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“He died with his boots on”: Fr Peter Haverty, a faithful priest to the end

Fr Peter Haverty (1934-2023) met St Josemaria in his youth and was a priest for over sixty years.

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Fr Peter Haverty was a priest of Opus Dei in Britain who stood out for his cheerfulness and love for his vocation. He spent years ministering in the north of England and was

particularly loved in the Diocese of Salford where he lived for several decades and which he served for a long time as 'Defender of the Bond' on the diocesan marriage tribunal.

This experience of marriage problems also helped develop his deep pastoral sense and wisdom, and his understanding of human weakness.

Born in Kippax, near Leeds, England, on 3 December 1934, Fr Peter was a Yorkshireman to his finger-tips and was very proud of his native county. His father Joseph was of Irish descent and his mother Hilda was born of English parents. He had two elder sisters, Kathleen and Hilda, whom he remained close to throughout his life. Kathleen predeceased him.

In Kippax the young Peter went to a non-denominational school but at the age of 10 he started secondary

education at the De la Salle brothers school in Sheffield, before moving to the local Hemsworth Grammar School. An intelligent and hard-working young man, he gained a scholarship to study Chemical Engineering at Imperial College, London, and found accommodation at Netherhall House, then a recently opened university residence promoted by members of Opus Dei. His mother had gone to the local bishop to ask if he knew anywhere safe for her son to stay in the big city of London and it just so happened that he had recently received a leaflet advertising Netherhall. So he told her about it.

Arriving at Netherhall on 4 October 1953, this was Peter's first personal contact with Opus Dei and while there he discerned his vocation to the Work (as Opus Dei is familiarly called). Unusually, he lived some time in each of the three ways men

can be in Opus Dei, first as a supernumerary from 1955 (those who are or could get married), though without marrying himself, and then a few years later in the two forms of celibate vocations, associate and, finally and definitively, numerary. After graduating from university, he started a mechanical engineering apprenticeship at the Royal Ordnance Factory in Bridgewater, Somerset, and would travel to London every month.

On 6 August 1958, Fr Peter had his first ever encounter with St Josemaría Escriva, the founder of Opus Dei, who spent that summer and the subsequent ones until 1962 in England. Helped by a translator, the then young Peter walked up and down the garden with the Spanish-speaking saint. Making a play on the young man's name, St Josemaría told him: "You have to be Peter, rock, solid, a support ..." Those words

would turn out to be prophetic as that is exactly how Fr Peter lived the rest of his life.

In that same meeting, St Josemaría said something about Peter going to Rome, which the young Englishman half understood. Asking his translator afterwards, he learnt that the idea was for him to go to the Eternal City to study for the priesthood and he went soon after. Peter arrived there, by ferry to France and then train to Rome, in late September 1958, in time for the new academic year.

Fr Peter would tell many stories about his time in Rome with St Josemaría and other early members of the Work from numerous countries. He would stress especially the affection and big heart of the founder and how much he, and all his young colleagues, felt loved by the saint. He had many funny stories

to tell, including how much St Josemaría enjoyed him singing a popular song of the time, Perry Como's 1956 hit *Hot diggity*. He was also in Rome for the death of Pope Pius XII and the election of Pope John XXIII.

Concluding his studies with a doctorate in Philosophy at the Lateran University, Fr Peter was ordained as a priest of Opus Dei in Madrid on 5 August 1962 and returned to Britain where he spent most of his priestly life in Manchester, apart from a number of years in London working in Opus Dei's Regional Council for Great Britain, principally to support the organisation's women members.

Throughout his priestly life he attended generously to the spiritual needs of Opus Dei's lay faithful and those involved in their apostolates, as well as his ministry to priests and his

work for Salford diocese. He dedicated many hours to preaching, teaching Catholic doctrine, hearing confessions and giving spiritual direction to both men and women. He loved to preach and did so in his unique manner with depth, wit and great faith, mixing solid Catholic doctrine, the spirit of Opus Dei, stories about St Josemaría, the wisdom of the saints, and amusing anecdotes about his life – or golf!

He had taken up golf which he enjoyed greatly and was very good at, playing it weekly with priest friends. In one of these games he had a major heart attack in the 1990s which almost killed him. But he came through and always saw his future years of life as a gift from God. His health continued to decline, with his lungs, legs, heart and voice all failing to various degrees, and he received the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick over a dozen

times. But he had great faith in the sacrament and felt each time that it gave him a new lease of life. He was very aware of the closeness of death and spoke about it with humour but also seeming to look forward to it. His mind and spirit remained razor-sharp until his very last day.

He was particularly devoted to taking care of some of the elder Opus Dei members in his house and many people have very fond memories of the affection and attention he lavished on Ron, a lay member with whom Fr Peter had lived for years and who in his latter years had serious dementia. At the end of his life, and after Ron's death, Fr Peter turned his attention to John, a bedbound Opus Dei member now in a care-home. Fr Peter would take him Communion a few times a week, even though he needed to be taken as he himself was very unsteady on his feet and needed a walking frame to

support himself. As much as his physical limitations allowed, Fr Peter was always willing to help and even, with his Yorkshire character, determined to do so.

He remained highly active to the end, despite his poor health. He wrote and published a number of collections of his spiritual insights and right up to his last day he recorded a weekly half-hour meditation full of wisdom to help people pray. On his very last day, Thursday 13th April 2023, he had just recorded a meditation on Divine Mercy (in preparation for the feast coming up on Sunday) before going down to lunch. While at lunch he talked of his plan to go to give Communion to John that afternoon. And minutes later, he fell from his chair with a massive heart-attack, without regaining consciousness and dying within a couple of hours, though not before he had received his final Anointing of the Sick.

Preaching about divine mercy in the morning, intending to be its channel in the afternoon – as someone commented, truly ‘he died with his boots on’.

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