

FR TONY SULTANA SDB

50th Anniversary of his Ordination to the Sacred Priesthood

Extract from the OLSD parish newsletter – 20 July 2024

Why 20 July? I was ordained Saturday 20 July 1974 at St John's Cathedral, in Valletta, Malta with 50 other priests.

Why at OLSD? 28 of my 50 years, as Parish Priest were here: The first seven years of Our Lady of Lourdes, one year of Our Lady of Lourdes and St Dominic Savio, 20 years of Our Lady and St Dominic.

I was born in January 1947 at the end of World War II. I still remember as a child bombed and destroyed buildings – rationing and so many thousands leaving Malta – in the 50's - for a better life in Australia, Canada, UK and United States. Most of my relatives on my father's side left the devastated island. Malta was the most heavily bombed area of World War II.

In March 1948 my father, Michael, who had been in the British Navy's Mediterranean Fleet for 20 years and served all through the war, died in the French Naval Hospital in Toulon, France, while serving on the aircraft carrier 'HMS Triumph'. He is buried in Toulon. I and my twin brother were a year old when father died, and my younger sister was born six months later. There was also an older sister aged seven. My mother – Agnes – was a person of great faith. Her determination, dedication and hard work was heroic. I owe so much to her bringing us up as a single mum in hard times.

I received First Holy Communion at five years old and Confirmation at seven. In August 1954, I started attending the Salesian Oratory and this was my first contact with the Salesians. It was open daily and besides time for playing we had Catechism classes and prayers in church every day. About 200 boys attended the Oratory.

The Oratory has a big chapel and Mass was said every morning and weekends. And at the age of eight, I asked if I could become an altar server. Mass was still in Latin and celebrated by the priest with his back to the people. The Sacristan gave me lessons on all I had to do and taught me the Latin words I had to say in answer to the priest. "Introibo ad altare Dei". Answer "Ad Deum qui letificat juventutem meam". So, on a weekday I served my first Mass. However, everything went wrong. I couldn't remember my Latin answers and I had to be told by the priest what I was supposed to be doing – when to move the missal – ring bells – bring wine and water to the altar, etc. On my return to the Sacristy after Mass I found the Sacristan waiting for me and after a telling off suggested that I give up on the idea of serving. However, the Salesian Priest whose Mass I had tried to serve, came up and said

that he expected me back the following day to serve again. I now realise that if that priest did not say that to me I would in all probability not be a priest today.

A sequel to this story is that this priest was a member of the Salesian Community of Savio College when I became Rector, in 1988, and in 1990 when he celebrated his 50th Anniversary of Ordination, I reminded him of when I 'tried' to serve his Mass all those many years ago and his words of encouragement to me.

It was thanks to the Salesians at the Oratory at the time – their kindness, charity and support – being there in those post-war days when life was still difficult and hard for many families, they were always there to give their support no matter what.

At that time few children stayed in school past Primary School but thanks to my mother's determination we all went through Secondary School and sat for GCE 'O' Levels.

At the age of 15 I left home with four other boys to come to the UK to the Salesian Missionary College in Cheshire. In the five years that followed I sat for 'A' Levels, did three years philosophy and went to the novitiate and was professed.

At the age of 20, I returned to Malta and spent three years in St Patrick's School in Sliema as an assistant and teacher. The boys came from different areas of the island, and all had difficult family backgrounds.

In 1980 I moved to the newly opened Savio College where I and five other young Salesians started attending Theology lectures at the newly formed Institute for Philosophical and Theological studies for eight different Religious Orders.

After I was ordained a Deacon in July 1973, I was asked to move back to Sliema but this time to the Salesian Oratory which I had attended as a boy. I looked after the Under-15 boys.

Ordination followed on 20 July 1974 at St John's Cathedral after which I was asked by my superiors to stay on at the Oratory. But this time I was to look after the older young people – aged 15 to 24. This to me was 'real' Salesian work and I was fortunate to do this work until 1988.

In 1988 I was appointed Rector of Savio College for three years and in 1991 I moved to Farnborough for a 'sabbatical' year – a sabbatical year which has now lasted 33 years!

In Farnborough I first served as assistant parish priest for four years at "Our Lady Help of Christians". In 1992 I was asked to be a governor at St Patrick's School, and in

1993 I became part time chaplain in All Hallows in Farnham, a post that lasted till 1996.

In 1995 I was asked by Bishop Crispian Hollis if I would take responsibility for "Our Lady of Lourdes" for three to five years as the Benedictines of Farnborough Abbey had asked to relinquish responsibility for the parish. The Salesian Provincial gave his approval, and I came to the parish in September of 1995.

In 2003 the merger of the parishes 'Our Lady of Lourdes' and 'St Dominic Savio' meant that the area of the parish was doubled and after consultation it was decided to name the new parish 'Our Lady and St Dominic'.

I served as Governor at St Bernadette for 25 years and as visiting priest at Farnborough Hill for 30 years.

I was blest with being parish priest for 28 years until in 2023 a new, much younger energetic priest could take over. During the last few years especially since the first lock down in 2020 due to COVID, I could see that I was physically exhausted and facing more mobility problems. The fall I had in church on Maundy Thursday of 2023 was the last straw.

Now after a year of retirement I thank God for the years I spent in his service. And I thank all who in many small ways helped me in my vocation.

God Bless,
Fr Tony Sultana SDB