

ARCHBISHOP'S HOUSE WESTMINSTER

Fr John Michael Warnaby R.I.P.

He played the title role in King Lear at the Edinburgh Festival; St Thomas More in a Man for all Seasons in Atlanta, Georgia; Freddie in A Day in the Death of Joe Egg at the Comedy Theatre, and so many other characters during an accomplished acting career of thirty years, full time from 2000 until 2012, on the stage and on screen large and small. He prayed to the God he knew since his childhood, having been born and brought up in a practising Catholic household and community. As an actor John Warnaby knew the reality of the 'fourth wall' between the performers and the audience, as a Catholic priest Fr John Warnaby respected appropriate boundaries with parishioners but there was no wall of separation – he was a bridge-builder helping people to deepen their relationship with God and with other people. By his own admission he could be a procrastinator, delaying decisions and what had to be done until the raising of the curtain or the call to action. Perhaps that accounts for his decision, at the age of 52, to take steps to be accepted for formation as a priest, even though he had the awareness of a possible call by the Lord in his teenage years.

John Warnaby was born in Birmingham on 6 November 1960 into what he described with thanks to God as 'a strong Catholic family'. His mother, from Co. Cork and his father, from Yorkshire and who became a Catholic, ensured that John and his three younger sisters were brought up committed to the life and work of the Church. The family home became a centre for prayer meetings and days of renewal for parishioners and others involved with charismatic renewal. The young John was educated at St Teresa's Primary School in the Birmingham suburb of Handsworth Wood before going to St Philip's College in Edgbaston from 1971-79. He did well at school academically and took an active part in school Masses and Sunday Masses in the church as an altar server, singer and reader. As a member of St Philip's School choir John accompanied the choir to Rome to participate in music for an academic symposium on Cardinal Newman in the Holy Year 1975. Much preparation was involved, with rehearsals before, during and after school and at weekends, resulting in a memorable and successful visit that included singing at Mass in St Peter's Basilica and having a private audience with Pope Paul VI (later canonized in October 2018). John enjoyed religious studies, encouraged by his teachers. The Head of RE took John to Oscott College, the seminary in Birmingham, and to events at Birmingham University and elsewhere to supplement John's education. During his growing-up years John followed his father's passion for cricket, watching and playing, and became very attached to the sport. He also took part in school plays, dramas and musicals. His talent as an excellent mimic was noticed and appreciated. John had an outward-going personality, a positive view of life and people and he enjoyed the company of others. He recognized that he was not the most industrious of students but his abilities, achievements and interests led him to take the exam for acceptance as a student of Oriel College in Oxford to read for a degree in Theology. He relished the study of scripture, he felt connected with Newman who had been a Fellow of Oriel as an Anglican and a key member of the Oxford Movement that led to reception into the Catholic Church.

At Oxford John continued to practice his faith. He grew in his intellectual understanding and in his devotional life. He sang in the college choir and became involved with drama productions. He continued to watch and play cricket and he also represented the college at rugby, rowing and hockey. The Catholic Chaplaincy and the local parish of St Aloysius were important to John. Reflecting on his time at Oriel John wrote, 'My faith anchored my college life but I did not seriously consider becoming a priest, save the thought crossing my mind from time to time. I had a constant, albeit unclear, sense that something might happen later...'

After university, theatre became John's main interest. Having finished his Theology degree course, achieving a BA with honours in 1982 and later raised to MA, John remained in Oxford to prepare to take a production of Shakespeare's King Lear to the Edinburgh Festival the following summer. Alongside preparations for this John did some teaching and worked as a painter and decorator and as a porter. He fulfilled a teenage ambition by joining the reserve battalion of the Parachute Regiment after rigorous training and selection. He was proud of his red beret, and grateful for the opportunities that came

his way to talk about matters of faith with those he encountered and who sought his counsel. Preparations for the production of King Lear paid off and the show was successful, so much so that John decided to pursue an acting career.

