

## **Fire from the North**

My story with the Men of St. Joseph (MOSJ) began in January 2016 long before I even realised I would be returning to England. I was generally content with my life living in Dublin where I had been settled for the best part of nine years. I even made a serious attempt to learn the Irish language as I thought my future would be to remain in that country. I left England as a twenty year old in 1994 and moved around a variety of countries including Italy, Belgium & India but Ireland had been the base to where I would return. One particular weekend I found myself covering the weekend Masses for a priest friend up near Co. Monaghan. As usual I was scrambling around looking for some inspiration to write my Sunday homily at the last hour. I dipped into Bishop Robert Barron's offering for that particular Sunday in January, as I had done many times before. Although I would have slight disagreements with a number of Bishop Barron's views on theology, many of his homilies are inspiring.

This particular reflection was based on the Old Testament books of Ezra and Nehemiah and recounted the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the Temple in the aftermath of the Babylonian Exile around the year 440. The people return to their beloved homeland only to witness with great sorrow the devastation and utter carnage of its ruin. Under the guidance of two key figures the huge rebuilding operation begins with two important tasks; Nehemiah, the governor, is rebuilding the walls of the city which is what gave Jerusalem its physical identity whilst Ezra, the priest, is teaching, re-catechising Israel using the Law of Moses in order to restore their spiritual identity. This homily touched my soul and established my mission in the Church. At that time I could never have imagined that God would send me home to England, place before me a gifted governor and help us to establish an army of men with whom we could begin the huge rebuilding operation. This is exactly what He did a few months later.

As I delivered Bishop Barron's homily verbatim to the good people of that parish little did I know of the ominous clouds heading towards me and the storm that would engulf me. In the tumultuous years that followed I would be forced to leave two jobs which I loved and move countries twice in what became a very dark period in my life. Yet, it was precisely in the crucible of pain and humiliation that some of God's most beautiful gifts were given to me. The exiled son would return to his homeland and the rebuilding project would begin in the old town of Stockport. The army of men would become the Men of St. Joseph.

According to my desk diary I arrived at St. Joseph's Parish, Stockport on Wednesday September 7th, 2016. During the summer just gone my world had fallen apart. I had resigned from my dream job in a national seminary due to a homosexual scandal that had made national headlines. My Provincial had relocated me back to England in what felt like an exile experience. I had been based largely in Dublin for a span of twenty two years (at that point over half my life) therefore lost not only a wonderful job but also a beautiful circle of friends and a fulfilling ministry amongst the vibrant young adult groups operating in Dublin during those years. I was deeply depressed, forlorn even, wondering what I was doing in a parish that seemed to be populated solely by old women. During those first few months I engaged in prolonged periods of soul-searching, wallowing in the

seemingly purposelessness of this new phase of my life. Why had God brought me back to England and taken what seemed like everything away from me? I had no idea.

My first encounter with Simon Leigh was not that remarkable. He approached me one day after the midday Mass on a Saturday in September and wondered if I was available for some spiritual direction. I readily agreed. It would be a welcome relief to chat with a man who seemed solid in the faith, intelligent and relatively normal. Neither of us could have imagined the significance of that first meeting. I have a faint memory of being impressed by his adult conversion story and how, after a painful breakup, he began to wonder at the meaning of life that eventually led him to the truth of the Catholic Church. Although both of us had in common a life-long devotedness towards our respective (and rival) football teams, it began to emerge that a different kind of zeal would steadily consume us even more intensely than chanting on the terraces.

Those first sessions of spiritual direction are somewhat hazy in terms of recalling content and outcomes. I do remember some discussion around a general dissatisfaction with the state of the Church and an even greater disappointment with the level of engagement by men. At one point it must have dawned on me that sitting here complaining about the woes of the Church wouldn't do either of us any good so I suggested he set up a men's group. Let us round up a few guys and see what could be done to salvage the woeful state of affairs.

My previous work in the seminary formation had led me to compile numerous resources on the formation of men's character and identity in view of preparing them for ordination to the priesthood. One document stood out to me as particularly striking. It was Bishop's Thomas J. Olmsted's Apostolic Exhortation to the Catholic men of his diocese in Phoenix, USA entitled '*Into the Breach.*' It is a rousing call to all men in whatever walk of life, beseeching them to stand up and act against the onslaught directed towards the Catholic Church in these most challenging of moments. The entire document should be proclaimed far and wide. The opening paragraph reads;

*'A Call to Battle*

I begin this letter with a clarion call and clear charge to you, my sons and brothers in Christ: Men, do not hesitate to engage in the battle that is raging around you, the battle that is wounding our children and families, the battle that is distorting the dignity of both women and men. This battle is often hidden, but the battle is real. It is primarily spiritual, but it is progressively killing the remaining Christian ethos in our society and culture, and even in our own homes.'

