

James Abbott

Well, I suppose the logical thing to do is to start at the beginning. Now, you were born on the Isle of Wight, and I imagine island living is a little bit different. Tell us a bit about your upbringing. What was it like?

Bishop Declan

Well, you just take it for granted. You think everywhere's like the Isle of Wight, but you then discover when you go on to the mainland, that things are a little different. But it was a nice place to grow up. My brother and sister were born in Birmingham. My parents moved down to the Isle of Wight in 1946. My father was a local GP and I went to school on the island - primary school, and then at secondary level as well. I was due to go to the Jesuits, but I failed the exam, partly on purpose because I didn't want to go! So I stayed on at the school where I was and did okay there.

James Abbott

Tell us a little bit about where that 'call' came from. It's a question everybody asks, but was there ever a moment when you realised you might be called to be a priest?

Bishop Declan

I remember being asked by Derek Worlock, who was the Bishop of Portsmouth, the diocese that I was going for, "why do you want to be a priest?" I said, "I don't know. It's just a feeling I've got within me that it's the best way I can serve God and serve other people." That was it. It was just an instinct, almost.

James Abbott

So it was quite natural? No big 'Road to Damascus' experience?

Bishop Declan

No 'Road to Damascus'. I didn't fall from any horses!

James Abbott

And so what came next? You were accepted, and where did you study?

Bishop Declan

I studied at Allen Hall when he was out in Hertfordshire.

James Abbott

What was that like for a boy from the Isle of Wight?

Bishop Declan

It was different, but seminaries are different in themselves as well. But when I was in the seminary, I also went to university, to Royal Holloway College, and did a history degree. So that was part of my formation because the students were fascinated by what I was doing in the seminary. And they asked me, "Why do you want to be a priest?" So I had to just ponder it and think about it.

James Abbott

Did any of them gain an interest in the Catholic faith as a result of having a trainee priest in their midst?

Bishop Declan

Yes. One or two who I knew, have since, I've heard, become Catholics.

James Abbott

Wonderful - a great witness. And so you were then ordained for the Diocese of Portsmouth. Where was your first posting?

Bishop Declan

My first posting was Portsmouth Cathedral as the second curate and the chaplain to the comprehensive school of St Edmund's. I did that for four years. Then I became Bishop's Secretary to Bishop Emery for four years. Then I went to Bournemouth as parish priest. Also, I was an advisor for adult RE. There were two priests in the parish, and the other priest who did most of the parish work, and I was doing the adult education.

James Abbott

I'm just interested, not so much a faith-based question, but have you always had a love of the coast and the seaside. Has that been in your blood?

Bishop Declan

Yes. I remember saying to someone in Abingdon where I was a parish priest, "I miss the sea". They said, "Oh, we've got the River Thames." I said, "The Thames is not the sea."

James Abbott

You wouldn't swim in it, would you?!... And then, further down the line, obviously in 2001, you were called here to the Diocese of Clifton.

Bishop Declan

Indeed. It was a diocese I didn't really know anything about.

James Abbott

You and I have talked a little bit about the call from the Nuncio, the Holy Father's representative in the UK. I had these grand ideas of pomp and ceremony and everything. But tell us how you accepted the offer to be Bishop of Clifton...

Bishop Declan

Well, it was very strange. Somebody had phoned me one evening when I'd been out in the parish. I came back later and Janet, who was my secretary, said, "You've got a number of people who've phoned in today. One was a priest from London." So I went through the list and then had an RCIA meeting in the evening. So I missed the London call. I was out the following day, and Janet said to me, "The man from London was on again. He said, he wants to talk to you straight away." So I rang up, and he said, "The Papal Nuncio wants to see you." I went, "Oh!"

James Abbott

What's your thinking at that point?

Bishop Declan

What have I done wrong?!... Then the Nuncio saw me the following day and he came in with a bit of paper and said, "Congratulations, you've been appointed Bishop of Clifton. Sign here." I said, "What do I say?" He said, "Dear Holy Father, thank you for appointing me as bishop. I accept it."

James Abbott

So that was the formula of words, not "do you fancy the job" or anything?

Bishop Declan

No!

James Abbott

So we know that twenty-three years have passed. Now I've known you for a long time, and I've always felt that the Diocese of Clifton, under your leadership, has been very dynamic, very creative, very confident in faith, which is absolutely to your credit. I remember in the early days, around 2007, you had these wonderful pastoral plans. And you can correct me, 'Called to be a People of Hope' and 'Seeking the Face of Christ'.

Bishop Declan

'Seeking the Face of Christ' was the beginning of the process. We asked our parishes to reflect on what it was to be the Church for today and how they were facing up to the challenges. We had thousands of replies, which was not for my credit, but to credit of the people themselves, their desire to actually be active members of the Church and have a deeper understanding of what it is to be a Catholic.

James Abbott

That was quite prophetic, really, because if you look at the synodal pathway that we talk about today that Pope Francis has instigated at parish, diocesan, national and international level with the two big synods in Rome, it's a similar model, isn't it? A listening model, a participatory model?

