

# CANON MICHAEL J FITZPATRICK

- Born** 23 December 1943
- Baptised** Michael Joseph Noel Fitzpatrick
- Parents** Matt and Annie Fitzpatrick
- Raised** On a farm in Corcanidos, Co. Cavan, Ireland.
- Siblings** Sean, Matthew and Philomena Fitzpatrick.
- Education** Attended Corcanidos & Milltown Primary School from 4½ yrs  
At 12 years began boarding at St Patrick's Diocesan College, Cavan.  
At 18 years entered St John's College, Waterford, Ireland
- Ordained** 8 June 1969 in Waterford Cathedral, aged 25.  
1 August 1969 - joined the Clifton Diocese.



## Appointments

- Holy Cross** Bedminster as holiday supply in 1969
- St Joseph's** Fishponds as curate 1969-1975
- St Peter's** Gloucester as curate 1975-1984
- St Pius X** Hartcliffe as parish priest 1984-1989
- Our Lady of Lourdes** Kingswood Bristol as parish priest 1989-1996
- St Peter's** Gloucester this time as parish priest 1996-2006
- St Osmund's and Most Holy Redeemer** Salisbury as parish priest 2006-2019
- St Gregory and the English Martyrs** Salisbury in 2009: this parish was absorbed into his responsibilities and the three Salisbury parishes became the unified Salisbury Catholic Churches.





# A BROTHER...

by Sean and Philomena Fitzpatrick

MICHAEL was the first grandchild in the family and was much loved and spoiled by his parents, Matt and Annie Fitzpatrick, and his elderly grandmother, who all lived together on the family farm in Co Cavan.

From early times, Michael was quiet and reliable, aware of what was required of him and always willing to please by doing little jobs round the farmyard, or looking after his three younger siblings, ourselves and Matthew.

He was a happy child and spent much of his childhood helping his father, doing farm work, fishing and wandering by the river Erne, which flows round the farm. Chores included milking cows, preparing urns for collection, herding cattle, working the land and making hay. His dad always had jobs for the boys to do, depending on the season and weather, and a strong work ethic was instilled in him from an early age.



Michael interacted well with people, made friends easily, and always had a close circle of friends at school, college and afterwards. It was not obvious that he was going to follow a life in the priesthood. He was mechanically minded from an early age - a true Mr Gadget - and would spend hours repairing broken toys, moving on to bicycles as he grew. He played football and handball but his first interest was always in things mechanical. When the first tractor arrived on the farm, it was Michael, who as a young boy was up driving it at every opportunity and helping with servicing and repairs. He used an old doll's pram to make a go-kart, then attached it to the family dog to haul himself and his siblings round the farmyard.



When the family's third child was old enough to go to secondary school, their parents came up with what he thought was a wonderful solution. They bought a car and appointed Michael to drive all three boys to school each day.

In addition, he has always enjoyed his cars - and a personalised number plate, a gift from his family when he was 60.

His holidays as a boy were spent with grandparents and relatives and on trips to the seaside at Bundoran, a resort on the Irish west coast.

A summer highlight was the return of his uncle, the Canon, from England. Our uncle was always full of stories about his time as a priest in Clifton diocese, building new parishes and communities. In addition, cousins came from America, full of stories about life in that “land of opportunity”.



As a priest, he has travelled to the Holy Land, South Africa, America, and Portugal, as well as to Ireland, and has always kept in touch with friends from all stages of his life.

Michael's strengths are his patience, understanding, impartiality and his non-judgemental stance. And he always has time to talk things through with people.



He is family orientated and is always at the heart of family celebrations of faith - baptisms, first communions, weddings and funerals. Whatever the occasion, Michael will travel to be there, nothing is ever too much trouble and he always has a smile on his face. But he is always busy, day and night, his phone never turned off – he is always there for everyone.

If Michael had not been a priest, he would probably have been a successful businessman, working with cars or in property development.

Although we are all sad to see Michael retire, we realise that after a lifetime of service to the community he is entitled to a well-earned rest.

# A BROTHER PRIEST...

by Monsignor Gabriel Leyden

Canon Michael was ordained priest in 1969 and around that time Cardinal Heenan of Westminster wrote his memoirs entitled *Not the Whole Truth*. What I write will be the truth, but not the whole truth.

As everyone knows, Michael is a dedicated priest in love with the priesthood. He is always available to his people and the word “no” is not in his vocabulary, I recall another book Heenan wrote, *The People's Priest*, so applicable to Michael, for, to use the words of Pope Francis, “he has the smell of the sheep”.

Throughout the past 50 years or so, Michael and I have been friends and colleagues as well as fair weather golfers. Some priests referred to our golf standards as an insult to the noble game. But we enjoyed ourselves.

Over the years, Michael and I have met for a few days in Ireland and I recall on one occasion, when we were in Northern Ireland, I was anxious to know how my home team, County Clare, were doing in an important Hurling match (corresponding to a Cup final), I casually mentioned this and nothing was said. A few minutes later, Michael stopped the car at a lay-by at the foot of the beautiful Mountains of Mourne. He said nothing but got out, opened the boot, and produced a tiny television set. No wonder, Bishop Mervyn Alexander called him “Gadget Man”.