The document was read in its entirety during that first Thursday night in April, 2017. There we were, a small group of guys huddled around in our parish hall wondering what we could do for the Church. The only other significant intervention I recall during that initial stage was my insistence on a programme of serious study. Simon, along with his few faith friends never lacked in zeal for the faith and were ready to be unleashed on the streets of Manchester in order to preach the Good News and save

souls on every corner. No mission was too big or too tall. My request that we all sit down and begin a study of the Catholic Faith before deciding on what apostolate God may be calling into was agreed without too much resistance. We decided to follow one of Jeff Cavins' Bible study series as this has been fruitful in another local parish. That was it. We had begun. It was all rather humble, uneventful and a bit disorganised. God began to move men's hearts in order to build momentum, ushering us forward and upwards to become engaged in the Church as every father should be. The Men of St. Joseph had begun in the parish of St. Joseph although we hadn't as yet given ourselves that name. Four of those original men are my closest friends to this day and still form the core of the MOSJ: Simon Leigh, Sean Booth, Mike Tracy and Steve Conlon. I call them the Fab Four. Imagine the city of Manchester having its own Fab Four. *Imagine.*

My next significant contribution was to abandon the group. I was offered another dream job in another national seminary, this time in England. The first one lasted seven years. This next one would last nine months. Simon had decided that the first men's group meeting was to be held on the night of the Manchester derby. This was very significant. Simon is a season ticket holder for Man City and most of the other guys had varying degrees of allegiance to one of the two Manchester clubs. The majority of other men would have waited a week in order to begin the group and avoid the clash with the big local derby. Simon wanted to lay down a marker for himself as much as anyone and stake the claim to put Jesus Christ at the centre of his week no matter what. This is duly what he did, to his credit. Needless to say there wasn't much resistance from the Scouse spiritual director about missing that particular game.

Knowing the level of commitment from the core members of the group I felt secure enough that it wasn't going to peter out. As I left to move into the seminary during the summer of 2017 the guys got on with the weekly meetings and the Bible study programme directed by Jeff Cavins.

Naturally, I kept in touch with Simon and through him the progress of the group. I returned to the parish for extended periods during the Christmas and Easter breaks and continued our conversations along with attending the weekly meetings when I could. At some point during this period we fell into a pattern of celebrating what I called an '*eschatological breakfast*'.<sup>1</sup> These events were not merely sharing a breakfast together in one of Stockport's breakfast cafes but an experience of a living encounter with the Risen Christ on the shores of the lake at dawn. This seemed a fitting description of my meetings with Simon as I recall listening to so many blessings and graces emerging from the nascent men's group as I devoured my gluten free full English. That encounter with Our Lord over breakfast instilled in his disciples an extraordinary sense of hope both for this world and into the eternal world beyond us. Death was not the end, it had been conquered. All the other woes in our world were put into perspective by this cosmic and eternal event. The news from the men's group was nearly always expansive and hopeful. As a second men's group became established the mission in England slowly began to emerge. The fire

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<sup>1</sup> 'Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast"' (John 21:12) The appearance of the Risen Lord to his disciples on the shore of lake Tiberias.

has been lit in Stockport of all places,<sup>2</sup> could we begin to light up other towns and cities? The weekly eschatological breakfasts with Simon continue to be a life-giving feature of our friendship to this day and something I would highly recommend to all MOSJ members. Way better than any AGM.

As the year 2018 rolled by, the men's group was steadily developing. Another decisive contribution came from Gary Stephens, the leader of the Prince of Peace community in Liverpool and Chairman of the New Dawn Conference Walsingham. Whilst on a speaking tour in Poland he came across a large Men of St. Joseph network making a significant contribution to the life of the local church. Some of those members urged Gary to set up a similar group in England. On his return he contacted his friend Simon and inquired about his men's group with the suggestion that they become part of this international network of the Men of St. Joseph. This initiated a period of discernment as regards our identity and mission. Very quickly it seemed obvious that the name of the group would fit. After all we had been meeting in the parish of St. Joseph for over a year. The international movement of men was gathering in Rome the following November so a few of our group became inflamed by the idea of attending and began to make plans. Twelve of the men ended up travelling over to the Eternal City for the conference known fittingly as the 'Siege of Rome.' It was a beautiful experience for many different reasons. Although we never felt called to join the international group we shared their passion for the renewal of the Church through the engagement of men.

