



Obituary for Father John Ryan MBE

30th November 1941-31st August 2025



John Ryan was born on 30th November 1941 in Argharina House, Dripsey, Co Cork, the son of the late Tom and Nora Ryan and brother to Kathleen, Tomas, William, Helen, and the late Con, Joe and Tess

Having completed his school education with the Redemptorists in Limerick, he was accepted for formation for the diocesan priesthood and entered St Kieran's College, Kilkenny, as a student for the then Diocese of Southwark. Following completion of his studies he was ordained as a priest on 6th June 1966 in Kilkenny. Shortly after his ordination he arrived in England and in a letter written to Archbishop Peter Smith in September 2013 he describes taking a taxi from the airport to

Archbishops House where he met Archbishop Cyril Cowderoy. He was given his faculties and taken to the Finance Office to meet the person who was to be his first parish priest, Father, later Bishop, Howard Tripp, the parish priest of Our Lady Queen of Peace, East Sheen. He described how Fr Tripp took him back home to the presbytery at East Sheen and on the way introduced him to some of the parishioners. He was really happy at East Sheen and described it as a beautiful parish. It gave him, he said, an insight into English life and the marvellous influence of Fr Tripp who was a delightful person and gave him wonderful fatherly advice about being a priest and running a parish.

One of Fr John's duties in the parish was to drive the school minibus taking children to school in Mortlake parish. Here he describes meeting Monsignor Gibney who was parish priest of Mortlake and also Vicar General and he asked Fr John to drive him to and collect him from the station three days a week while he was working up at Archbishops House. This became a regular feature for Fr John during his time at East Sheen.

In August 1971, Archbishop Cowderoy appointed him to be an assistant priest at St John Fisher, Chatham. It was at Chatham that he first encountered the Royal Navy as Chatham was an active Naval Base with a training school on the base. The then chaplain, Father, later Bishop, Frank Walmsley was moved to another appointment and asked the parish priest in Chatham, if Fr John could take over the priests' duties at the base. It was this initial introduction to the chaplaincy work that led him to join the Royal Navy as a full-time chaplain in September 1972.

For the next 16 he was attached to the Royal Navy as a Southwark priest working within the Bishopric of the Forces. This took him on active service to many parts of the world and also into a war as he was part of the contingent that sailed to the South Atlantic in 1982 as part of the "Task Force" sent to recapture the Falkland Islands following the invasion by Argentina. In a letter to Archbishop Michael Bowen of June 1982 he wrote "What a time we are having I had some very narrow escapes. It was sad to see so many ships sink to the bottom with so many lives lost. I am at the main field hospital, sad to see so many wounded and dead. I also have my own little temporary cemetery on the hill, both for our own and the Argentinians. Sadly, it is getting very big. I also look after POWs. All evils of war are horrendous and frightening. We are at the moment without proper toilets or running water. It is primitive living. I have lost so many good friends, seen

hundreds wounded and I have never anointed so many in my life. The horrors of war and modern weapons are frightening. I dread to think of nuclear war."

In a response to this letter Archbishop Michael wrote on 1st July 1982 "My Dear John, I want to assure you that I have kept you very especially in my thoughts and prayers during these past months and I am so glad to have recent news of you. Your letter is very enlightening and yet tells me of what a valuable job you are doing in so many ways. What a relief for everyone that the hostilities are now over. I deeply sympathise with you in the upsetting situations you have found yourself in; but how welcome your pastoral services must have been in these times. Bishop Walmsley did give us some news of the chaplains in the South Atlantic and he also mentions you all by name in an article he wrote for The Universe. I am sure that many of the Southwark brethren have you in mind and are proud to know that one of their number has dedicated himself unselfishly to this ministry.

Fr John was recognised nationally for his services to the navy in June 1981 when he was awarded the MBE in the Queen's Birthday Honours List

Fr John's naval service was to continue until 1987 during which time he served in the Far East and on secondment to a department of the Navy in San Francisco with the American Navy. In a report to Archbishop Michael of November 1984, Bishop Walmsley wrote "Fr John Ryan continues to do well in the Royal Navy, he is enjoying the working with the US Navy as our half of the chaplain's exchange programme.

