



THE ARCHDIOCESE of BIRMINGHAM
GUILD OF SAINT STEPHEN
· *Cui Servire Regnare Est* ·



GUILD NEWS 2026

WELCOME to the first edition of our newsletter for altar servers!

For some time, I have been looking for a way to share the wonderful things that are happening in our parishes across the Archdiocese of Birmingham, and this newsletter seems to be the perfect place to begin.

It is my hope that this annual newsletter will keep you informed about upcoming events and, perhaps more importantly, provide an opportunity for parishes to share news of the many great things taking place in their own communities. Please do share stories, photographs and reports of events from your parish for inclusion in future editions.

In this first issue, I want to take the opportunity to thank you for your invaluable service within your parishes, chaplaincies and school communities. The important role you undertake as an altar server is sometimes taken for granted, but I assure you that it is deeply appreciated. Your service in the sanctuary and your support in the sacristy are an essential part of the Church's liturgy.

On the first Saturday of each October, we have the wonderful opportunity to gather together at St. Chad's Cathedral for the Annual Mass of Thanksgiving for Altar Servers. Last year, it was truly inspiring to see the Cathedral filled with altar servers from across the Archdiocese. If you have never attended this celebration before, why not think about joining us this year? Holy Mass will take place at 12:00 noon on Saturday 3rd October.



Many priests, deacons and religious first discovered their vocation while serving at the altar. Yet every vocation begins by responding to Jesus' invitation to follow Him. Perhaps the Lord is using your own service to help you discover His plan for your life.

Serving at Holy Mass is also a reminder that each of us has a unique calling from God. I encourage you to pray that He will help you discover how He is calling you to live your life. Perhaps He is calling you to marriage, to the single life, religious life, the priesthood or permanent diaconate. Whatever His call may be, be open to it. Be courageous!

Please be assured of my prayers for you.

Fr Craig

Fr. Craig Szmidt
Diocesan Director of Vocation
& Diocesan Director for the Guild of St. Stephen



GUILD MEDALS AWARDED IN THE ARCHDIOCESE OF BIRMINGHAM IN 2026

BRONZE MEDALS



For those
newly-enrolled
into the Guild

SILVER MEDALS



For 10 years
of service
in the Guild

SILVER MEDALS OF MERIT



For 20 years
of service

*Medals of Merit can be awarded for years
of service prior to enrolment into the Guild*

GOLD MEDALS OF MERIT



For 50 years
of service

GOLD MEDALS



For 50 years
of service
in the Guild

Those awarded medals for long service are acknowledged in the Order of Service at the Annual Mass of Thanksgiving.

WHO'S WHO



FR. CRAIG SZMIDT

**Diocesan Director
for the Guild of Saint Stephen**

Fr. Craig is responsible for looking after and promoting the Guild of Saint Stephen for altar servers in our Archdiocese.

He is the also **Diocesan Director of Vocation**, who accompanies men who may be called to the priesthood.



KATHRYN BAYLISS

**Administrator for the
Guild of Saint Stephen**

Kathryn is the main point of contact for the Guild. She helps parishes by handling goods orders and keeping records about their affiliation and medals awarded. She is responsible for organising our Annual Mass of Thanksgiving



DCN. OWEN GRESTDY

**Diocesan Representative on
the Guild Central Council**

Dcn. Owen helps arrange Guild events, such as the Annual Mass of Thanksgiving and Called to Serve. He is also responsible for designing our printed and digital resources, such as this Newsletter.



THE GUILD IN THE ARCHDIOCESE OF BIRMINGHAM



The Guild of Saint Stephen was established by Fr. Hamilton McDonald in Hammersmith, London, in the Archdiocese of Westminster in 1904. Two years later, it was made an Archconfraternity, enabling parishes in other parts of the country (and later around the world) to affiliate to it. Affiliation is a canonical process that officially connects a parish to the original Guild, allowing altar servers to be enrolled with the Guild Medal.

In the Archdiocese of Birmingham, the first parish to affiliate was Saint Chad's Cathedral in 1908. Since then, the vast majority of our parishes – currently 93% of them – have affiliated to the Archconfraternity and most are active in enrolling altar servers into the Guild. Some senior schools, chaplaincies and convents have also joined. The most-recently affiliated parish is St. Joseph's, Whitnash in late 2024.

Whilst all members of the Guild wear their medals on red cords (symbolising the martyrdom of Saint Stephen), Birmingham's altar servers have the distinction of having cords with tassels.