The summer of 2018 became significant for two related scandals within the Catholic Church. It was dubbed the 'Summer of Shame' at least in the US due to the appalling revelations of the prelate formerly known as Cardinal McCarrick. It was also another decisive moment for me and my employment status. I was actually fired from my job in the seminary for not being able to recommend a homosexual seminarian continue with his formation towards ordination. My judgement as regards his suitability was rejected by the Rector along with the seminarian's bishop so I was asked to leave. Despite extended conversations with the Archbishop under whose jurisdiction the seminary fell, and the Papal Nuncio, no attempts at addressing the issue emerged. Once more, I was left depressed and forlorn over the level of disobedience on the part of the Catholic hierarchy towards the teaching of the Church that they were supposed to represent. In the wake of leaving both positions I had previously been silent, not wanting to publicise the shameful and scandalous behaviour I had witnessed first hand. The Theodore McCarrick scandal which broke that summer changed all that. It became clear that the hierarchy of the Catholic Church had learnt nothing from the decades long clerical abuse scandals and the scourge of homosexual clergy. I felt I had to speak out. So I did.

At this point my Provincial was running out of places to send me. After pondering a few options it was decided that I would be sent to Rome in order to embark on some doctoral studies at the Institute of Psychology where I have completed my Licence some years earlier. This meant that I was already a resident in Rome when the twelve Men of St. Joseph arrived for the international men's conference. I was able to join some of the input sessions and periods of prayer along with meeting some

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<sup>2</sup> "Can anything good come from there?" Nathanael asked. "Come and see," said Philip. (John 1:46)

very committed men who had been engaged in men's ministry for decades. It was deeply enriching to learn from their experiences. It was also our first international men's tour.

The next event that knocked us all for six was the global lockdown due to Covid 19 beginning in the Spring of 2020. It came to Europe via Italy, where I was still living, and eventually spread around the world. The governmental response is something I still look back on in disbelief.

When the decision by the Bishops of England and Wales was made to rededicate England to Our Lady of Walsingham on 29th March 2020 I remember wishing to be back in England in order to celebrate this hugely significant event. When the announcement by the bishops was made I was living in Rome and so that possibility seemed very unlikely. Just prior to the closure of all airspace due to governmental restrictions my mother had a fall in the night and became very ill. It seemed as if she was going to die and so I requested permission to return back to England in order to see her. In the chaos of airport closures I miraculously managed to get three separate planes back from Rome to Birmingham just before Boris Johnson closed the airports in England. In the most extraordinary fashion my prayer to be in England for the rededication to Our Lady had been answered. A small step towards the re-conversion of England had been taken. My dear mother survived and we both moved into my brother's house in Lincolnshire as the world came to a standstill. Slowly we all began to adapt to the new normal of social distancing, ceaseless fear-mongering from the media, and apocalyptic doom-scrolling.

Once freedom of movement was re-established I returned to Stockport and continued working on my dissertation in the library. This began a golden period for me with the MOSJ. I could finally commit to the weekly meetings and enjoy getting behind the mission in England. As the nation emerged from the lockdown restrictions we all sensed the time was ripe for evangelisation, healing and harvest. The whole country had been rocked, superficial distractions had been taken away, mental health issues skyrocketed and the need for authentic fellowship became palpable. No matter what the government or the Church threw at us, we had each other and we shared a passion for Jesus Christ and the Catholic Faith. Nothing could separate us from this bond of brothers, nothing could separate from the love of God (Rm 8:35-8). We knew we had to draw as many souls as possible out from the cultural chaos into this life giving community of men.<sup>3</sup>

I honestly can't remember when the MOSJ began studying the Catechism of the Catholic Church. I think I am correct in saying the WOSJ began studying it first as their initial programme of study in September 2019. It took both groups over a year to work through this stunning document. I can't emphasise enough the importance of studying this text and the power of delving into its richness in

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<sup>3</sup> In August, 2019 the Women of St. Joseph (WOSJ) came into existence. A small group of us gathered at dawn in the Shrine grounds in Walsingham during the New Dawn Conference and dedicated ourselves to Our Lady & St. Joseph. The WOSJ have been meeting every week ever since in St. Joseph's Parish, Stockport and form part of the same mission to re-convert England.