Bishop Declan

Yes very much to stress the need to listen. 'Seeking the Face of Christ' was a matter of listening to what the people said, because I was determined that a pastoral plan should not be imposed from above, but should come up from the bottom so people could own it. It wasn't Bishop Declan's plan, it was our plan, in which we all participated.

James Abbott

What's it like to be a bishop? I know there are challenges, I know there are ups and I know there are downs, but how do you look at it now, twenty-three years on?

Bishop Declan

When I go to primary schools and the children ask me questions, one question is always, "Do you enjoy being a bishop?" I say, "Yes, I do. Because why be miserable?" I missed parish work and still do. But I enjoy being bishop. There are challenges, but on the whole, people are good and people respond to requests.

Bishop Declan

I remember the first time as a Catholic, I went into a Catholic church in your diocese - I converted in my 30s - it was in Cheltenham, where my parents were from. They're not Catholics, but I found myself in Saint Gregory's, where the new bishop (Bishop Bosco Macdonald) spent some time as a parish priest. And I remember those immortal words, "...and Declan our Bishop". So you were the first bishop's name I heard used, leading the diocese - your name was indelible even before I met you.

Bishop Declan

I was thinking of St. Gregory's. I had Confirmations there on Saturday - my last Confirmations for the diocese. There were 40 candidates, and it was a full church. I had a good experience. The night before I've been at Downside for Confirmations. So my Confirmation programme has come to an end. It will go over to Bishop Bosco now.

James Abbott

That's a very fitting way to end, isn't it, really? Seeing that new, blossoming faith in young people. How important are the young people to your ministry?

Bishop Declan

They are very important because they are the Church. People say they're the Church for tomorrow. That's true, they are the Church for tomorrow. But actually, they're the Church for today. I think many young people are spiritual. They may not necessarily recognise that they are, but they have got good values and great ambition for themselves and for other people. They have a concern, especially for the environment at the moment, and the concept of justice and peace throughout the world.

James Abbott

We've talked a little bit about your work in the diocese, your ministry in the diocese. I wanted to touch upon the work you've done for us at a national level for the Bishops' Conference, because obviously you've been the chair of the International Affairs department, and within that, the chair of what we call the Holy Land Co-ordination, an

annual pilgrimage of bishops from around the world to the Holy Land. It's a place that I know is very dear to your heart. I've been there twice with you. But now we look upon it with heavy hearts, and it's very sad. But before we come on to the specifics, tell us a bit about how that national ministry has played into your life as a bishop.

Bishop Declan

Well, going to different parts of the world, seeing the Church in action, has been a very enriching experience. There's a temptation to think that the Church is the same throughout the world, but you recognise that the Church has got great diversity.

James Abbott

And of course, we talked about the Holy Land. That must be an area that's of particular interest.

Bishop Declan

Yes, it's very sad at the moment because you know people in the Holy Land who have been directly affected. We often said, as you know James, on the Co-ordination group, there's very little hope around. You've got two people living so closely to one another, and yet so distant from one another. The whole trust has broken down, and it's going to take a lot of healing.

James Abbott

You and I have spent some time in Gaza, too. I think back to 2017 when we were there, that was the only time I was there with you in that particular strip of land. It was amazing to see the 130 or so Catholics and maybe 1,300 Christians out of 2.2 million people. But we always see how they don't just work for themselves, and minister just to that tiny group, they really help the wider community, don't they? Including kids with disabilities, orphans. It's very sad to see what's happening there now, isn't it?

Bishop Declan

It's sad. As you say, the Sisters, the Religious Sisters, they run homes for the elderly and for the disabled. They teach in a school. And those houses, those schools have been hit.

James Abbott

You mentioned hope there. I mean, you brought that into the diocese. It's an eternal theme, isn't it? 'Called to be a People of Hope'.

Bishop Declan

If we've got no hope, we're not going anywhere.

James Abbott

I must say, though, I've seen you with people during your ministry here as bishop, and you have a very easy manner. You're very easy to get on with, very relational. Is that sociable side important to you?

Bishop Declan

People are fascinating. Everyone has a story to tell which is worth hearing and learning from as well, because we always assume that people think in the same way, but we don't. People have insights that other people don't have. If those insights are shared, then everyone is enriched, something new emerges, which is lasting.

James Abbott

Talk to me a bit about your faith. You told us about when you first walked the path and decided to train for the priesthood. But how has your faith been enriched, or challenged, during the last quarter of a century as a bishop?

Bishop Declan

It's been challenged. I don't know if it has anything to do with age, but you actually think, does God exist? And is there anything after death? These are important questions to ask. And there are opportunities for you to grow in faith. That faith isn't something that we learn from a book. Faith is about a relationship with God. And that relationship... God can lead it anywhere. One of my favourite prayers is Charles de Foucauld's "Father, I abandon myself into your hands. Do with me as you wish. For whatever you do, I thank you. I'm ready for all, I accept all, that only your will be done in my life."

