

Last Tuesday afternoon I was busy doing nothing when my phone pinged denoting an incoming message. Since I don't have many debtors and even fewer friends, I was anxious to learn the identity of my correspondent.

It was from my brother-in-law and the message read:

I have a big favour to ask but will understand if you do not want to do this. At the end of the Mass of the celebration on Saturday people have encouraged me to ask someone to tell them about me and all my oddities (a tribute?) so they have a clearer picture of me.

'Me and ALL my oddities'

It was Tuesday afternoon. I had only 3 and half days to recount ALL his oddities.

Panic! Did I have enough paper? Did I have ink cartridge spares? Where might I buy twin end candles?

In today's world it seems not uncommon to change the pronoun by which you wish to be addressed. My brother-in-law is Richard O'Brien or that was what I was told. We have just celebrated the anniversary mass of Fr Tom O'Brien. Now in honesty, this Fr Tom looks and sounds like a very nice chap. He also looks very much like my brother-in-law Richard. I find this a little odd.

My brothers in law Richard and Tom IS a priest.

In recent years Richard has sought occasional respite from the hurly burly of Hitchen parish life by seeking the clear blue skies, verdant Dales, rolling hills and particulate free air of God's Own County.

He drives from Hitchen to Leeds at a steady 55 miles an hour. Canny use of the electric motor ensures that his trip has used approximately a pint and a half of petrol.

He delights in the frugal consumption of his once white Hyundai. I say once white because the car now has such an abundance of moss and so many small woodland plants lining its windows and dented doors, that small birds gather in search of grubs.

Richard is an environmentalist.

On arrival, Richard parks his car in the drive where it will remain - save for one morning of battery charging - for the entirety of his stay. He emerges from the car in his preferred travel wear, ancient shirt, a pair of double Sunak trousers and those indestructible sandals.

He unloads three carrier bags into which are stuffed holiday clothing, missals, breviary laptops, and other sundries. His trusty bicycle is unwound from the rear hatch, re assembled and led to the security of the shed.

Let the holiday begin.....But where shall I begin?

Other than the traditional garments of the sanctuary, I have never seen Richard in normal clerical cloth. Here I am not talking about the soutane and biretta just a plain, dark suit and dog collar. Despite the best efforts of Laurence and myself Richard's dress sense remains firmly based on a Tolkien, woodland, character. He doesn't wear trousers. He wears BREECHES. His feet have never enjoyed the luxury of a woollen sock or a leather shoe. His choice of shirt is random and his jumper seldom coordinated. Should the weather be inclement Richard is the owner of the last non rainproof Pakamac in the United Kingdom.

There is nothing odd about veganism or vegetarianism but there is something ODD about Richard's approach. On his return from daily Mass, Richard enjoys a VERY large bowl of cereal. He chooses either muesli or those small, shredded wheats designed to choke the elderly. So far so normal. But here's the kicker. Richard switches on his Kindle and consumes this dust bowl without the addition of milk and without the luxury of cutlery. Now that is ODD.

The gap to dinner is filled with tea and half a fruit bowl. It is after dinner that Richard begins his African Mission Work. Between the hours of 7 and 9 his consumption of peanuts and cashews gives a percentage boost to the economies of several of the smaller west African countries.

Years of disregard for the pain and discomfort caused by the many cycling accidents combined with his stubborn refusal to avail of medical attention are catching up with Richard. His gait is becoming robotic. He needs a stick. He takes an eternity to descend the stairs. As hips and knees begin to crumble, he is no longer able to join us on longer walks. But here is something very ODD. Every day his guardian angel lifts him onto his bicycle

and Richard sets off along country roads towards Otley, Ilkley, Harrogate or Wetherby. Believe me, these routes are not without their challenges. (We do proper hills in Yorkshire!) And yet several hours later that same body returns having cycled between 20 and 30 miles. Miraculous? Certainly, very odd!

Richard is a great football fan. Much of his aggression, brutality and foul language is derived from his early association with Millwall. ONLY JOKING. What many of you do not know is that Richard's real sporting love is 'The Maggies'

Horsforth St Margaret's play in the West Yorkshire Premier League. The side was managed for 20 years by my son, Tom, and was the trailblazer for the type of football later embraced by Pep Guardiola. Richard loves his trips to watch the Maggies. He does so in the company of myself and Eddie. The language is often ripe, exchanges with rivals robust and challenges to officials humorous. Clad in his latest cast offs Richard embraces the occasion and relishes the post-mortem pint.

I shall continue but I must pause a while to consider what Richard / Father Tom has brought to my life.

First and foremost, I look forward to his visits (as I mentioned. I don't have many friends).

Richard is my personal pastor and sounding board. I can unload all my frustrations with religion, Catholicism, clerical hierarchies and Richard will listen. He is a truly great listener. He can synthesise and contextualise my arguments which he answers with clarity and wisdom. He is a natural bringer of comfort.

On holiday in Leeds, Richard has no need for caution. He is nobody's parish priest but this is no cause for change. My tribute to Richard is that I have never met anybody with such humility, such optimism and such faith.

Enough of that as I near the end.

Having a brother-in-law priest does have its rewards. Baptisms, Weddings and Funerals are handed over to him. He has performed all three on several occasions and has never once struck anything but the perfect note. And he does it for free! Or does he?

Quite recently the Vatican has published new rules for assessing, miracles, apparitions and mystical visions. For many years, Laurence, Eddie and I have pondered the idea of proposing that Richard's wallet might be recognised as divine mystery. When together we enjoy a couple of pints of Timothy Taylor's Landlord in our favourite Otley pubs and it comes to his round one of us will shout

'Richard. Get your wallet out'

To which he replies, 'Sorry, I seem to have left it with Fr Tom!'