a group of faith-filled individuals. For myself the force of our fellowship and mission burned most brightly when we shared the insights from our study of the Catechism. It seems that God has placed in my heart an ardent desire to inflame souls in love of Him through two of the most significant contributions of St. John Paul II to the Church; the Catechism of the Catholic Church and the Theology of the Body catechesis.<sup>4</sup>

It truly was a sight to behold. Former criminals, drug dealers, addicts, alcoholics, Manchester United fans, all sitting round fumbling through the Catechism slowly beginning to articulate their Faith, their love for Jesus and His Church. It's true that men often shy away from sharing their feelings in a group. I slowly began to understand the common focus of intellectual study helped to build trust and fellowship and within that healthy ambient men could become more honest and vulnerable. The depth of sharing was both moving and inspirational.

Here are some texts from the Catechism that made an indelible mark on my heart and mind when I first read them with the groups;

*'The only begotten Son of God, wanting to make us sharers in his divinity, assumed our nature, so that he, made man, might make us gods. (St. Thomas Aquinas, CCC 460)*

*'The spousal character of the human vocation in relation to God is fulfilled perfectly in Mary's virginal motherhood.'* (CCC 505)

*'She (Mary) is the burning bush of the definitive theophany.'* (CCC 724)

*'On this way of perfection, the Spirit and the Bride call whoever hears them to perfect communion with God:*

*There will true glory be, where no one will be praised by mistake or flattery, true honour will not be refused to the worthy, not granted to the unworthy; likewise, no one unworthy will pretend to be worthy, where only those who are worthy will be admitted. There true peace will reign, where no one will experience opposition either from self or others. God himself will be virtue's reward; he gives virtue and has promised to give himself as the best and greatest reward that could exist.... 'I shall be their God and they will be my people...' This is also the meaning of the Apostle's words: 'So that God may be all in all.' God himself will be the goal of our desires; we shall contemplate him without end, love him without surfeit, praise him without weariness. This gift, this state, this act, like eternal life itself, will assuredly be common to all.'* (St. Augustine, CCC 2550).

*Just as Jesus prays to the Father and gives thanks before receiving his gifts, so he teaches us **filial boldness**: 'Whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you receive it, and you will.'* Such is the power of prayer

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<sup>4</sup> JPII's third most significant contribution to the Church, in my opinion, is the World Youth Days.

*and of faith that does not doubt: 'all things are possible to him who believes.' Jesus is saddened by the 'lack of faith' of his neighbours and the 'little faith' of his own disciples as he is struck with admiration at the great faith of the Roman centurion and the Canaanite woman.'* (CCC 2610)

As we began to work through the fourth and final section of the Catechism, the section on 'Christian Prayer', I began to notice a theme. The concept of *filial boldness*, quoted above, began to appear throughout the text and it resonated deep within me. In fact, it touched the echo of an old wound from years before. During that very first meeting back in April 2017 Bishop Olmsted's Apostolic Exhortation had nailed it. The crisis in our culture and the Church lay with the confusion and alienation experienced by many men. If the rebuilding project was to begin then the primary task was to rebuild the very men who would begin the work of restoration! In order for men to assume their God-given mission on earth they needed help in bolstering their identity as fathers in order to live fully in the image and likeness of God our Father.

*'Like masculinity itself, perhaps fatherhood has never been a widely-pondered topic among the philosophers because it has always been presumed, its meaning fairly obvious. This is no longer true. In his book, Crossing the Threshold of Hope, St. John Paul II writes of the attack on fatherhood in modern society: "This is truly the key for interpreting reality [...] original sin, then, attempts to abolish fatherhood."*

*The great pontiff of the family points to our first parents' original act of disobedience, which cost them and us our original innocence and freedom from bodily death, and in original sin, we find a primordial rebellion against God's fatherhood, a desire to remove fatherhood itself. This is our enemy's underlying plan: to remove our reliance on God, the benevolent Father. To do this, Satan's primary strategy is to damage and abolish human fatherhood, in the man and relationship where each of us first glimpses what God's fatherhood might be like.'*<sup>5</sup>

The more I reflected on the theme of Fatherhood, the more I realised the importance of the MOSJ for the Church. I had come from a broken home. My father left our family when I was 16 years old. He left a trail of emotional devastation that even ten years of therapy could not completely heal. I have two half-brothers, one whom I have never met. Many of my brothers in the MOSJ could identify with this fatherhood wound. We were slowly and at times painfully helping each other become better men and more loving fathers. We couldn't always articulate it but we were fostering what had become a term of derision in our fallen civilization; an authentic patriarchy. We wanted to become who we were called to be; men who protect and defend, men who give their lives for what they love, men of mission, men of God, men of the Church.....Men of St. Joseph.