With a student overdraft and the need for funds John worked with the Industrial Society, now known as the Work Foundation, and he devoted time to help those on youth training programmes. He had an easy rapport with teenagers and young adults, many of whom came from disadvantaged backgrounds. His large stature was non-threatening, his sense of humour disarming, and his natural empathy and skill at listening as well as his ability as a ready raconteur were helpful in this and in subsequent endeavours. He took employment with the Corporation of Lloyd's, an organization charged with the regulation and administration of the Lloyd's of London insurance market. This temporary job was to last until 2000! John worked as a regulator in the area of solvency and financial reporting before being asked to set up an office in Atlanta, Georgia in the USA where he worked with investors for a couple of years. He returned to London with responsibilities around advising on investment selection for a Lloyd's company dealing with private and corporate interests. He and senior colleagues became close friends and they were content that John was doing office work by day and rehearsals and performances as an actor in the evenings. For a time John was both a Director at Lloyd's and a working member of the Royal Shakespeare Company. As an actor he was given much work in a variety of roles with increasing theatre engagements, film and television roles. When asked by a priest-colleague soon after he was ordained if he had appeared in the long-running tv series 'Casualty', as many actors have, he replied, 'no, I was in Holby City'! He played Hugh Fielding. Other tv appearances included Doctors, playing Michael Fairclough and Chris Hodgkins; the Pathologist in Eternal Law; Inspector Neele in Poirot; Lord Cirencester in Hotel Babylon; Hugo, Silent Witness; Tim Beecham, Rough Treatment and others roles in a variety of tv dramas from The Bill to EastEnders, Lovejoy to Rumpole, Cambridge Spies to Midsomer Murders. He also had roles in plays made for the radio. His talent wide-ranging, he was sought-after. Films in which he acted included Les Miserables, The King's Speech, The Sweeney, Wimbledon, Ali G – Da Movie... He acted in several theatre productions, including in London's West End and in regional theatres. John liked acting and was good at it, but he eschewed fame and wealth. He sensed that something was missing from his life, but tended not to worry about the future. He acknowledged that, gradually, his faith and the Church began to move centre stage in his life. This led to greater involvement in his local parish in London, initially as a reader at Mass then involvement with the Society of St Vincent de Paul and its outreach to the poor, helping to prepare adults to be received into the Church through the RCIA and helping with social events in the parish hall. He met and developed a strong friendship with the late Monsignor Ralph Brown, a retired distinguished Canon Lawyer who had become dependent on a wheelchair for mobility while still being heavily involved with Church matters and John gave him assistance. Mgr Brown, who died in 2014, was one of a number of priests who had become significant figures throughout John's life. He helped John with vocational discernment. John became involved with the Catholic Association for Performing Arts. He began to wonder if he was becoming, or had become, too old to offer himself for priesthood. He seems to have put off taking the necessary steps, but the encouragement and persuasion of those who had come to know him well prompted him to approach the Diocese of Westminster and in 2013 he was accepted as a student for the priesthood and was sent to the Pontifical Beda College in Rome.

John enjoyed life at the Beda – the staff and students, the studies, the liturgical life and, in a moderate way, the 'vita italiana'. The formation team saw in John a man more like a colleague than a student, a mature personality with a deep faith. He was worldly yet spiritual, a big yet humble personality, always respectful of others and their various roles. His excellent singing and speaking voice enhanced college liturgies, as did his developing preaching skill. He was ordained to the priesthood by Cardinal Vincent Nichols in Westminster Cathedral on 24 June 2017.

Fr John's first appointment was to St Monica's, Palmers Green where he served as Assistant Priest from 2017-19 before moving to St George's, Sudbury as Assistant Priest until 2020. He then moved to St Joseph's, Carpenders Park initially as Assistant Priest (the late Fr Dominic McKenna was Parish Priest in addition to his responsibilities in the two Borehamwood parishes). Fr John graciously accepted appointment as Parish Priest of St Joseph's in 2022, responsive to the failing health of Fr Dominic and humbly recognizing the confidence that the Diocese had in him and in his abilities. Fr John was devoted to his parishioners at St Joseph's and he worked hard for them. Some had become concerned for him, especially with the demands of Holy Week and Easter, commenting that he looked tired. Having completed the Easter liturgies he travelled to Birmingham to see his mother and sisters. He was advised by a friend to go to hospital in Erdington. He did and was found

to be seriously ill, a shock to his family and friends. He remained at the Birmingham Hospice, receiving end of life care. On Thursday of the Second Week of Easter he was visited by the Cardinal. Fr John was given the Sacrament of the Sick and he received Holy Communion. He knew he was supported by the love and prayers of his family and those who were around him. He was called by the Lord on Saturday of the Second Week of Easter, 13 April. He passed peacefully and is now sorely missed by his mother and sisters and their families, and by his friends and colleagues and, not least, by his parishioners at St Joseph's, Carpenders Park in Hertfordshire. He will be fondly remembered.

Ordained to the priesthood at the latter stage of his life but it was undoubtedly the biggest 'role' of John's life, a role handled with characteristic sensitivity, kindness, self-deprecating humour and, above all, a strong faith and deep trust in God and in God's mercy.

May Fr John's humble and generous soul, and the souls of all the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace. Amen.

Mgr Martin Hayes | Vicar General | Diocese of Westminster
21 April 2024

Fr John's Funeral Mass – Tuesday 30 April 2024, St Joseph's church, Carpenders Park