Since 2015, the Diocesan Director of Vocation has also been Director of the Guild for the Archdiocese of Birmingham. Since then, the Diocesan Vocations Office has been the first port-of-call for guidance on how to enrol altar servers, the purchase of goods, the awarding of special medals for long service, and for prayer materials.

LEVEL 3 CERTIFICATE IN ALTAR SERVER STUDIES

The Guild of Saint Stephen has partnered with the Maryvale Higher Institute of Religious Sciences to deliver a first-of-its-kind course in the ministry of altar serving, for over 18s who wish to deepen their understanding of Christian service and the Church's liturgy.

It is a distance learning course, delivered online and through a Saturday in-person study day providing practical workshops. There are six modules studied over six months.

This is a UK Level 3 qualification, the equivalent standard of an A-Level or International Baccalaureat diploma.

The course runs once a year, starting each September. Registration for a 2026 start is now open.



For more information, visit: www.guildofstephen.org/certificate

guild@vocations.org.uk



ANNUAL MASS OF THANKSGIVING 2025



On Saturday 4th October 2025, 324 altar servers of all ages gathered at St. Chad's Cathedral for our Annual Mass of Thanksgiving. It is thought to be the largest attendance at the yearly celebration for the Guild of Saint Stephen. Extra chairs had to hastily be put out in the nave as altar servers processed in – a wonderful problem to have!

Bishop David Evans was principal celebrant, joined by twelve priests and four deacons, as well as family and friends of altar servers. Each year, a different parish of the Archdiocese is invited to serve on the sanctuary, and this year it was St. Margaret Mary, Perry Common.

The Mass is always a joyful chance for altar servers to come together and renew their promises as we give thanks for their faithful service. Afterwards, a great amount of cake and biscuits were consumed in the Grimshaw Room!

CALLED TO SERVE 2026

In spring this year, the Diocesan Vocations Office, working in collaboration with the Kenelm Youth Trust, held our biennial *Called to Serve* weekend retreat for altar servers of our Archdiocese, hosted at Alton Castle.



Over 60 young people, alongside adult leaders from their parishes, came to reflect on service to God not only in the liturgy, but through their lives.

There were lots of moments of fun – with plenty of new friendships made – and times of great faith, such as a beautiful candlelit Blessed Sacrament Procession on Saturday evening. Bishop Timothy Menezes joined us to celebrate Sunday Mass to conclude the weekend.





AN ALTAR SERVER'S JOURNEY



My journey as an altar server began at St. Anne's Church in Keighley (Diocese of Leeds) where I first put on a cassock as a young child. I remember watching the older servers with admiration – their calm movements, their reverence, their quiet confidence. The sanctuary felt huge to me then, and stepping into it for the first time was both exciting and humbling. Even at that age, I sensed that serving was something special, something sacred.

It was at St. Anne's that I first encountered the Guild of Saint Stephen. Although I didn't fully understand its motto, "*Cui servire regnare est*" – To Serve is To Reign – the words stayed with me. The Guild encouraged us to serve "reverently, intelligently and punctually," and those simple principles began shaping not only how I served, but how I approached responsibility and faith.

As I grew older, serving became a natural rhythm in my life. The sanctuary became a place of peace and purpose. I learned the flow of the Mass, the timing of the bells, and the quiet attentiveness required at the altar. These small, repeated actions deepened my faith in ways I didn't recognise at the time. Serving wasn't just something I did; it became part of who I was.

My journey eventually led me to St. Marie's Church in Rugby, where I now serve as Master of Ceremonies. Taking on the role of MC has been both an honour and a joy. It has allowed me not only to deepen my own understanding of the liturgy, but also to guide younger servers as they begin their own journeys. Watching them grow in confidence and reverence reminds me of my own early days at St. Anne's.

One of the most humbling moments of my life was being awarded the Guild of Saint Stephen Gold Medal. Feeling the weight of the medal around my neck, I was overwhelmed with gratitude – for the priests, servers, and communities who had supported me, and for the privilege of serving at the altar for so many years. The medal symbolised not achievement, but faithfulness.

Serving has shaped my faith more deeply than anything else. It has grounded me, given me purpose, and drawn me closer to God through simple, faithful acts. Looking back, I am grateful for every Mass, every parish, and every moment of grace. And for as long as I am able, I will continue to serve – because serving at the altar remains one of the greatest privileges of my life.

Andrew Was
Parish MC - St. Marie's, Rugby (pictured right)
Awarded the Gold Medal in 2025





1960 GUILD OF SAINT STEPHEN ROME PILGRIMAGE – A RECOLLECTION

I think it was May. I was 13. It was £12 or £14, can't quite remember. The 1960 Rome Olympics were that year and the coach that was taking us on a tour of Rome took us past the stadium which was not quite completed.