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<sup>5</sup> INTO THE BREACH, An Apostolic Exhortation to Catholic Men, my Spiritual Sons in the Diocese of Phoenix, Thomas J. Olmsted, Bishop of Phoenix, 2015

I failed badly at my A-Levels in the early 1990's due to the emotional distress at home in the wake of my father's departure. Through the grace of God I managed to find a job in a youth retreat centre owned and run by the Sacred Heart Fathers. Without realising quite what I had got myself into, the new position became a period of spiritual and emotional inspiration that overwhelmed me. The two years at Dehon House were two foundational years in my life. Magnificent. Life-changing. Most of my friends went away to university and continued the downward spiral into the hedonistic lifestyle we had begun in college, having had me at the fore-front of proceedings. As my new life as a youth leader developed I was taken up into a radically different path than that of my old school pals. I witnessed first-hand the extraordinary religious transformation of young people throughout the course of the week-long residential retreat. It was the kind of high that no previous experience of recreational drugs could quite match.

On Friday morning, the last day of the retreat, before the group left for home, we always concluded with morning prayer in the chapel. It was a commissioning of sorts, a sending out into the world after this week away with God. We read the same New Testament passage week after week. The passage was from St. Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, Ch. 3:14-21 from the New Jerusalem Bible;

*'This, then, is what I pray, kneeling before the Father, from whom every fatherhood in heaven and on earth takes its name. In the abundance of his glory may he, through his Spirit, enable you to grow firm in power through your inner self, so that Christ may live in your hearts through faith, and then planted in love and built on love, with all God's holy people you will have the strength to grasp the breadth and the length, the height and the depth; so that knowing the love of Christ, which is beyond knowledge, you may be filled with the utter fullness of God. Glory be to him whose power working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine; glory be to him from generation to generation in the Church and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever. Amen.'*

There I was, sitting on the floor of the chapel hearing the same passage Friday after Friday, for two years. It was the beginning of my lifelong journey into fatherhood. At the dawn of my spiritual awakening, as a questioning 18 year old, little did I realise how my heavenly Father was calling me to Himself through the intense wound left by my earthly father. He would call me away from biological fatherhood into a spiritual fatherhood that would lead me into the mentoring of numerous spiritual sons. Over many years of training and healing my 'inner self' would 'grow firm' as St. Paul had prayed. I would come to know the love of Jesus Christ and enter more thoroughly into the 'fullness of God.' Stepping back and bringing the arc of my entire life into focus I am now beginning to grasp the pathos of St. Paul's prayer which I now make my own; learning to forgive the transgressions of my earthly *Father*, coming to understand the depth of love of my heavenly *Father*, and my own striving to become an authentic spiritual *Father*. The MOSJ have helped me to become a true Father.

The formula for lasting fruitfulness couldn't be simpler; *weekly* meetings of prayer, fellowship and serious study of the Faith. No minutes, AGM's, risk assessments, admin, motions for or against,



elections, deliberations, yapping about politics or any other unrelated topic. Stay faithful to this simple model and allow the Holy Spirit to do the rest. Very slowly the MOSJ meeting becomes the fulcrum of your week and your discipleship of Our Lord begins to flourish. Faith is nourished, deep friendships are forged and you become consumed by the mission. This is what our Christian communities are supposed to look like. This is sadly what has been long lost in most of our parishes which is why they are collapsing before our eyes.

The stories you are reading are real accounts of actual Men of St. Joseph. As you will read, they all have their own story to tell. Some are reasonably well educated, even from privileged backgrounds. Others had a far more modest beginning to life and struggled to persevere through formal education. Some battled with dysfunctional or chaotic familial situations and fell into a downward spiral of addiction, crime and hopelessness. Others simply drifted through life without knowing which way to go. As far as possible, we have left each man to express himself in his own way. Our hope has always been that the variety of stories will inspire different men in different ways.

