



St. Michael's Church

Father Brian O'Higgins (1937-2009)

Brian O'Higgins was born in Dundalk, Co. Louth, on 4 July 1937. He was named after his paternal uncle, Brian O'Higgins (1882-1963), the celebrated Irish poet, calligrapher, publisher and Sinn Fein politician. Throughout his life Father Brian was very attached to the culture, history and literature of his native Ireland, his profound knowledge of which reflected the tradition of the O'Higgins Clan as being, pre-eminently, one of poets and scholars. His family had strong Fenian and Parnellite links, and Father Brian's vast library contained a wealth of volumes on Irish political history.

He was educated at the Christian Brothers' School, Dundalk, and at the National University of Ireland, Dublin, where he graduated as a Bachelor of Arts in 1961. His training for the priesthood took place at All Hallows, Dublin, where, on 20 July 1965, he was ordained for the Diocese of Brentwood by Bishop Herlihy of Ferns.

He then went to Rome for further studies. Residing at the Irish College, he completed his Doctorate in Divinity at the Angelicum in June 1967. His thesis, on 'Cardinal Newman and Uncreated Grace', won him a distinction 'cum laude'. One of his companions in Rome was the future Cardinal Sean Brady, who was studying for a Doctorate in Canon Law at the Lateran University. Brian had a lifelong interest in Newman, and shortly before his death he bequeathed to the Brentwood Diocesan Archives his copy of **Essays Critical and Historical**, on the inside cover of which was pasted Newman's autograph. Another autographed volume he similarly donated was his copy of Bernard Lonergan's **Insight**.

In 1967 he was appointed as Catholic Chaplain to the North East London Polytechnic (the former Barking Technical College on Longbridge Road), and he resided at St Mary & St Ethelburga, Barking, where he also acted as part-time curate to Canon Vincent Hurley. In 1968 Father Brian was appointed to St John's Seminary, Womersley, as Lecturer in Dogmatic Theology. While on the staff at Womersley, in addition to his teaching duties, he was appointed as a member of the Catholic-Methodist Committee and also served as a Consultant to the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission's Mixed Marriages Sub-Committee. He was asked to prepare a paper on the *cautiones* (Mixed Marriage promises). The commission approved of what Father Brian produced and asked him to attend its next meeting. He was looking forward to returning to Rome, but instead went to Dublin during the Easter holidays! His paper was subsequently published in **The Irish Theological Quarterly**. Another publication was a Service of Reconciliation on Justice and Peace, issued by Veritas as part of its **Prayer Book for Holy Week** in 1975 – although the publishers committed what was, in Brian's eyes, the unforgivable sin of omitting the "O" of his surname!

In 1976 Father Brian returned to the Diocese of Brentwood, where Bishop Casey appointed him as Parish Priest of Most Holy Redeemer, Harold Hill. He was also appointed as Leader of the Brentwood Religious Education Service (1976-1983). For the last three years of his appointment with BRES (viz. 1980-1983) he also served as Chairman of the National Board of [Religious] Inspectors and Advisers. He was also

closely involved with the English edition of **Credo**, the Catechism published by the German Bishops' Conference and published by Geoffrey Chapman in 1983. The translator from the German was Sister Benedict Davies OSU of St Angela's Convent, Forest Gate. She approached the national catechetical expert Bishop David Konstant, then an Auxiliary Bishop of Westminster, for the purpose of finding a competent theologian to check her translations. Bishop Konstant suggested that she approach Brian, although Brian himself always remarked that it was probably because Harold Hill and Forest Gate were near to each other – and in the same diocese - that he was chosen, rather than for his theological competence. Brian then suggested Father Pius Smart OFM Cap to be the adviser on Canon Law matters for the publication. However, as he was working through Sister Benedict's translations from the German, Brian became uneasy not with what she had produced but with the content and structure of the original text. Brian, with Sister Benedict's permission, re-worked the whole Catechism. This English version was then sent to the German publishers, and both Brian and Sister Benedict held their breath. The response from Germany was that they much preferred Brian's revision: the original German edition was withdrawn and a German translation of the O'Higgins/Davies edition was then commissioned.

