

What have the following men got in common: a war hero, a Premier League footballer, a standup comedian, a headmaster, a chart-topping pop star, a concert pianist, a member of parliament and a mathematics teacher? The last one probably makes the link a bit easier on this Good Shepherd Sunday, remembering the path of yours truly. I'll say them again: a war hero, a Premier League footballer, a standup comedian, a headmaster, a concert pianist, a member of parliament and a maths teacher – what links them? Answer: they are all men who became priests. All six had mapped out a promising career for themselves, but all six were called by God to leave their plans behind, and became God's shepherds, as priests in the Church.

To be inclusive I'd also like to mention a woman. The American Hollywood star Dolores Hart, starred alongside Elvis Presley (including an on-screen kiss with The King of Rock and Roll) and featured in one of Franco Zeffirelli's movies – she heard God's call to be a nun, and left behind fame, fortune and celebrity to enter the convent. She is 85 years old now and even became the Abbess of her Benedictine monastery in Connecticut. Even more so than the six mentioned men, Mother Dolores looks like a shepherd, because Abbesses, like abbots or bishops carry a crozier with a hook on the end, like the crook a real shepherd uses to rescue wayward lambs and sheep.

The war hero already mentioned, is called Fr Clive Dytor. Long before he was a priest, Fr Clive was Lieutenant Dytor who fought on the Falkland Islands, a British territory that had been invaded by Argentina. On the night of 11th of June 1982, 45 Commando Royal Marines launched a silent night attack against strongly held enemy positions during the battle of Two Sisters. Initially they progressed onto the rocky high ground undetected. However, a fierce fight soon ensued. At the height of the fighting, the war hero and his troop were pinned down by enemy fire. The lives of his troops were in mortal danger, so he encouraged them forward and personally led the assault on a strong enemy machine gun position. He received a Military Cross medal for his actions. I think this man was a good shepherd, because he was willing to lay down his life for his sheep. And the sheep following him listened to his voice. He was doing this not for his military salary, but risked his life for others. He eventually became a Catholic priest and now tries to live out the life of a Good Shepherd for his flock, laying down his life for them in smaller ways than when at war. *Jesus said: I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd is one who lays down his life for his sheep.*

Some of the other priests with an interesting past were my contemporaries when training for the priesthood. The professional comedian, the concert pianist, the former headmaster were all there. In fact, one of the former headmaster's pupils also came to the seminary (a kind a boarding school for priests), and the ex-pupil was in the year above his former English teacher: the tables were turned for the future shepherds. Like the good shepherd, every headmaster knows each member of the School's flock. We're lucky with our Head who is always with us to lead the School to verdant pastures every Sunday, at Mass. *Jesus said: I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me.*

As for the comedian turned cleric, maybe his flock enjoy plenty of Paschal laughter every Sunday. He's called Fr Frankie and is the son of comedian Jimmy Cricket. He wrote a book entitled: *Does God LOL* (Does God Laugh Out Loud?) A question for another time: and the book includes contributions from a bevy of famous British comedians of faith. Comedy aside, there is a profound quality when the funny guy cuts the clowning and feeds his flock who need spiritual support throughout their lives.

Whatever your skills and abilities, they could be turned to the Lord's Service, as a priest or a monk or nun. Is the Lord calling you to this? Have you asked Him what His plan is for you? Or instead, what might the Lord be calling you to? What work, what way of life will be your future? How will God feature in it? What might be your vocation, your calling in life? We can be sure that God has a special plan for everyone, some might be priests or nuns, but not many; many of you will be mums and dads, husbands and wives; and everyone here has a vocation to serve the church and the world in some way, your path will become clearer when you ask the Lord in prayer.

Let me tell you about Fr Philip Mulryne, who as a young man was part of the extremely successful Manchester United team in the late 1990s. He was spotted aged 14 by a Manchester United scout while playing for his parish soccer team, the parish of St Oliver Plunkett in the North of Ireland (whose relics are here at Downside). His boss, the legendary Sir Alex Ferguson; his team won everything, much to the chagrin of everyone else. Philip didn't play for the first team very much owing to other famous names (such as David Beckham). So this midfielder eventually went and had a successful career with Norwich City, whom he helped to promotion to the Premier League. He could afford flashy cars and famous girlfriends. But he gave that up to become a Dominican Friar and a priest. Professional footballers are extremely

well paid; but instead of keeping and spending that, as a Friar he would have made a living will and given it away to benefit others. At his ordination as a priest, the Archbishop said: *Whatever gain you had, you have counted as loss. In a real sense, your experience as an athlete has helped to prepare you for this moment: you have known the meaning of working hard to attain a goal, and now the goal is Christ.*

Dear Brothers and Sisters, even our own patron St Gregory the Great took time to model his life on the Good Shepherd. He was Prefect of Rome at the young age of 30. He gave secular power up, to become a monk, and later, servant of the servants of God, as Pope. The last words go to Pope Francis, who has written a special message to the entire Church for today's world day of prayer for vocations. He writes: *Let Jesus draw you to himself; bring him your important questions by reading the Gospels; let him challenge you by his presence, which always provokes in us a healthy crisis. More than anyone else, Jesus respects our freedom. He does not impose, but proposes. Make room for him and you will find the way to happiness by following him. And, should he ask it of you, by giving yourself completely to him.*