In 1988, Fr John left the Navy to return to the diocese. In a letter to him dated June 1988, Archbishop Michael wrote confirming his new appointment as parish priest of Hartley also saying, "I offer you a warm welcome back to the diocese, and I am very glad indeed that you are returning to us. I know that when you leave the Navy you will be greatly missed from the chaplaincy scene and by the many colleagues you have worked with over the years. You have done a tremendous job as a chaplain to the Royal Navy both pastorally and in the practical order, and I am sure that a large number of people and naval families will be offering you their appreciation. I join my heartfelt thanksgiving to theirs for your presence among them and the work you have done so cheerfully and faithfully"

Before taking up his next appointment he took part in June 1988 in a 3-week resettlement course organised by the Archdiocese of Southwark in consultation with the Navy. This course enabled him to reconnect with the Archdiocese and be involved in different types of ministry, from Hospital Chaplaincy, the Christian Education Centre, the Marriage Tribunal and the Diocesan Finance Office, the Southwark Catholic Youth Service to working in parish settings in three different parishes as well as ministering alongside Canon Charles Walker with the South London Caribbean Chaplaincy.

Following this course, and after a bit of a break, he took up his first appointment as a parish priest in September 1988 when Archbishop Michael appointed him as parish priest of St Francis de Sales, Hartley. He was inducted as parish priest on 23rd September 1988 by Bishop John Jukes. In a visitation report of June 1990, Bishop Jukes wrote "The parish, seems to me, to be in very good heart and the parish priest is to be congratulated upon the visiting he does and the building up of the parish associations and general sense of unity in the parish. In 1992 and 1994, following his visitation, Bishop Jukes again commented on the parish being in good hands and the pastoral care that Fr John gave to his parishioners. Fr John described his time at Hartley as a wonderful experience in which he met some wonderful people. He served the people of Hartley for 8 years and during this time, he celebrated his Silver Jubilee of Ordination to the priesthood.

In May 1996 he received a letter from Archbishop Michael appointing him as parish priest of St Paul's Dover. He wrote "you have achieved a great deal since moving to Hartley some eight years ago and I should like to take this opportunity to thank you for all you have done. You will be missed by everyone, I am sure.

Fr John moved to Dover in September 1996 and was inducted by Bishop Jukes on 31st October 1996 and served there for almost 8 years. During his ministry the parish developed and many lay led initiatives were encouraged by him. Fr John was described by Bishop Jukes as an energetic and sacramental priest and he is to be commended for his pastoral care of the sick and the housebound. At that time the port of Dover was changing following the opening of the Channel Tunnel but it was still an important port and an entry point for refugees. Fr John, along with the other clergy in the Dover deanery, developed a pastoral outreach of welcome to these refugees, often going against the media hostility to them at that time. The parish of Dover under, under his leadership was a place of welcome, and Bishop Jukes commended this in his visitation report that there is a lot of work going on here.

In 2004 Archbishop Kevin McDonald, in his first round of appointments, asked Fr John to the parish of St Mary of the Crays, Crayford, to succeed Fr Peter Madden who he appointed to replace Fr John at Dover. In his letter Archbishop Kevin wrote "I take this opportunity to thank you for your ministry in Dover where you will be missed.

Fr John was inducted as parish priest by the then Vicar General, Monsignor Richard Moth on 26th November 2004. He was to serve here until October 2013. In a letter to Archbishop Peter Smith in 2013 he spoke of his time at Crayford as the best time of his life, I love Crayford very much and will be sad to leave it, a wonderful parish complex, a lovely community and some very willing helpers. He marked his 40th anniversary of priestly ordination in Crayford in June 2006.

Sadly, the final years of his ministry were marked with ill health which eventually led to him offering his retirement to Archbishop Peter Smith in July 2013. In his reply to that letter Archbishop Peter wrote "I willingly accept your resignation and wish you every blessing in your retirement and also want to express my thanks for your faithful ministry as a priest these past 47 years, both as a Royal Naval Chaplain as a parish priest of Hartley, Dover and Crayford. This is a great innings, and I am deeply grateful to you for all that you have done for the pastoral and sacramental care of the people whom you were sent to serve over these years. You have laboured long and hard in the vineyard of the Lord and now hopefully you will have time to recover your strength and more time for yourself without the responsibilities attached to being a parish priest. I thank you for your offer to help out when your health is better and I know the local clergy will appreciate that.

Fr John celebrated his Golden Jubilee of Ordination in June 2016

Following his retirement Fr John continued to live in the Bexley Deanery and was available for parish supply until his health made it impossible for him to live independently and he moved into full time residential nursing care where he died peacefully on 31st August 2025.

In a recent letter to the clergy of the diocese of Rome, Pope Leo wrote "I thank you for your lives given in service to the Kingdom, for your daily labours, for so much generosity in the exercise of the ministry, for all that you live in silence, and that at times is accompanied by suffering or misunderstanding." This describe Fr John Ryan's ministry of nearly 59 years.

He was a popular parish priest, whose varied ministries brought him into contact with many different pastoral situations. He was generous in his ministry and devoted to the people he served.

Fr John Ryan, priest of the Archdiocese of Southwark who died on 31st August 2025 in his 84th year and the 59th year of his priesthood.

May he Rest in Peace and Rise in Glory