On another occasion, we were touring Connemara and went on a day trip from Connemara Airport to the Aran Islands, a flight of about ten minutes. We hired bicycles and cycled round an island. Can you imagine Michael cycling on a hired bike, not driving even a small car?

One could go on about trips and anecdotes, including visits to friends in an impoverished area of South Africa and a week in Germany staying with Fr Alan Finley, who had been an Army chaplain there, driving in an Army vehicle through the gate known as Check Point Charlie into East Berlin just a couple of weeks before the Berlin Wall came down.

Michael, as the reader knows, is a computer buff and uses his many talents in the service of the Church for spreading the Gospel. People in Salisbury are familiar with his skills and talents.

In the 1980s, he was responsible for the building of the beautiful church of St Pius X at Hartcliffe in Bristol.

You know what excellent work Michael has done here in Salisbury - involvement of people, reorganising and rationalising Masses, encouraging superb liturgy with the help and support of many talented parishioners. The good news of the Gospel is the same as it has been for a thousand years – the message doesn't change but the way of communicating it varies from time to time, and from place to place. Michael must be complimented for courageously facing the challenge of the day, including the fewer number of priests, as well as the use of the laity and their baptismal commitments.

Since Michael has always worked ecumenically, people are delighted the Salisbury Cathedral authorities have graciously granted permission for Michael's Golden Jubilee Mass to be celebrated in such a magnificent cathedral. We all look forward to a happy occasion.

Michael must be wondering where the 50 years have gone. His deep spiritually and prayer life have been his anchor – that closeness to the Lord that his parents (RIP) passed on to him in Co Cavan.

I take this opportunity to thank Michael for his friendship and camaraderie and I know all of us wish him a well-deserved rest (?) and retirement. It is rumoured he plans to open a computer consultancy department in the Bristol area, especially for clergy who don't know the difference between a mouse and a Microsoft.

**May the Lord,  
the Good Shepherd,  
bless Michael for his good works  
and remain with him always.**

# IN HIS OWN WORDS...

Question and Answer Interview with Canon Michael

*The obvious question is did anyone inspire you to become a priest?*

My uncle, who was a priest in Swindon (also called Canon Michael Fitzpatrick), was a good influence on me as a child and the Bishop of Clifton, who visited my grandmother, when visiting the Holy Rosary sisters at their Mother house which is near my home.

When I became a teenager, being a priest was the last thing on my mind. What changed me, I don't know and it was a last-minute decision when God stepped in and said: "I want you to do this."

One of the school staff, had a big influence. He was so kind I don't think he should have been teaching in a secondary school – he was kind and the lads played him up. But he never got upset or raised his voice and was always there to help and support. I came to the Clifton diocese because of my uncle.

*That was the time, as we found later, that some Irish and, indeed Catholic, schools were not the kindest of places for the pupils. Were your schools one of these?*

At St Patrick's, most of the staff were diocesan priests and were really appreciated. Those in charge were strict but those below them were kind. The cane was used but they were not harsh. If you did something out of the ordinary you had to pay for it.

I went back to the school for reunions after 50 years and again after 60 years of starting secondary school. Many of the boys I knew, who now live in different parts of the world, came back and the majority were positive about their experience. I find it hard to understand what some went through at secondary school; I never experienced anything like it.

*You left school at 18 and a half to go to the seminary at St John's College, Waterford, and you were ordained at 25. What did you do then?*

It was June 1969, so I had a summer holiday. I did nothing but I enjoyed myself visiting and travelling round Ireland. I had a car, an Austin A55, so I was free to visit new places and admire the beauty of the coastline.

On 1 August, I had to report to the Clifton Diocese and my first appointment by the bishop was as holiday cover at Holy Cross, Bedminster, with Canon Vincent Ryan who was then curate in the parish.

It really was a baptism of fire - to go into the parish and stand up by the altar and preach, having never done it before in public. I have always found preaching difficult because of the responsibility it places on our shoulders, proclaiming the Lord's word. I find it difficult even to this day – I find it to be pressure because of the responsibility that is on our shoulders.

Preaching and celebration is so important - the Gospel you are reading and the Eucharist you are celebrating is helping people to grow in their relationship with God. It is so important that people hear a message from the Gospel that they can understand and that relates to their daily lives.

When we first arrive in a parish it is easier because everything is new but when you have been there for a number of years people have heard you so many times and it is difficult to find something new to say, without repeating what you have said over and over again.

I spend a lot of time preparing and I try to memorise what I am going to say because spontaneity comes from the heart.

*What happened after those six weeks in your first parish?*

I was sent as curate to St Joseph's, Fishponds and stayed six years before going, as a curate, to St Peter's, Gloucester. The parish priest at St Peter's had served 49 years so when he retired the new parish priest asked me to stay on for an extra year.

My first appointment as parish priest was to the parish of St Pius X in south Bristol in 1984.

The parish had a temporary wooden church and a Mass centre, so we decided to combine the two and build a permanent church in the modern style. It is a square with an altar on one end and the seats in a semi-circle.