James Abbott

That's an incredible prayer of surrender, and certainly one to bear in mind. I think when I struggle, that's something I try and bear in mind, especially when it doesn't make sense and things are confusing or make you a little despondent, just to offer that to God.

Bishop Declan

I think we have to learn to live with chaos, to live with uncertainty.

James Abbott

Let's talk a little bit about where we are now. You obviously offered your resignation, and we know there have been health challenges for many years. How have those challenges impacted upon you? And not just physically, but in terms of how you carry out your ministry as bishop.

Bishop Declan

I sometimes ask myself the question, "Have I done the right thing retiring slightly earlier?" And the answer I get is "Yes, you have." And people tell me I have done the right thing. Because the Parkinson's is a disability. And I shake. I'm very aware that I'm shaking. I'm very conscious of that. As part of the medication, I was told, It can depress you, but I've never been depressed. I've found that I get out of bed more slowly, and I take longer to dress in the morning. I need a good hour to get ready for the day. It's helped me to have more compassion, perhaps, for those who are sick, those who are terminally ill. You could ask the question, "Why me?" But why not me? So it hasn't depressed me at all.

James Abbott

No, you've always been very positive. You only have to look at Pope Saint John Paul II in terms of also bearing suffering - that actually says something to a lot of people, doesn't it? Have you felt, or hoped, that your suffering might help other people who are also suffering?

Bishop Declan

Well, I've discovered that Parkinson's is quite widespread. People have come up to me and said, "I've got Parkinson's as well." So I'm more aware of the vulnerable members of society.

James Abbott

It's really easy to make an over-pious point and ask: Has it strengthened your faith or made you more resilient and mentally strong? Are these just words, or do you feel that it has strengthened your faith in some way?

Bishop Declan



It's strengthened my trust in God - that God knows what He's doing. I'm not saying that God sent me Parkinson's, but I am saying that you can live through Parkinson's. The Christian message is about life. It's about death, but it's about life coming from death. We are people of hope, and we can find God. We might think Parkinson's is totally destroying lives, but actually God can be found in illness, sickness and vulnerability, and it has made me more vulnerable in some ways.

James Abbott

Tell me a little bit about how you look back now on the past twenty-three years as a bishop. Is there an element of satisfaction? Do you feel that you've been able to do the job you've wanted to do overall?

Bishop Declan

Yes. Twenty-three years have gone very quickly. The first year seemed to go on and on. After that, from Year Two until Year Twenty-Three, it had gone very quickly. I give credit to the people of the diocese, because they have been people seeking the face of Christ, and they are a people who are called to be a people of hope. There is that sense of hope, I think, in the parishes, in the wider communities. I've just seen that the numbers at the Easter Vigil and on Easter Sunday were very high - on Ash Wednesday as well. People in our society are searching for meaning, I think. The sad thing is they don't necessarily find that meaning in the Catholic Church or expect to find that meaning in the Church. One of the challenges we've got is to proclaim the Gospel in a language that people understand because it is about the truth of life, because it's about Jesus - who is the way, the truth, and the life.

James Abbott

Very well said. And I must say, looking at the Diocese of Clifton, it means a lot to me, through your leadership, and I'm very grateful for the Church in the west of England as it has provided for me, and I'm sure a lot of other people too. So what comes next in terms of looking to a happy retirement?

Bishop Declan

I said to people over the weekend, when I celebrated Mass at the Cathedral, I'm going to do nothing for three weeks! Enjoying those weeks, working out what I'm going to do for the rest of the time. I'll catch up on reading. I might do a bit of traveling. But I also want to be associated with a parish - to the Eucharistic table. Because I think without one, you just become isolated, and the Church is about community and communion. Our mission is to form communion, not only with one another in the Church, but with the whole of creation. So a positive move forward.

James Abbott

And much as that's the circle of life in some ways, it's the circle of ministry, isn't it? Because you start as a priest doing the core job that you felt called to do in the first place. And perhaps to end it in that way is right and proper.

Bishop Declan

My predecessor went to a parish when he retired, down in Weston-Super-Mare, and he was there for about five years. Then he gradually became too ill and went into Saint Angela's nursing home.

James Abbott

But you think it's important to be back with the people to a certain extent?

Bishop Declan

I think so, yes. Not all bishops may say this, but I think there's always a danger that the longer you're a bishop, you could be out of touch with people in their daily lives.

James Abbott

This is the classic "...and finally" question. If you were to have a single message to the faithful of the diocese of Clifton after twenty-three years, what would that be?

Bishop Declan

Be a people of hope.

James Abbott

Well that's in a nutshell! Nobody can say they can't remember that. Bishop Declan Lang, thank you so much, not just for your ministry as Bishop of Clifton, but also for all you've given me and the Church in these lands. I think we're much the richer for it. So thank you.

Bishop Declan

Thank you, James.