

ARCHBISHOP'S HOUSE WESTMINSTER

Fr Gerard Thomas Burke R.I.P.

Because of his love for, and commitment to, the Priesthood and the Diocese, Fr Gerry will be fondly remembered and sorely missed by the Bishops, Priests, Deacons, Religious and Lay People who knew him. And because of his love for, and commitment to, his family and friends they too will miss him greatly and treasure their memories of him as a brother, uncle and companion.

Gerard Thomas Burke (known as Gerry by almost everybody except his family!) was born on 18 April 1935 in Willesden, the first of four sons born to Thomas and Ethel, parishioners of the parish of Our Lady of Willesden. Thomas Burke had come from a large family with roots in Ireland, and moved from Wallsend in the north east of England to London in search of work. In London he met and married Ethel, who came from Holloway. Gerry knew himself to be 'half-Geordie', and remained proud of his heritage and kept in touch with family members.

Gerry was educated at Sacred Heart Primary School close to the family home in Ruislip. He was an altar server at the parish church, and a member of the scout troop, always keen to learn new skills. He went to Gunnersbury Grammar School. Along with academic study, Gerry developed practical skills. He was high-spirited and enjoyed life at school, with occasional brushes with authority. He enjoyed comedy, notably the weekly 'Good Shown' broadcast by the BBC, and he developed a strong, and at times zany, sense of humour. He remained a lifelong fan and imitator of the Goons.

In his mid-teens Gerry's sense of vocation to the Priesthood led to his acceptance as an ecclesiastical student by Archbishop Myers, with the support of his parents and Parish Priest. In 1951 Gerry was sent to St Edmund's College, Ware as a boarder to complete his secondary education and prepare him for seminary life. Gerry was a conscientious student, intelligent and grounded in reality. He joined the college cadet corps, putting his musical skills to use as a member of the corps' band, playing the large bass drum and taking part in parades.

In 1953 Gerry went to the Venerable English College in Rome as a seminarian, and studied at the Gregorian University. He remained in Rome for seven years, with one visit home for the summer three years into his priestly formation. While in Rome Gerry became proficient in Italian, and he developed a love of cooking, Italian style. He enjoyed travel to other parts of Italy during breaks from study, travelling with, and enjoying the company of, friends from the College and other seminaries in Rome. Because he had practical skills and ingenuity, Gerry was called upon to attend to various repairs and odd jobs, with varying degrees of success, hence the nickname 'bodger' that friends continued to use, as did he of himself, long after life at the English College. On 12 March 1960 Gerry was Ordained to the Priesthood by Cardinal Traglia at the Basilica of St John Lateran. Fr Gerry's first appointment was to the parish of Holy Cross, Parsons Green as Assistant Priest, for one year before moving to St James', Spanish Place where he served as Assistant Priest from 1961-64. He then moved to Archbishop's House, having been appointed Private Secretary. In 1967 he was appointed Assistant Priest at Barnet, until 1973. Fr Gerry's next appointment was to Isleworth, as Assistant Priest and Chaplain to Gumley House School until 1980 when he was appointed Parish Priest at Poplar, where he remained until 1983. In Poplar Fr Gerry found parishioners as robust in their understanding of the faith as he was robust in challenging them to a renewed understanding, and what follows from it. They were well matched! Fr Gerry took part in preparations for the National Pastoral Congress, with 2,000 delegates from England and Wales, held in Liverpool in 1980. He was involved with a 'theological road show', travelling around the Diocese to address packed meetings in the pastoral areas explaining ecclesial models and theological concepts. It was a time of great hope, and Fr Gerry was an optimist. Fr Gerry helped many 'ordinary' Catholics to grasp the difference between the BOC and the POG – the Body of Christ and the People of God, drawing inspiration from the teachings of the Second Vatican Council. From 1983 to 1986 Fr Gerry was Pastoral Director at Allen Hall Seminary. At this time the 'Ministry to Priests' programme was being introduced to the Diocese, and Fr Gerry was appointed diocesan Director from 1986 to 1995. As Director of the Ministry to Priests Programme, and running the Centre for Human Development based in Kensington Square, Fr Gerry worked tirelessly to support and promote the growth of Priests in every aspect of their lives – spiritual, pastoral, intellectual and in their humanity and personhood. The programme was a response to the question 'who ministers to the ministers, and how?' The need for such support was recognized in other countries, and Fr Gerry was invited by the Bishops Conference of South Africa to set up and run the Ministry to Priests programme based in Pretoria. With the blessing of Cardinal Hume Fr Gerry went to South Africa in 1995 and remained there for three years. During his years working with the Centre for Human Development Fr Gerry travelled to many other English-speaking countries to share his knowledge of, and passion for, the life and ministry of Priests and the need for organized support and means for personal growth for Priests.

In March 1998 Fr Gerry returned to the Diocese and was appointed Parish Priest of St Lawrence's parish, Feltham. He enjoyed life and ministry in Feltham, perhaps more so than he had in Poplar, and he remarked to a colleague, speaking of the parishioners, 'I have never seen people as generous and loving as these people', and to another, 'these have been the happiest years of my life'. The response of the parishioners to Fr Gerry's commitment to shared responsibility for the ministry and mission of the church brought him much satisfaction. As a Parish Priest Fr Gerry had his own thoughts about matters such as the age of First Reconciliation and the manner of the celebration of Reconciliation with adults, and he articulated these verbally and in writing. But above his personal preferences, based on his knowledge and experience, he respected the authority of the Bishop and the unity of practice in the Diocese. From 2001 to 2006 Fr Gerry served as a member of the Chapter of Canons of Westminster Cathedral.

Throughout his life as a Priest Fr Gerry remained close to his family and to his friends. Many visited him in his various parishes and while he was in South Africa, and have stories to tell of his zest for life, fun and adventure, and of the animated conversations around the table while enjoying the results of Fr Gerry's cooking. Fr Gerry was an intelligent and articulate Priest, and a good listener to the ideas, and to the joys and sorrows, of others. He brought humour to many situations, helping people to not take themselves too seriously, while supporting people with kindness and compassion as they faced serious situations. Many colleagues and parishioners appreciated Fr Gerry's prophetic teaching and preaching, inspired by Vatican II, but others found him challenging, while maintaining respect for him perhaps in recognition of his evident integrity.

In 2010, at the customary retirement age for Priests, Fr Gerry retired to what he described as 'a bijou little bungalow' in Feltham, where he was able to indulge his twin passions of cooking and gardening (his passion for sailing had featured in earlier years), while remaining among his adopted parish family of St Lawrence's. In his letter to the Vicar General he wrote, 'This parish, more than any other, has become my family, and if I could retire locally I would be near many friends and, no less importantly, close to the various hospitals and medical facilities of which I have had to avail myself...' He remained active in ministry, giving assistance in the parish and giving his successors support while never interfering. Fr Gerry died peacefully on 20 March after a short illness, having recently moved from his bungalow to the nearby Derwent Lodge Care Home where his needs were met, and where he continued to receive the support of family, friends and colleagues. He knew he was close to death, and he was without fear. He was ready to be embraced by the Lord whom he knew, loved and served.

At the age of 83 years, having served as a Priest for 59 years, may this much-loved man and Priest rest in peace.

Monsignor Martin Hayes
Vicar General

31 March 2019