

ARCHBISHOP'S HOUSE WESTMINSTER

Fr Desmond Francis Henry Baker R.I.P.

Fr Desmond Baker – Fr Des to his former parishioners and friends – enjoyed his twelve years of retirement in his own home in St Leonards-on-Sea. He gave much appreciated assistance to local priests and became well known to them and to their parishioners. He was reliable and punctual when going to parishes for Mass and to hear confessions. Punctilious preparation of his homilies, and introductions to the scripture readings at Mass, won the appreciation of many in Arundel, Battle, Bexhill, Godalming, Hastings, Rye, St Leonards and beyond. His love of the Church and the priesthood, his devotion to the Mass and to the Blessed Sacrament were manifest, and his quiet manner and thoughtful conversation endearing. He had a love of Church history and an interest in prominent personalities, especially senior clergy, and he accrued a fund of anecdotes from his 50 years of priestly ministry which he generously shared with friends over dinner. While totally committed to the Roman Catholic Church, Fr Desmond had a love of Anglican evensong, following services broadcast on Radio 3. He made an annual pilgrimage to Canterbury on 29 December to participate in evensong in the Cathedral on the anniversary of the murder of St Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury, in 1170. It seems fitting that the venue of Fr Des' Funeral Mass is the church dedicated to St Thomas of Canterbury in St Leonards-on-Sea.

Desmond Baker was born in London on 23 June 1940. He grew up in Ealing and, with his Irish parents Victor Joseph and Anne Dorothy (formerly Keane) Baker, was a parishioner of Ealing Abbey. He was the only child of elderly parents. From a very early age he made known his desire to be a priest. Ceremonial and all things ecclesiastical were of interest to the young Desmond. His secondary education was at St Benedict's School, Ealing from 1953-58 and then, having been accepted as a student for the priesthood, he went to Campion House, Osterley – a residential house of studies run by the Jesuits to prepare men for seminary life. After two years, in September 1960, he went to St Edmund's College, Allen Hall Seminary in Ware, Hertfordshire. However, Desmond's personality made it necessary for him to discontinue formation for priesthood. The seminary President, Mgr Butcher, wrote to Desmond's parents, in July 1961, to inform them of the decision taken because of 'eccentricities of behaviour' which were not improving. It was in Desmond's best interests that he took time out, the President explained, and the door was open for him to re-apply to the Diocese after a few years. Desmond accepted the decision, recognising that there were issues that needed attention, and he communicated this in a letter to Cardinal Godfrey, Archbishop of Westminster. Desmond found employment and kept in regular contact with Mgr Butcher by letter, telling him of his progress. Desmond successfully re-applied for acceptance as a student for the Diocese and he was sent to the English College in Valladolid, Spain in 1963. Desmond was by now much more at ease with himself and more out-going, having grown in confidence and with some new skills. The Rector at Valladolid was committed to assisting Desmond's development and formation, and he was successful. On 21 December 1969 Desmond was ordained to the priesthood at Ealing Abbey by Cardinal Heenan. He would not then have known that his future Bishop, Cardinal Vincent Nichols, was ordained to the priesthood on the same day, in Rome!

Fr Desmond's first appointment was to Westminster Cathedral where he served as a Chaplain from 1970-77. He was then appointed Assistant Priest at The Immaculate Conception and St Joseph, Hertford where he remained for two years. His next appointment was to All Saints, Kenton serving as Assistant Priest for two years. He then went to St Hugh of Lincoln, Letchworth as Assistant Priest from 1981-86. He was then appointed Parish Priest at St Bede, Croxley Green where he remained one year. It was not the happiest chapter of his priesthood. Fr Desmond was not suited to the role of Parish Priest and the responsibilities and

expectations that go with parish leadership. He was appointed Assistant Priest at Marychurch, Hatfield in 1987 and remained two years. In 1989 Fr Desmond served as a supply priest, giving assistance in various parishes in Hertfordshire before being appointed Chaplain to the Hospitaller Order of St John of God, Barvin Park in Potters Bar. It had become clear to Fr Desmond, and to Cardinal Hume, that his ministry should be in a rural setting and without the stress of leadership. Fr Desmond continued to receive professional support to help him to cope with anxiety. In 1990 he was appointed Assistant Priest at Sacred Heart,

Teddington where he remained for eight years. While at Teddington Fr Des celebrated the Silver Jubilee of his ordination with a Mass of Thanksgiving, followed by a parish party, on 26 January 1995.

In 1998 Fr Des moved from Teddington to London Colney to take up his appointment as Chaplain at All Saints, the diocesan Pastoral Centre. He showed a keen interest in the work of SPEC, the centre for youth ministry. He remained at London Colney until 2002. He then went to live in the presbytery at Borehamwood North, available for permanent supply ministry. After a year he moved to Gunnersbury as priest in residence and available for supply ministry. The need for a temporary resident priest took him to Buntingford, from September 2003 to March 2005. He was then appointed to Mill End and Maple Cross parish as Parochial Administrator where he served until his retirement in 2009 and his move to the house formerly owned by his parents in St Leonards-on-Sea.

Fr Des' happiest years were spent in Letchworth, as Assistant Priest. He wrote that in these years he felt particularly happy and fulfilled. He also experienced much happiness living with privacy and independence in retirement and being of service to local priests and parishioners. He regularly participated at deanery meetings, contributing thoughtfully to discussions. He was able to keep in touch with friends and to enjoy meals with them, talking about the lives of members of the families and the lives of twentieth and twenty-first century political figures. In June 2021 Fr Des returned to Letchworth for the belated celebration of his eightieth birthday – Covid restrictions prevented celebrating in 2020. On 17 January 2020 – before the Covid lockdown announced in March – Fr Des celebrated the Golden Jubilee of his ordination hosted by the parish of Bexhill-on-Sea where he was well known from regular supply ministry. Bishop Richard Moth and Bishop Paul McAleenan were among those who participated at the Mass of Thanksgiving. On the actual date of his Golden Jubilee, 21 December 2019, Fr Des wrote to Cardinal Vincent to thank him for the letter of congratulations that he received, and commented "...to be able to look back on fifty years of faithful ministry in the priesthood is indeed a great joy and I warmly reciprocate your good wishes and extend to you my own congratulations on attaining your own Golden Jubilee. It has been a great privilege to serve as a priest in the Metropolitan See of Westminster."

Fr Des died peacefully at the age of 81 in hospital on 20 December 2021, just a day short of the fifty-second anniversary of his ordination. May this unassuming and devout priest rest in peace and rise in glory.

Fr Desmond's Funeral Mass: 20 January 2022 at St Thomas of Canterbury, St Leonards-on-Sea with Bishop Paul presiding. Cremated remains to be interred in Hastings.

Mgr Martin Hayes | Vicar General | Diocese of Westminster
8 January 2022