

God of Surprises!

Martin Plunkett, son of Francine and Dudley, is due to be ordained at Westminster Cathedral on 29th June, and will celebrate Mass for the first time in Southampton at the Immaculate Conception church, Portswood Road, on Monday 1 July, Feast of St Oliver Plunkett, at 7 pm.

Francine: We wandered away from the faith during the 1960s while we were in the States for postgraduate studies. Dudley took a job at Southampton University but it was only in 1983 that he returned to the Church. A year later he made a thanksgiving pilgrimage to the shrine of Our Lady in Medjugorje and soon afterwards I too returned to the faith. We went back to Medjugorje together, and this was a deep spiritual experience of, faith, love, hope, and learning to pray. But we began to feel very concerned about our two sons, Danny and Martin, whose religious formation we had totally neglected.

Martin: It was when I saw the difference that the faith was making in my parents' lives that a change began. I saw that they were more peaceful and happy. I was in my mid-teens and knew little about religion but I was curious. Danny and I agreed to accompany them to Medjugorje. There I heard about God and saw many young people who were joyful and fulfilled. There was also an intriguing challenge in the idea of supernatural apparitions of the Virgin Mary. We prayed for the first time as a family at the top of Cross mountain.

Francine: Our Medjugorje trip was very significant, as we had not had a family holiday for many years. We had great hopes our sons would have a conversion, but Our Lady put first things first. We had the most peaceful, loving time we had ever had as a family, each of us talking about our deepest hopes and fears late into the night. And my heart was touched: as a mother Our Lady knew what was most needed in our family. We have never lost this closeness; I can only put it down to God's loving grace, and my heart is full of thanks.

Martin: After Medjugorje, I went to university to study Drama and was convinced that I did not need religion. I wanted to taste the freedom of the world, to enjoy going out to bars and living my own life. I had ideas of becoming a famous actor, and then later a musician. Five years passed, by which time I was living in London, before I seriously began to reconsider my life. I was not happy, and began to see that the lifestyle I had coveted as a teenager was ending up as meaningless and even harmful. I was being sucked into a very limiting and even self-destructive culture.

Dudley: I remember having long talks with Martin in 1992. I offered him a copy of the Gospels that seemed to make an impression on him. We prayed that he would change his life but the possibility seemed remote.

Martin: The words of the Gospel seemed relevant to my life. Soon afterwards I encountered an Evangelical group in Brixton High Street and the words I heard made a deep impression. A young man prayed with me, and everything changed. I returned home to Southampton, and there was a moment when I knew that it was in fact Jesus who had been helping me to find my way. The idea of becoming a priest came to me almost at once.

Dudley: Despite his sudden conversion and his baptism the following Easter, it has taken Martin 21 years to reach the point of ordination as a priest. How did this come to pass? It is a long story, but it included time spent as a teacher in Portsmouth, a member of the Sion Community, a novice in the New York Friars of the Renewal, a care-worker for the disabled, a parish youth-worker helping to put on musicals and plays, and a student on the Maryvale Philosophy BA, before he applied to be accepted for priestly training at Allen Hall.

Martin: I am so grateful that the gift of the faith has come back into our family, and that my parents were open to rediscovering their own faith because it has given me the confidence to trust that any family can be reconciled to God and to his plans for their lives.

Francine and Dudley belong to the Immaculate Conception parish. She is involved in the Little Way healing programme, and he works part-time at the Maryvale Institute and coordinates the Southampton-based Faith Alive evangelising group.