

Can I forget St. Joseph's?

By Rev T. Greenway

For almost fifty years, I have lived as a missionary deep in the villages of India. However, a missionary must never lose his connection with his roots. As Pope Benedict says, "the missionary goes from the local Church"

Although it may be necessary for the sake of training and the organisation of the work to have missionary orders, yet a missionary is sent by and on behalf of the local Christian Community to bring the Gospel to new people.

(For instance Acts 13:1-3.) Wherever I am in the world, I feel that I belong to St. Joseph's. It was in St. Joseph's that I was born and brought up. St. Joseph's was the church of my baptism, first Holy Communion, the marriages of my sisters and then of my first Mass. It was from St. Joseph's that I set out as a missionary to India in 1964. St. Joseph's was the centre of our family life.

My first recollections go back to my earliest years. I have hazy recollections of Canon Kearney who appeared to me, a boy of four or five years old, as a giant of a man. I see him walking up and down the aisle of St. Joseph's, hymnbook in hand getting everyone to sing! Since my youth, Stockport has been a place far away. However, even to this day I always experience a special feeling when I return, as I always do when I am in the UK. This is most of all when I celebrate the Holy Eucharist in St. Joseph's Church. This brings back countless memories of my childhood and youth.

My first day in school was in St. Joseph's infant school. This is an occasion which is quite vivid in my mind and the classroom, somewhat done up now, is still there! I remember too the reception teacher, a certain Miss Hopkins. I remember her as a kind person who read us stories. I spent six or seven years in St. Jo's, as it was called. I remember the visits of the priests to our classrooms and the classes they gave. They did not come too often but it was always light relief after the drudgery of catechism questions and answers by heart! I can even remember what they taught and how they drew pictures on the board! I am sure they would be amazed to know that if they were alive today. It is more than sixty five years ago! Maybe looking at those young priests put it into my head to become one myself. I too also took great interest in teaching children the faith, when I was a young priest. I cannot say whether I was happy in St. Joseph's School. It was school. I had to go, and I adjusted to the sometimes 19th century treatment we received! There were highlights too. One morning in the week, we spent in the swimming baths and another afternoon in Woodbank Park playing football. We had a school football team and it was good playing other schools on a Saturday morning. I did one or two things, which neither the teachers nor my parents would have approved of, had they known.

I remember there was a movie showing in the Essoldo cinema theatre and I wanted to see it. It was "Treasure Island". Unfortunately, I did not have quite enough to get in. It was winter and by four thirty, it was dark. I caught some of the teachers as they came out of school, "Sir, can you give me a penny, I don't have my bus fare". When I had enough, I bought myself a ticket and enjoyed the show. When it was over, I remember I walked home! I must say, I had the sense not to do this kind of thing again!

In 1951, I left St. Joseph's and went to the seminary of the Mill Hill Missionaries. During my holidays, I would return to the school and meet my old teachers, particularly Mr. Bell the headmaster, Mr. Booth, and Mr. King.

The last had been a student with Mill Hill and had to leave just before ordination because of ill health. When I was ordained for the Mill Hill Missionaries, he was there for my first Mass. I was humbled that day when Mr. Booth knelt down to receive my blessing. There were others too in my class in St. Joseph's who also decided to become priests. They were both good friends. Peter O'Neill was ordained in St. Joseph's Church a couple of months before I was in Mill Hill. It being still pre-Vatican days the Rector did not allow me to go for his ordination. I have not met Peter again in forty eight years! James Clayton was ordained a couple of years later. Sadly he has since died.

I write this from the heartland of India but the sights and the sounds of Stockport and the St. Joseph's I knew are very clear in my mind and they have made a deep impression on me. I have much to be thankful for and I look back on my childhood and youth there with love and affection for all the people of the parish. They have never forgotten me even though I have been someone in a far and distant land. I was very moved when on a visit to St. Joseph's one of the parishioners told me that she had remembered me every day in her prayers. At that time I had been ordained forty years! For many, many years now, the parishioners have sent an annual contribution to my mission for which I remember all the people of St. Joseph's in my prayers with deep gratitude.

I feel honoured to have been requested to write an article in view of the 150 years' anniversary of the parish and pray for God's blessing on every member in it.

Rev T. Greenway

