where he organised retreats for all sections of the Diocese.

He returned to St John Ogilvie as Parish Priest in the early part of the 2000's, where he still demonstrated his absolute enthusiasm for life.

His wish was for the laity to take up more and more responsibility not only within the parish but also looking outwards and being involved in the community.

He galvanised many into action with a purpose to be a 'Walking Together Parish' by using their vast variety of skills to meet the needs in the parish and in the local community.

This might be seen as the forerunner to Embracing Change.

Fr Con's one wish was to die in harness, in the work he loved, following his lifelong vocation.

In 2014, he had a serious illness but successfully underwent a lifesaving operation. He spent some time convalescing in the Little Sisters of the Poor retirement home in Edinburgh, thought by some that he would perhaps remain there. He was not happy at all, and could not wait to get back to the Parish and his role.

Sadly for Fr Con a very short time later, he was told to retire and in January 2015 he spent his last day at St John Ogilvie's celebrating 12 noon Mass. He was moved to Nazareth House in Glasgow to live. He never settled there. He said that if he could not be useful as a Priest, he did not want anything.

It was then agreed that with minor alterations, aids installed and carers coming in he could be accommodated back in the Sacred Heart Community at Smithstone House.

Unfortunately, this was not to be, as he suffered food poisoning at Nazareth House and this exacerbated his other medical conditions

This happened the day before his planned move back to Kilwinning.

Fr Con did finally get to return to Ayrshire, but it was to a care facility, and he spent his last 4 plus years in Buckreddan Care Home.

Over the past 2 years his health deteriorated to such an extent that he was mostly confined to bed. Throughout this time, he was supported, loved and cared for with prayers, cards, gifts, and thankfully regular visits from parishioners.

A great loss to him was the stimulation from visitors during lockdown, and, sadly in the last few months his health failed with loss of weight, through loss of appetite.

He died very peacefully.

We give thanks to God for the life of Fr Con whom He took home on 15th August, very appropriately on the 75th anniversary of VJ day but even more special for him, would be the fact that it was on the Feast of the Assumption.

The parishioners of St John Ogilvie's owe him a huge debt of gratitude.

A sure sign of how Fr Con touched the hearts of many people are the tributes recorded in both the Galloway Diocese Facebook page and our own Facebook page together with many lovely messages passed on locally.

May Fr. Con rest in peace and reap the rewards he rightfully deserves.