

Fr Michael's Memoirs – 3: Life at Saint Francis of Assisi.

I had started to attend the church of Saint Francis of Assisi in Ewell when I was about seven. Soon after that the parish priest was joined on the staff by a Parish Worker – Miss Gwynneth Littler. One of her areas of responsibility was children's work, and she certainly knew how to do it. One of her innovations was to arrange that the mass on Saturdays in Lent should be particularly for children. The parish priest celebrated, she gave a commentary and some of the boys – soon including me – were trained to be servers by Mr Thomas Stanley Toms, the sacristan and senior server. It was from these two that I took my early lessons about the Church and its life.

Saint Francis church was next to the junior school. On Wednesday or Thursday morning, it was possible for children in the upper classes to start the day not in school, but in the Withdrawal Class in church. There Miss Littler taught us the basic elements of the Christian faith, the outline of the Church's year, the lives of the saints and the meaning of the things the priest used or wore at the Eucharist.

In those days there were no evening masses – the Maundy Thursday mass was at 6.30 am, and the Good Friday Liturgy at 9.30 am. Between these two services (including the whole of Thursday to Friday night) there was a continuous watch before the Blessed Sacrament. On Maundy Thursday there were ten-minute slots for children to join – two at a time – in the watch.

Another of Miss Littler's innovations was a Three Hours for Children on the afternoon of Good Friday. The time was divided between a simple form of the Stations of the Cross – done, I think, three or four Stations at a time – and hand work, organized in age groups round the church hall. There was a break for lunch – including a (cold) hot-cross bun, and we finished as the grown ups were coming out of church.

One of the year's liturgical highlights for the junior servers was a sung eucharist for children (and the elderly) at 9 am on Ascension Day. (There had already been a Eucharist with full choir at 6.30). In those days it was the custom to extinguish the paschal candle after the Gospel on Ascension Day, and in my last year at junior school that task fell to me.

It was also about this time that I had my first experience of incense, and – although I didn't know it at the time – of Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament.

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Mr Toms took me with a group of parishioners to the church where a former parish priest was now the Vicar – and, for the first time, I was a boat boy. Twenty-five or so years later, when I needed to move to a new ministry, I met the Bishop of Dorking in Holy Trinity Church, Hawley, and – to my surprise – discovered that this was the church where I had served at Benediction for the first (but not the last) time. So I had a surprise to spring on the parishioners when, a few months later, I was instituted as Vicar. But that's another story!