Father Brian resigned as Leader of BRES in 1983, handing over to Father George Stokes, but remained at Harold Hill until 1985. In November of that year he succeeded Canon Bernard Manning as Parish Priest of Our Lady Immaculate, Chelmsford, where he was to spend the next seventeen years, and where he became a much loved and respected figure in the town. He was known for his great pastoral care, his lively intellect, the humility with which he wore his immense learning and scholarship, his warmth towards Christians of other traditions, and his unfailing ability to make a joke at his own expense. The present writer well remembers bumping into Brian one day in the reading room of the Catholic Central Library in Westminster. When asked what he was researching, Brian, somewhat bashfully replied that he was looking through back issues of **The Tablet** in search of quotable comments from John Harriott's column. The reason for this was that John Harriott was a great cricket lover, and often alluded to the game in his column. Brian had been asked to preside and preach at the Memorial Service for T.N. Pearce, the late President of the Essex County Cricket Club and one of the county's greatest cricketers. His wife (Stella Rippon) was from an old Chelmsford Catholic family. Brian wondered what his poet-uncle and all his Irish friends might think of him preaching on the quintessential English sport. I was not at the service, but my late father was, and he told me afterwards that the homily was very well constructed and asked whether the preacher was himself a cricket fan, so at home did he seem with the intricacies of the game! While at Chelmsford Brian also served as Dean of Mid-Essex (1999-2002). Other diocesan responsibilities included serving as a Trustee, acting as Deputy Child Protection Co-ordinator, and as a Joint Administrator of the Brentwood Diocesan Sick & Retired Clergy Fund.

In October 2002 Bishop Thomas McMahon appointed Father Brian as Parish Priest of St Michael, East Ham. Many among the clergy wondered how 'the Chelmsfordian' would adapt to an East End parish with a very different social, cultural and ethnic make-up from the county town of Essex. We need not have worried. Brian was loved by his parishioners

at East Ham and during the last few years of his ministry at St Michael's, as he fought bravely but unassumingly against cancer, their care, concern and support was palpable. In particular, mention ought to be made of Christopher Lukose, who became Brian's right-hand man, literally, and without whom, by Brian's own admission, he would not have been able to have continued as Parish Priest of East Ham for as long as he did. He also received great support from his brother priests, not only those in the Newham Deanery, but from Father Augustine, his long-standing supply from Nigeria, and others who came to St Michael's when Brian was undergoing treatment in the London Independent Hospital or when he was on convalescence. Indeed, few of Brian's friends will remember the moving Christmas letter he wrote in 2007, in which he said farewell, not expecting to see another Feast of the Nativity in this life. When, before Christmas 2008, he entertained his fellow priests in the presbytery at St Michael's after a penitential service, he sat in his chair with a glass of wine and apologised for being there, saying he felt something of a fraud given his letter of the previous Christmas. Needless to say, his remarks were quickly drowned out by the gathered company.

To the end Brian was a scholar, a voracious reader, and a wise counsellor. The present writer recalls how, even as Brian was suffering from his final illness, he took it upon himself to assist the Diocesan Archivist in seeking to discover the whereabouts of the burial-place of Father Myles O'Reilly, the Parish Priest of Witham who was killed in a car accident in 1939. The O'Reillys are a Co. Louth gentry family, and the link between his native county and his own diocese as a priest was enough to set Brian researching – he even engaged the services of Cardinal Brady in this matter – and not to give up until he had exhausted all avenues. When he had done his research he summoned the Diocesan Archivist to East Ham, whereupon he gave him a detailed summary of the O'Reilly pedigree culled from a pre-war edition of **Burke's Irish Peerage**. Brian would always see a job through.

Thus, that Brian died in Dublin, surrounded by his loving family, and that his Requiem Mass will be celebrated by Cardinal Sean Brady, Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of All Ireland, at All Hallows College, Dublin, on Friday 8 May, was a wholly fitting conclusion to the life of 'a dedicated and selfless... priest', to quote Bishop Thomas' *Ad Clerum* announcing Brian's death. May he rest in peace.

Father Stewart Foster, 1 May 2009.