The M1 motorway had been opened in 1959 between Watford and Rugby. Fr. Eric Morgan – our curate at Christ the King parish in Kingstanding, Birmingham – piled four young, excited servers into his A35 van at the church at 2:30 a.m. and we set off. There were no services, no motorway lights, no central reservation and no hard shoulder. About halfway, just before Luton, he realised he needed petrol and so left the motorway to go in search of a garage that was open. Having found one, he got back onto the motorway, but after a little confusion, found he was heading back north! I was in the front seat, and when he realised, I can remember him stopping at the side of the motorway, running into the middle of the road to check there was nothing coming, and then running back to the van and doing a U-turn straight across the middle onto the other side and heading off south again. Honest! Unlikely to be done now, nay impossible.

We were going by train from Victoria, I think, then by boat and train again. A 26-hour journey with nearly 100 altar servers and priests. Exciting at the beginning, but tiring as we progressed. We arrived and were accommodated in Santa Marta Guest House for the next week.

Each of us served a couple of Masses in St. Peter's Basilica for Fr. Morgan (looked good on a server's CV). We toured Rome on various pilgrimages. I remember going to the Catacomb of Callixtus and seeing a statue of the body of St. Cecilia, the patron saint of musicians.



We went to Castel Gandolfo, the papal summer residence, where we saw Pope John XXIII. I found myself in a corral with a group of Irish nuns and pilgrims, one of whom turned out to have been my father's teacher in Cork, small world that it is.

I queued up and spent most of my pocket money that was left on three papal blessings for my family members – Vatican commercialisation in action even then. The one for my parents is hanging on the wall in my little office as I type this.

A week soon passed and we set off on the 26-hour train journey home. The nuns in the hostel had given us food for the journey. The main staple ingredients were tins of sardines. We had to bludgeon our ways into the tins. Didn't really like them, but I was too hungry to care. First and last time I have eaten sardines!

So that's the background to the photo of 86 or so people on the steps of St. Peter's that I have kept for over 65 years. Hopefully it gives a bit of colour to the distant black and white image. I can remember many of the faces now, all those years later. There is an elderly server, fourth from the right in the second row, who was wearing a scarlet cape. I remember as we returned to the hostel in the Vatican City after the photo, the Swiss Guards snapping to attention and shouting "Cardinale" as he approached. He felt very grand!

Just for posterity, I am in the front row, sixth from the right. I served at the altar from age seven until 67, by which time just at Christmas, Easter and "State Occasions", as my dad called them.

John McCarthy

**Editor's note: prior to the Second Vatican Council, each priest celebrated his own daily Mass, rather than being able to concelebrate together.*

LAST CHANCE TO BUY!

Many Guild items (including Bronze Medal enrolment packs) can be bought directly from the Diocesan Vocations Office in Birmingham. A few items have now been discontinued by the Guild, but - whilst stocks last - are still available to buy.

Tie Slide - £6.00



Old-Style Tie - £14.00



Cufflinks - £6.00



For order forms, visit: **www.vocations.org.uk/guild-forms**

guild@vocations.org.uk

THE GUILD PROMISE

I offer myself to God Almighty, to Blessed Mary, our Mother and to our Holy Patron, Saint Stephen, and I promise to do my best to serve regularly, with reverence and understanding, for the glory of God, the service of His Church and my own eternal salvation.

THE GUILD PRAYER

O God, you accept our ministry and allow us to serve at your altar; grant that while serving you we follow the example of our Patron, Saint Stephen, the first martyr, and that we may, like him, come to see Jesus standing at your right hand in the Kingdom of Heaven. We ask this through Jesus Christ, your Son. Amen.



DIOCESAN PRAYER FOR VOCATIONS

Heavenly Father,
we ask you to send labourers
into your harvest.

Inspire, in the hearts of your people,
vocations to the priesthood, diaconate
and religious life.

Bless our families with a spirit of generosity,
so that those whom you call
have the courage to give themselves
to your Church in faith.

Through Christ our Lord.

Amen.



THE ARCHDIOCESE of BIRMINGHAM
DIOCESAN VOCATIONS OFFICE
Ask · Invite · Pray



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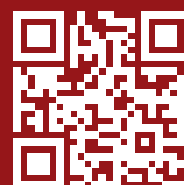


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For more **information**
about the Guild in the
Archdiocese of Birmingham
and for **forms to order medals**
and **other goods**, visit:

www.vocations.org.uk/guild



For medal and goods orders
and for enquiries about the
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