

**ARCHBISHOP'S HOUSE
WESTMINSTER**

Fr Peter James Maher R.I.P.

Pope Francis describes Christians as 'missionary disciples'. The Church, in every time and in every place, is missionary and those who follow and learn from the teaching and example given by Christ are disciples. Fr Peter Maher knew himself to be both a missionary and a disciple. He responded to the call to follow Christ as a member of St Joseph's Missionary Society of Mill Hill and he was ordained as a priest of that Society on 13 June 1970. Father, later Cardinal, Herbert Vaughan established the 'Mill Hill Missionaries' as a Society of Apostolic Life of Pontifical Right in 1866 with the blessing of Cardinal Wiseman, Archbishop of Westminster, with the purpose of proclaiming the Gospel overseas.

Born in Blackburn, Lancashire on 4 November 1944 with a twin sister, Sheila, and an older brother, Gerald, Peter's secondary education was at St Peter's College near Liverpool, from 1956-64. He then went to St Joseph's College in Holland, from 1964-66. He returned to England to study at the Missionary Institute of London, from 1966-71. After ordination as a 'Mill Hill Missionary' his studies continued at West Hill College, Birmingham. This equipped him for his role as a lecturer and leader of youth retreats at St Joseph's College, Durham until the summer of 1973. His desire to engage in parish ministry led to his appointment as Assistant Priest at Kingsland in Westminster Diocese where he served from 1973-78. In July 1975 Fr Peter wrote to the Vicar General, Mgr David Norris, requesting incardination as a priest of the Diocese of Westminster, 'to serve the home diocese'. The VG responded, writing that Cardinal John Heenan would be pleased to incardinate him. Formalities commenced, supported by the Superior General of the MHMs, and on 29 September 1975 Fr Peter became a priest of Westminster Diocese.

In 1978 Fr Peter was appointed Assistant Priest at St John Vianney, West Green. By the end of that year he expressed an interest in applying to be a Chaplain to the Royal Air Force. He wrote, '...thanks to the experience and success I enjoyed both in Kingsland and here in West Green makes me feel that I would enjoy even more responsibility...this would not be possible in the diocese for some years to come.' He was given permission to pursue the possibility of joining the R.A.F. as a Chaplain. He applied and was appointed in September 1979. However, the experience was not as Fr Peter had expected and he returned to the Diocese in 1981. He was appointed Assistant Priest at St Catherine's, West Drayton. Here he felt underused in a parish with a Parish Priest and a 'senior' Assistant Priest and it was agreed that a new appointment was needed. In September 1981 Fr Peter was appointed Parish Priest at St Scholastica's, Clapton. Four years later Fr Peter took up his next appointment at St Teresa's, Borehamwood where he remained until 1993. In September 1993 Fr Peter was appointed Parish Priest at St Agnes, Cricklewood where he remained until 2002. Within three years Fr Peter became aware of health issues and believed that an appointment to a parish in Hertfordshire would better help him to live with severe asthma, a condition not helped by many years of heavy smoking. On medical advice Fr Peter gave up smoking. He wished to return to Hertfordshire with cleaner air and a different pace of life. By 2001 Fr Peter's asthma required specialist medication as his breathlessness had become debilitating. In 2002 Fr Peter was asked to take up appointment as Parish Priest at St Augustine's, Hoddesdon. However, because the parish was so well organized he felt he could not go there, despite the health benefits that would accompany a move to Hertfordshire. He was given time away from parish ministry and went to live in Luton in September 2002. While living in Luton Fr Peter gave regular assistance with Mass locally and also in Baldock and Osterley.

In September 2003 Fr Peter returned to the Diocese to take up his next appointment, at Our Lady Queen of Apostles, Welwyn Garden City. In September 2006 he was appointed to serve as Dean of Hatfield along with his duties at Our Lady's. His next appointment, from September 2008, was to Our Lady and St Michael, Garston as Parish Priest.

Fr Peter continued to have health issues and began to think about early retirement. In March 2013 he wrote to Archbishop Vincent to say that he needed to retire in the summer. Fifteen years of chronic asthma had taken its toll. He described the past five years, in Garston, as the busiest and happiest of his priestly ministry. At Garston Fr Peter attended to the repair and refurbishment of the church, parish hall and presbytery. The church sanctuary was remodelled. Mass attendance increased.

In 2013 Fr Peter moved from the Diocese to live in Dunstable in a private house. He continued to need medical assistance due to asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. He remained active and provided supply ministry in parishes in the Luton and mid-Bedfordshire area and in parishes in north Hertfordshire. After six years in Dunstable Fr Peter moved to live in Marston Moretaine, a village in Bedfordshire, close to Milton Keynes and close to where his sister was living. He followed the advice of his doctor and walked five miles every day. He provided supply ministry in parishes, especially in Luton and Baldock – this was greatly appreciated by priests and parishioners.

In August 2022 Fr Peter was diagnosed as having advanced cancer. The prayers and support of family and friends, and his robust faith, gave him strength and courage as he bore his illness. Additional complications were caused by having Covid in January 2023. When chemotherapy resumed, the course of treatment was scheduled to last until Easter. But the Lord intervened and took Fr Peter to himself on Holy Thursday, 6 April when he died peacefully in Bedford Hospital having been admitted six days earlier.

Fr Peter will be remembered as being 'down to earth' and always having a clear idea of what he wanted to do, when and how. He encouraged the active involvement of parishioners in the life and work of the various parishes where he served. He was blessed with a strong voice that gave encouragement to others when singing in church. He had a pastoral heart but did not shy away from confrontation, as evidenced when the Social Club at Welwyn Garden City needed to be closed down, not without opposition. He touched the lives of many parishioners in the dioceses of Westminster and Northampton. He made many lasting friendships among priests and parishioners.

May his soul, and the souls of all the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace. Amen.

Fr Peter's Funeral Mass – Wednesday 10 May, Our Lady & St Michael, Garston; cremation at W Herts Crematorium.

Mgr Martin Hayes | Vicar General | Diocese of Westminster
22 April 2023