

PROFILE

Brother Ronald

Dressed in his brown Franciscan habit, peaked crash helmet and goggles, with ukulele and puppets strapped across his back, Brother Ronald turned quite a few heads as he travelled around on his Lambretta scooter. He was based at the Liverpool Anglican Diocese industrial mission in Warrington.

Mike Waiting pays tribute to Brother Ronald, an Anglican Franciscan who, together with his puppets, introduced many young people to the Focolare.

When not visiting factories or on outward bound courses with young apprentices, or mentoring ordinands, he could be found on parish or beach missions using his puppets 'Brother Happy and Sister Hoppy' to tell Bible stories.

Always a firm favourite with children he was in great demand for both school and college visits.

Wilfred Ronald Austin came from Northampton, a centre of the shoe industry. He had been employed in the fashion and advertising industry there, which left its mark on him. For the rest of his life he had strong views on how young people were the target of these industries. He also enjoyed working in the entertainment business doing impersonations dressed in a variety of wigs and disguises and was inspired to learn the ukulele by George Formby.

In the late 1930s it looked as if there would be a war with Germany. Ronald declared: 'I have no argument with the German people. I will not go to war with them'. Instead, he joined the Franciscans.

Over the years he was based at the mother house at Cerne Abbas in Dorset. Then Cambridge, Stepney in east London before working in industrial missions, first in the Coventry diocese then moving to the Liverpool diocese.

My first encounter

I first met Brother Ronald when the Franciscans held a mission in my parish. I was very impressed by the joyful lively witness he gave. It was at this mission, at the age of eighteen that I felt God was calling me. A few weeks

later he invited me to come along to a youth service in a nearby parish where he would be speaking. The hymns would be accompanied by guitars and drums which pleased me as I played the drums in a local beat group. I arrived to find Brother Ronald and a church full of young people, but no band. Their van had broken down. Not only that, but when they did arrive it was without a drummer. 'No problem', said Brother Ronald 'we have a drummer sitting here at the back of church!' I was introduced to the group and I passed the audition when I told them I could play with brushes. They didn't like to play too loud in churches. As we set-up the drums and guitars we talked through the music. The bass player would help me in any difficult parts. Without any rehearsals I played with a technique that I still use today. If I don't know the piece I join in on the third bar or the second verse!

I joined the band and travelled all over the country playing in many different parishes of various denominations as well as several cathedrals. I got to know Brother Ronald better on these travels and he inspired and encouraged me even more.

In the front row with Focolare

The Franciscans had been invited to a meeting held by a religious movement which had just arrived in Liverpool from Italy. Very little was known about the Focolare and so he was asked to go along and investigate. His plan was to go along late so he could sit on the back row, stay a short while then leave. As soon as he arrived he was spotted by two charming young ladies with Italian accents who escorted him to a seat on the front row. From then on, whenever he went to a Focolare meeting he was always a front rower.

Later he was invited to go to Italy to a meeting at Easter which was being held specifically for Anglicans, at the Focolare centres in Rome and Loppiano near Florence. Listening to Chiara Lubich talk about the Gospel, with such vitality, made him realize he had met a kindred spirit. From his front row seat he took photos of Chiara to show and tell everyone about her on his return home. At Loppiano he found smiling young men and women from all over the world playing guitars and drums to express their joy in trying to live the Gospel.



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Brother Ronald (right) meets Pope Paul VI during a general audience. This was part of the first Ecumenical trip from GB to Rome in 1966.

Filled with joy on his return home at every opportunity he would speak about Chiara and Loppiano. I am one of the many people who he encouraged and influenced into going to the first Mariapolis held in the UK at Twickenham. Fifty years later I can still remember clearly him telling me that I should visit Loppiano.

After leaving the industrial chaplaincy he was invited to work in two large girls' schools before moving to a retreat centre in Scotland.

'Thank you Lord'

The last years of his life were spent at a college on the Ayrshire coast where life became a great deal more challenging for him. He was almost completely deaf and blind. People had to shout three or four times into his good ear before he understood. He never lost patience though, he smiled put his hand behind his ear and said, 'Can you repeat that?' As a family we visited the college. Even with all his difficulties he showed us around with great love. I was impressed how he had ordered everything in his room

so he knew where everything was. His visitors would often bring a block of good chocolate only to find that he had several other blocks there already, because he would only ever eat one square. In the drawer next to the chocolate was a list of people and situations from all around the world that he spent many hours praying for. His life was one of service motivated by the Holy Spirit. After receiving communion he always said 'Thank you Jesus, Thank you Lord'. Then the atmosphere changed. There was a real sense of holiness surrounding Brother Ronald.

As he grew weaker he moved to a nursing home where each night as the carers helped him into bed he would thank them with a 'God Bless you'. The staff were always touched by this and said he was the most peaceful man in the home. In August 2012 they organised a special 100th birthday celebration for him. The highlight of the day for him though was the celebration of Holy Communion in his room so he could say his 'Thank you' to Jesus before going to his party.

He died six months later, seventy one years after joining the Franciscans. 🍷