You, the reader, may be an accountant, a builder, a teacher, a civil servant, unemployed, a drug dealer, in prison, living on the streets or just drifting through life in a somewhat disconnected way. Wherever you find yourself in life just now, there is always hope in Jesus Christ. He is the treasure we have all found, the Pearl of extraordinary value. The lies and deceits of our secular, godless culture have all been exposed for what they are, bearers of regret and isolation. The emptiness of the sexual revolution has also been laid bare. Most of these men have smashed every variable on the hedonistic life-scale over and over again and found only despair. Jesus is now Lord of their lives; the joy, peace and purpose He gives means they'll never go back. Once you've tasted the eternal, uncreated reality of the Divine life, there is no going back. The words of St. Augustine of Hippo reverberate down through the centuries;

“Late have I loved you, Beauty so ancient and so new, late have I loved you!  
You called, shouted, broke through my deafness;  
you flared, blazed, banished my blindness;  
you lavished your fragrance, I gasped, and now I pant for you;  
I tasted you, and I hunger and thirst;  
you touched me, and I burned for your peace.”<sup>6</sup>

If you are reading this chapter, then you have the book in your hands (or some kind of electronic device). This is for a reason. If you are a man then you have a decision to make. You are being personally invited by me to review the contact details at the back of the book (or on the website) to see if a MOSJ is operating in your area. If that is the case, please make contact and join them. If no group is to be found you are invited to take up the challenge of establishing a MOSJ near where you live. There

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<sup>6</sup> *Confessions*, Book X, Ch. XXVII

is another dropdown page on the website that contains all you need to set up a MOSJ group. We're calling all men to join the mission in England. Life is short. When we come before almighty God, which may be sooner than we're expecting, we will each have to give an account of our stewardship as custodians of the Church. How have we lived our spousal relationship as Fathers? How have you lived your life as a Father?

Arise Men of St. Joseph.

The Church needs you to step up.

There is much work to be done for Our Lady in her green and pleasant land.

## **Epilogue**

The Sacred Heart Fathers, SCJ, the Religious Order to which I belong, served the parish of St. Joseph's, Stockport for nearly forty years. We finally withdrew from the parish in the summer of 2023 in order for the church to become a shrine of Eucharistic Adoration for the Diocese of Shrewsbury. The transformation of the parish into a Eucharistic Shrine has been a tremendous gift to both the Men and Women of St. Joseph, as well as the Church in general. We have both Bishop Mark Davies and Fr. Sean Davidson to thank for that.

I only found out recently that Simon's first contact with the Sacred Heart Fathers came through the Well Spring centre that was established by Fr. Con Botter SCJ, the parish priest of St. Joseph's in the 1980's and 90's. His initial inspiration to feed the homeless of Stockport was established in an old prefabricated building in the grounds of the church around the year 1991. A number of years later the project had become so popular that the construction of a new, purpose built venue was needed. This would go on to feed hundreds of homeless people a day, although sadly the original foundation of Christian values have been significantly eroded over time. The new building has only recently been extended and is now back in full operation.

Shortly after Simon Leigh's conversion to the Catholic Faith he met a homeless lady in the carpark of his accountancy firm late one night. She asked him if he could take her to the Well Spring centre and Simon confessed to not knowing where it was. He could see she was really struggling and so agreed to drop her off at another location and gave her some cash.

The following week at Mass his parish priest made an announcement at the end of the service. Apparently the Well Spring centre which had been recently relocated to a purpose built venue was struggling for capital and had begun a huge fund-raising drive in order to save it from going bust. Simon saw this as a nudge from God and made it his business to find out where this centre was located. On arrival, he promptly donated a significant amount of money to the stricken enterprise. This began a journey of partnership between Simon and the Well Spring centre through years of serving on the Board of Trustees. Part of that involvement led to the running of the Alpha course at the venue. This included the recommendation of attending Mass for all the participants (Catholic and non) at the conclusion of the programme. The nearest Catholic church was obviously round the corner at St. Joseph's where the original site of the Well Spring centre had been established near the car park years before. This led Simon to St. Joseph's parish for the first time and into the welcoming

arms of Fr. Jim Matthews SCJ, the then parish priest in residence. Fr. Jim was delighted to welcome the Alpha group to join the 12 noon Mass on Saturday.

On that particular Saturday at 12 noon Mass a tall, scouse priest appeared out of the sacristy looking for trouble.

In the telling of this story I would like to think that these faithful priests all played a part in establishing the Men and Women of St. Joseph in the parish of St. Joseph's, Stockport. They helped lay the foundations of the group and therefore our mission in England. For this reason, they won't be forgotten.

Fr. Con Botter SCJ died in August 2020. RIP

Fr. Jim Matthews SCJ retired back to Ireland in September 2023.