

**ARCHBISHOP'S HOUSE
WESTMINSTER**

Canon Digby John Samuels RIP

Very soon after the sad news of the death, on March 17, of Canon Digby Samuels was sent to the priests and parishes across the Diocese a response was received from a priest: 'The Diocese has lost a saint'. Canon Digby will be remembered with gratitude by many priests, religious and lay people for helping them to grow in holiness, in sanctity. To be holy is to be close to God, the source of holiness, and Digby was close to God throughout his life. Canon Digby was ready to go to God as he endured physical frailty in his final weeks, cared for in St Anne's Home by the sisters and staff and the friends who visited him and sent him messages of encouragement and assurances of prayer.

Born on 8 May 1948 in Bovington, Dorset, the son of Major Frederick and Anna Maria Samuels, Canon Digby wrote, 'My mother was Catholic, my father nominal Church of England. Not surprisingly it was my mother who taught me my prayers and introduced me to Mass, sharing her own faith with me'. The young Digby was educated at Ampleforth College. Known as 'Dig', he enjoyed his school years while also experiencing what he described as 'the turbulent years of early teens and the transition from one boarding school to another'. He had a sense of the closeness of God and a one-to-one relationship with Jesus in prayer. The influence of the Benedictine monks, and their way of life, made a deep and lasting impression. Dig wrote home regularly, giving details of his studies, sporting and social activities. In 1967 he left Ampleforth to undertake studies in law at Aberdeen University and was awarded LLB in 1970. He applied for, and was accepted as, a student for the priesthood for the Diocese of Westminster. He studied at Allen Hall in Ware and at the Venerable English College, Rome. As a student he was popular and very much liked. On 17 July 1976 Digby was ordained as a priest by Bishop Gerald Mahon MHM at the church of Our Most Holy Redeemer and St Thomas More, Chelsea.

Fr Digby served as Assistant Priest at Muswell Hill from 1976 to 1978 when he was appointed to Hertford. In 1980 he moved to the parish of St Francis of Assisi, Notting Hill as Assistant Priest and then on to More House as Chaplain from 1983 to 1989. This was followed by a time of sabbatical leave until he went to the Shrine at Walsingham to serve as Chaplain to Pilgrims from 1990 to 1993. He then spent two years at Potters Bar, doing retreat work, before returning to Ampleforth Abbey to explore the possibility of a monastic vocation. It was discerned that this was not to be. In 1997 Fr Digby was appointed Assistant Priest at St Charles Square where he served until 1999. He was then appointed Parish Priest at St Patrick's church, Wapping. At Wapping Fr Digby found stability and purpose. He grew in his knowledge and love of the East End and the people there. He appreciated their faith and spirit. He was appointed Dean of Tower Hamlets in 2001 and in January 2006 he was appointed as a Canon of the Chapter of the Metropolitan Cathedral, Westminster. He was to become the Canon Penitentiary. In 2012 Canon Digby moved from Wapping to have a few months sabbatical leave, spent with Carmelites and then Jesuits, until January 2013 when he took up his appointment as resident Chaplain at St Anne's Home in Stoke Newington. Failing health meant retirement from that

role last year. He remained in residence, continuing his ministry of spiritual direction and accompaniment and as a confessor to priests, religious, seminarians and lay people.

Canon Digby was a man and priest committed to prayer. He described prayer as a deep listening to God, to discern God's purposes. He talked openly about the spiritual life, and helped others to deepen their relationship with God. He did so with sensitivity and wisdom. While characteristically gentle, Canon Digby was able to quietly challenge others, with his sincerity and goodness helping others to grow closer to God and responsive to God's will for them. His outwardly cheerful and breezy disposition allowed him access to the hearts and minds of many people, as he was able to endear himself to the strong and weak alike through the immediately imparted sensation that he was in touch with the inner self of the other. He remained a 'spiritual seeker' himself, at times intensely so, and sometimes experiencing periods of darkness and desolation but remaining faithful, trusting that the light of God would continue to shine on him. Through his ministry, marked by empathy and compassion, the light of God shone into the lives of others. His friends appreciated his loyalty and his kindness, and helped him to take himself less seriously than he might have been inclined, and moments of joy and laughter will remain memorable. To his family – his sister Jacqueline and her children – Digby was an uncle first and a priest second, sharing times of recreation including playing golf and tennis and watching sport, especially rugby, and country walks. For Digby, trekking for long distances could constitute 'some of life's best experiences', he wrote. Gifts at Christmas would come from the CAFOD catalogues, helping poor people and bringing joy to the recipients. His family were proud of him and were inspired by Digby's generosity and his ability to relate to people young and old, rich and poor, seeing the person before anything else, and seeing something of God in them. Canon Digby was a priest through and through, and rather ascetic, but never 'clerical'. A close priest-friend described Canon Digby as having 'the heart of a child', a person of joy and innocence. He saw everyone as a child of a loving father, the God in whom he had profound and transparent trust. May he rest in peace in the presence of the God he knew, loved and served.

Mgr Martin Hayes
Vicar General
24 March 2018