

**“... from his fullness we have, all of us, received - grace upon grace.” (John 1:16)**

In my opinion, this verse expresses my experience of my time spent with you at Holy Innocents'. First of all I would like to thank God for his providence and goodness which He has shown to me during these three months. Yes of course God loves us and everyday He gives us one gracious blessing after another. However, sometimes we do not realise it.

I would like to share with you a little experience of how God's providence has worked for me. As you know, I am in my fourth year of the seven year philosophical-theological course, which is called the **“intermediary year”** – a year of formation lived outside the **seminary** (the training college). Its aim is to help us to confirm (or otherwise) our decision, and to mature in our vocation to the priesthood whilst in a different setting. During this year of formation we are expected to do work experience and some pastoral work in Malta. We are also encouraged to spend part of this year abroad, doing some pastoral or voluntary work.

Last year, at this time, I was planning for this coming year. Originally I had not planned to come here and I was planning to go somewhere else. After a long period of time I found myself without a parish. One day I was talking to my friend, who is a priest in Malta, and he asked me whether I had anywhere to go for my pastoral placement. And I replied that I had nowhere confirmed. So he told me that he had a friend who was in England, and that on the next day he would be going to England, so he could ask him about me. So I said to him, *“Yes you can.”* The day after, I received a phone call and he told me, *“Fr Victor has accepted you to go to his parish.”* When we finished talking I said to myself, *“How great is God's providence!”*

Sometimes God's ways differ a lot from what we plan or think. I am still admiring God's providence to me a year after. To be honest with you, I did not expect this experience. It has been a very fruitful one and I have received, **“grace upon grace.”**

This year has been one of discernment about the priesthood. And after being with a priest for a long time, I can assure you that you learn a lot from him. I am referring to **Fr Victor**. As you know, he is a hard worker and you must be prepared and alert to his call! One thing I have learnt from him, is that he tries to keep prayer at the centre of his priestly life. I think this is one of the most important lessons that I have learnt from him. *If the priest does not pray, how can he be a good role model for his flock?* Another aspect that I really admire in him, is his love for the Word of God (*the scripture*), his dedication and his pastoral zeal. Apart from this, I would like to thank him for his kindness and for his warm welcome in accepting me to your parish and into his home.

I would also like to thank two priests who serve in the parish - **Canon John McNamara** and **Fr James Tolhurst** from whom I have learnt a lot of good things as they shared with me their experience of what it means to be a priest, with all the challenges and the joys of priesthood. I would like to thank both Deacons **Barry** and **Austin** for the support which they have shown to me. Another thing I never anticipated, was to have a seminarian with me. I am referring to **Daniel**. It was a wonderful experience to have him with us - *we were like a small community of monks*. Moreover, to have a seminarian with me on pastoral placement, was very encouraging indeed.

My basic aim this year has been that which we find in the scripture reading: **“Test everything: hold on to what is good” (1 Thessalonians 5:21)**. Although I will definitely miss your presence as a community, I can assure you that I am going back very happy, because I have noticed and learnt a lot of good things from you. I describe this community of Holy Innocents' as similar to the first community of disciples after Pentecost, because although they were small in number, they were strong in their faith. Another good thing that I have learnt, is that although there are many groups and activities, you are trying to re-invigorate them with spirituality. The centrality of prayer seems important to you, and this I can see by your presence during the **weekly adoration** and the **vigils of the Blessed Sacrament**. Your presence during these liturgical celebrations has given me more determination to put the Eucharist at the centre of my life. Another vital aspect that you have in your parish is **the convent of Saint Anne** and **the Sisters of Mercy**, by whose presence during the Mass and the support of their prayers, nourish the parish.

As part and parcel of my pastoral work, I have tried to be with some of the groups which we have in our parish. My experience with these groups has been very fruitful, and will stay with me in the future. While I was with these groups I tried to observe the aim of every group and how they work.

Some of the groups were new to me. For example, **Reach, Mothers' Prayers, the Consolation group, Churches Together in Orpington** and many other groups. One thing that I will take with me, is how seriously every group takes prayer, and also the use of the scripture as a meditation at the beginning of every meeting.

Another experience, was visiting the sick and the housebound with **Fr Victor** and **Sister Joan**. In these visits you can observe the suffering of the human being, but when we unite our sufferings with the cross they have a different meaning.

**Cabrini House**, which is next door, was another unexpected experience. Cabrini is a social welfare charity that works with particularly vulnerable children and their families, and with adults with learning disabilities. Their mission is to encourage, inspire and support the individuals with whom they work to find their way in the world. By this experience I have appreciated the dignity of every human person and that he is in God's image and a child of Himself.

Finally I would like to talk about the expression of our faith. While I was here I reflected a lot on this topic, as it seems that today's world needs authentic Christians and good role models to imitate. As you know, last week in our parish we had an "**Arts as Acts of Praise and Worship**" workshop. To be honest with you, it was an experiment for me, but I found a lot of support from the **Reach group** and other parishioners. One thing that I really enjoyed were the prayers which some parishioners had prepared for the spiritual time. I can assure you that these prayers were written from their hearts. And also, from that workshop, we had a nice exhibition. But what I found most interesting was the expression of our faith. We tried to pray, and then afterwards draw and write what God was telling us to do.

Today it is important to be a good Christian, because others will look at us to see how we act and if they see that we are genuine and trying to live according to God's word, they will join with us. This expression of our faith I noticed especially in **Journey in Faith (RCIA)**. This group is for those wishing to learn more about the Catholic Church. Together with parishioners, enquirers will have an opportunity to explore and discuss the Christian Faith and Catholic Tradition in a relaxed and informal atmosphere. In this particular group I witnessed the expression of faith from those who are searching for God and saw how this faith sustains them.

In addition, another occasion when we spoke about the expression of faith was at the **Invocation**, held in Birmingham, which was organized for those who are enquiring into their vocations. Around four hundred youngsters were at this weekend seminar seeking to strengthen their vocation and to be a witness for others.

Finally, I would like to encourage those youngsters who are searching for something in their lives. If you feel that you are being called, do not be afraid to accept and respond. Christ will not take anything from you, but will give you more and more blessings.

I would like to thank everyone for your warm welcome, the support and kindness I have received from you. At the end of this experience I need one thing from you - to keep me in your prayers, that I may grow in His Love and be a good instrument.

**Charlon Muscat**