The church opened in December 1987. It was nice and had a lovely feeling and atmosphere. I liked it and was very happy.

Eighteen months after the new church opened at St Pius X, I was asked to move to be parish priest of Our Lady of Lourdes, in Kingswood, another Bristol suburb, to replace the OMI's (Oblates of Mary Immaculate). I was the first diocesan priest to take over as parish priest in that parish. That same year, the church opened its community facility (called the Mazenoid Centre) dedicated to St Eugene de Mazenoid, the founder of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate.

The renovation here at St Osmund's was so different. Building from scratch is very different from major work on an existing listed building. When you are developing and re-decorating a listed building, you are tied down by heritage requirements and we had to have special permission at every stage.

Incidentally, about St Osmund's, the church was very dark and the new lighting system we installed made a big difference – one old parishioner told me it was the first time in years he was able to read his missal in church. We also had the floor stripped down to the natural wood colour which brightened the building.

*Then, after seven and a half years at Kingswood, you were sent back to St Peter's, Gloucester, this time as parish priest. Was your return a success?*

When I returned to Gloucester, after my first appointment I had been away for 12 and a half years. Many things had changed but many had remained the same, I knew lots of people, and people I had baptised were now getting married. I found myself asking about people and parishioners would say if you want to find those you will have to go to Coney Hill (the cemetery). At that time, I was quite good at remembering names but that has all changed.



*Then, in September 2006 and at the age of 62, when most people are contemplating a quiet life and retirement, you were sent to Salisbury. How was your start at the new parish?*

Change is always difficult and when I was asked to move, I felt a great sense of loss and went through the whole process of grieving, but I have felt that leaving every parish where I have been. But I have loved every minute of my time here – I didn't find my start difficult because the people are fantastic. Well, maybe in the first year I had a real sense of loss for the past. I find it quite difficult to up sticks and move, but priests don't bring anything with them except their clothes, books and a few mementoes and personal possessions.

Now I have mixed feelings about leaving because I am going into the unknown, I have enjoyed my work as a priest and enjoy my time with people. I need a purpose to get up every morning. When you retire you are not the centre of everything any more, you're just one of the crowd, and that will be a big change.

The numbers of people going to Sunday Mass have stayed much the same over my years here but the overall number of priests is going down.

Our relations with Salisbury Cathedral are very good and the authorities have been so generous in offering us the use of the cathedral for my jubilee Mass. The new Dean of the cathedral (the Very Rev Nick Papadopulos) has been very generous and has facilitated us in every way.

*What's your advice for your successor, whoever he may be?*

It's not for me to give advice. Everyone has their own strength and weaknesses and sometimes strength can be weakness and weakness can be strength. A priest when I was at college told us, you are not sent to a parish to represent yourself but to represent Christ. So, when you are asked by the bishop to move you should never say no, however well liked you are, some people who don't like you will have an opportunity to come back to church again. That is so true.

To parishioners, I would say that every priest has his own strengths and it is important not to live in the past. A parish can never stay still, when a new priest takes over it gives the parish a chance to have a review and move forward.

*What is your greatest achievement in Salisbury and your greatest disappointment, if any?*

I like to think I tried to bring Catholics in Salisbury together. Our congregation is mixed – we have 37 nationalities at the church - and we have to appeal to all traditions and cater for them. No tradition is better than another because we are all equal before God.

For all parishes, the future is going to be difficult because the number of priests is reducing all the time. By 2020/21, there will be only 46 priests in our diocese under the age of 75. That will bring big changes with a doubling up of Masses, for example.

But don't be closed to the changes, be open to them and see them as an opportunity. This does mean making sacrifices. In some parts of the world, people have to travel long distances to attend Mass.

My disappointment? There are plenty of those, I suppose I would not be human if I had not disappointments – not being there for people when I am really needed.

I have enjoyed my life as a priest because there is no greater gift than to be able to bring Christ to people through Word and Sacrament.

As for Salisbury itself, well a newspaper's readers said this spring that Salisbury is the best place in the country to live. I would agree. It has so much to offer - just look at the number of people who come visiting here each year.

It is sad to see so many empty shops, but it is important to take the city forward. Look at the wonderful market area – since it was refurbished people are sitting outside restaurants, pubs and cafes enjoying themselves. This brings new life to our city.

*Finally, what is your personal future?*

The Diocese has offered me a bungalow in Bristol for my retirement. This is close to Holy Family Church in Patchway. I will be living on my own but close to the church, and close to the motorways to travel to any part of the Diocese to help parishes. I will be taking a break from September to Christmas and then be available to supply in parishes. In November, I and others celebrating their jubilee have been invited to Rome for five days when I hope to meet the Pope.

When I retire I would like to take up photography in a more artistic sort of way. I was into photography in a big way when I was at college and when I was first ordained. Today, we are spoiled with our mobile phones because the quality of photos are so good, they are small and you always have them with you to capture every situation.

*Interview by Peter Blacklock*



*Fr Michael with his parents on the day of his Ordination*

# SALISBURY CATHOLIC CHURCHES

<https://salisburycatholics.org>

A FUTURE  
FULL OF HOPE

CLIFTON DIOCESE