

## Father Michael Butler

13 November 1934 to 6 January 2024



Father Michael John Butler, the son of Sydney Butler and his wife Irene (nee Knife) was born on 13 November 1934 and he grew up in Higham's Park, Chingford, London E4. His secondary education took place at Bancroft's School, Woodford (1947-1952). He joined the Royal Air Force as a regular serviceman (1953-1956), in due course assuming duties as a medical technician responsible for measuring pilots' hearing. He began instruction to become a Catholic while serving in the R.A.F. and was received into the Church by Father Michael Hollings at Westminster Cathedral in January 1955. After demobilisation in January 1956, he was subsequently employed by Unilever and then by the Inland Revenue. Expressing a desire to try his vocation to the priesthood, he was accepted as a candidate for the Diocese of Brentwood and studied at St Augustine's House, Walworth, London SE17 (1956-1957) and at the Venerable English College, Rome (1957-1964), where he was ordained by Cardinal William

Heard on 27 October 1963. As a seminarian he was very accomplished at his studies, gaining a Licence in Philosophy and Baccalaureate in Theology from the Gregorian University in Rome.

As an assistant priest Father Michael served at St Bede, Chadwell Heath (July 1964-October 1971), mostly under Father (later Monsignor Canon) Christopher Creede, during which time (1966-1971) he served as the first Secretary of the Brentwood Diocesan Senate (now Council) of Priests. Monsignor Creede, who was a tireless visitor of parishioners' homes, often reminisced about his curate's shyness and reticence with regard to parish visiting, commenting that he (Monsignor Creede) admired Father Michael's determination to fulfil his duties even when he found it somewhat intimidating. Father Michael also volunteered for missionary work in South America, but the necessary permission was not granted by the Bishop Wall. Under Bishop Casey, he pursued further studies at Mount Oliver Catechetical Institute, Dundalk, Co. Louth, Ireland (October 1971-June 1972) in preparation for his appointment as the first Leader of the Brentwood Religious Education Service (September 1972-July 1976), residing at New Hall, near Chelmsford, where he was Chaplain to the Convent and School. He then undertook sabbatical studies (in Psychology) in the United States (July 1976-October 1978) and upon his return to the Diocese of Brentwood he was appointed as assistant priest at St Joseph, Leyton, London E10.

In May 1980 he was sent as Parish Priest to St Sabina, Brightlingsea and St Monica, Wivenhoe. Later in the same year he became Catholic Chaplain to the University of Essex upon the appointment of his predecessor (Father Thomas McMahon) as the 6th Bishop of Brentwood. During his time as Chaplain, Father Michael gained an M.A. in the History of Art and in due course became an Honorary Fellow of the University. On news of Father Michael's death, the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Essex wrote to the Bishop of Brentwood in the following words: 'He was a valued and respected member of the University for many years and those who knew him are deeply saddened by the news of his death.' As Parish Priest of Brightlingsea and Wivenhoe for no less than 21 years, he became a well-known and much respected figure in the locality. He is remembered for his cheerful disposition and kindly manner, as well for as the establishment of the Gregorian Society for Catholic students at the University and his famous 'at home' occasions in the presbytery where all and sundry were made welcome.

In August 2001 Father Michael was appointed as Parish Priest of The Assumption, Mulberry Green, Old Harlow, where he was to serve for nineteen years. At diocesan level, he served variously as Chairman of the Art & Architecture Committee, Chairman of the Liturgical Commission and Chairman of the Historic Churches Committee. He was also Diocesan Co-ordinator for Ministry to People with HIV/AIDS (appointed in 1992) and a member of the Diocesan Social Welfare Commission. Father Michael was an avid reader with a vast personal library, an expert on art and architecture, a good raconteur, a generous host and was very fond of music, especially classical and choral. As Chairman of the various diocesan committees on which he served, he invariably began meetings with a delicious

supper which he had prepared, ably assisted by Mrs Helen Barwell, his long-serving Secretary at Cathedral House, Brentwood, and accompanied by a good bottle or two of wine.

In March 2020, his health failing, Father Michael retired to Conewood Manor Nursing Home, Bishops Stortford. It was here that he died on 6 January 2024. His body was received into the Church of the Assumption, Old Harlow, on 8 February 2024 and on the following day Rt. Rev. Alan Williams sm, Bishop of Brentwood, celebrated Father Michael's Requiem Mass at Holy Cross, Harlow. As a mark of respect the flag at the University of Essex was flown at half-mast on the day of the funeral and it is planned to add Father Michael's name to the University's permanent memorial on the Colchester campus. Father Michael's ashes were later interred with those of his parents in the grounds of The Church of the Assumption, Mulberry Green. Requiescat in pace.

*Canon Stewart Foster*  
Diocesan Archivist

This obituary was written for the 2025 edition of the Brentwood Diocesan Directory and is used *cum permissio*.