

Ladies and gentlemen, if I could have your attention please. It has been suggested to me that I say a few words to mark this special occasion. After all, we are here to celebrate Fr. Tony's lengthy and dutiful service to the parish and it seems appropriate to propose a toast in his honour.

Eight or so years ago when Fr. Tony first arrived here in Dorking, it probably wouldn't have occurred to any of us that he would be staying as long as he ended up doing – least of all, Fr. Tony himself! A one-year sabbatical turned miraculously into a multi-year tenure as parish priest. Extraordinary circumstances meant that we had the good fortune of Fr. Tony's continuing presence here at St. Joseph's after his sabbatical technically came to an end. Of course, none of us can forget Fr. Dominic and all that he did for the parish. But, if we can be certain of one thing, it's that he could've wished for no better a friend than Fr. Tony during the months towards the end of his life. As one parishioner remarked, Fr. Tony has always been prepared to go the extra mile – even at a moment's notice. When Fr. Dominic was ill, he (quote) 'led the way, quietly picked up the reins and showed us how to carry on.' His unerring supportiveness and infinite capacity for caring and compassion lessened the burden that Fr. Dominic had to bear – it was a burden he needn't bear on his own. Not just that but it meant that the transition from one parish priest to another was seamless! You were there for Fr. Dominic and you've been there for the parish and each and every one of us ever since.

St. Joseph's has changed tremendously during Fr. Tony's tenure. We witnessed the renovation of the back of the church, Fr. has led countless reflection sessions, the composition of the congregation has altered, as people from outlying villages such as Gomshall and Chilworth were welcomed into the St. Joseph's family. And Fr. Tony has always been there to greet people with a smiling face and an open mind. He's made everyone feel truly welcome here. No wonder at this, given his interest in ecumenism – something which, I believe, shines through clearly during his homilies and his celebration of Mass. He has made a wonderful effort to engage with the younger people of the parish. Fr. once said to me that in his job you never stop, there's always something to do. Whether he's tending his flock here at church or working with the parish school, he's virtually always doing something for others. Whilst preparing this short speech, I was sent the links to various YouTube videos that Fr. had produced during lockdown for the First Holy communicants, on topics such as transubstantiation, the Eucharist, what a tabernacle is! Not only were they brilliantly watchable and yet further evidence of the way in which Fr. Tony is always willing to 'go that extra mile', but the idea of using Transformers – yes, the movie franchise – to explain what happens during the consecration, now that's inspired!!

Over the past sixteen or so months Fr. Tony really has come into a league of his own. His technological know-how meant that, when Masses resumed, we had singing and music – courtesy of his trusty iPod! His understanding of Zoom, his ability to livestream Mass and

host online prayer sessions has meant that, in these darkest and dreariest of times, we haven't become disconnected from our faith! Just when we needed our parish priest most, the parish priest did not disappoint! Even as a youngster, I find it staggering that Fr. has such a good grasp of technology, gadgets, and gizmos, so hats off to him!

And, if you'll permit me to get rather sombre for a minute, one of the things that we are surely all eternally grateful to Fr. for, is how he has steered us through the last year and a half during the pandemic. Many of those gathered here tonight will remember Ted and Mary Williams. They are but two of the many people we've lost over the past year. Personally, one of the things I'll miss most about Fr. Tony is the beautiful way in which he conducted memorial services. When words failed the rest of us, he always managed to say something comforting and reassuring. His leadership of the parish throughout the past sixteen months has been characterized by immense sensitivity and thoughtfulness. For this we should thank him with all our might.

But, to end on a slightly lighter note, what I'll remember about Fr. Tony most, is the way in which he made Mass fun. One of my first memories of him was the way in which he supervised our Tuesday evening confirmation classes. He got off to a great start by ordering in pizza for us confirmation candidates. You know what they say – if the pull of spiritual enrichment isn't quite enough, then bribery usually does the trick. As a young person in this parish, I've always felt welcome and appreciated. Fr. Tony's Easter Sunday addresses to the young people of the parish, inviting them up onto the altar, were a highlight for many of us, I think. It was a huge privilege to serve on the altar for a good few years and Fr. Tony's sense of humour and light-heartedness, telling us jokes in the sacristy before Mass, always kept us altar servers thoroughly engaged and entertained! When he first became our parish priest, few of us would have expected that we were getting someone who incorporated Lego Movie references into his homilies, who impersonated Inigo Montoya, and who occasionally brought out his guitar and serenaded us on special occasions. We didn't get a normal parish priest, we got a superstar rock 'n roll one!

And so Fr. Tony's time here at St. Joseph's comes to an end. We will miss him enormously. Southwick doesn't know how lucky it is to have him! But we expect Fr. Tony to return to us, to see all of us again – soon! We shall all remember him for different reasons: his fascinating and illuminating sermons, his kindness and compassion, his hill walking and commitment to sustainable living, his exceptional pastoral care – something which has emerged plainly from his guidance of the parish during COVID. And, if we can be confident of one thing, it's this: that wherever he goes he will continue brightening people's lives and opening their hearts. Thank you for everything and best of luck in the future. Now, if you could raise your glasses...