

Father Andrew Shiels

Andrew Shiels was born in Falkirk in 1921. He was educated at Campion House, the Jesuit-run pre-seminary college in Osterley, west London. He then attended Oscott College in Birmingham. He was ordained for the Archdiocese of St Andrews and Edinburgh in 1954.

His first Parish as assistant Priest was Gorebridge where he was placed from 1954 and 1955. He was then transferred as assistant Priest to St Columba's Edinburgh in 1955 where he was to remain for 7 years until 1962. His third Parish was St Mary Magdalene's Portobello in Edinburgh again as assistant Priest from 1962 to 1968.

It was then that he was transferred to St Patrick's Kilsyth in 1968 as assistant Priest to Thomas Canon McGarvey who was Parish Priest of St Patrick's at that time. This move to Kilsyth reunited Fr Shiels with his brother Charles, who was a teacher at St Patrick's Junior High School in Backbrae Street. His time in St Patrick's was to last until 1971.

Fr Shiels was then transferred as Parish Priest to St Joseph's Kelty in Fife for 9 years from 1971 to 1980. His final Parish was Our Lady and St Bridget in West Calder from 1980 to 1984.

Fr Shiels died in his home town of Falkirk on 12th Oct 1984 at the age of 63. Faithful servant of God, may he rest in peace!

Rev Fr. Andrew Shiels – 12th October 1984.

Father Andrew Shiels, parish priest of Our Lady and St Bridget's West Calder, died in Falkirk on 12th October 1984 in the 64th year of his age and the 31st of his priesthood. The funeral Mass was celebrated in St Francis Xavier's Falkirk on 16th October, the principle celebrant being the Right Reverend James Monaghan, Auxiliary Bishop of St Andrews and Edinburgh and the interment took place in Falkirk. At the Mass, the following panegyric was delivered by Father Keith O'Brien, Rector of St Mary's College, Blairs:

'The public life of Jesus Christ was a very busy one – he was hounded by crowds eager to see him and hear him, to listen to his teaching, to witness his miracles and cures. From time to time he did seek peace and quiet – he withdrew from the crowds into a place apart, he went into the mountains to pray to his Father, he got into a boat to go out onto the lake with his chosen twelve and from time to time he withdrew to Bethany, a small village about 2 miles from Jerusalem, to be with the family of Martha, Mary and Lazarus. There was a close bond of friendship between Jesus and this family; he gave them particular advice and help; and he imparted some of his most important teaching to this family. It was in the home of Martha Mary and Lazarus that Jesus reminded his followers of the importance of the contemplative life as opposed to the active life, of the value of a life of prayer as compared to a life of action.

I was thinking of Bethany, of Martha, Mary and Lazarus, this past weekend when pondering the life of Father Andrew Shiels. In the life of this good and zealous priest, there was undoubtedly the Martha part – there was the life of a man of action. Oh yes, strengthened by a life of prayer, but it was the life of a man, a priest, another Christ, who was set on "going around doing good", on

going around doing as much good as possible in as short a time as possible.

Father Andrew was a teenager when he first thought of offering himself as a priest. Born in 1921, he was just eighteen when the Second World War broke out – he could not go to seminary and instead served in the Royal Navy for the duration of the war. His war experiences instead of dampening his enthusiasm for the priesthood rather strengthened his desire to serve God and others and at the end of hostilities, he joined many other ex-servicemen in his preliminary studies at Campion House Osterly. His senior Seminary studies were continued at Oscott College Birmingham and Andrew was ordained a priest in the Cathedral in Edinburgh by the then Archbishop Gray on the 12th June 1954.

After service for one year in Gorebridge, Father Shiels served in turn at three of the largest and most important parishes in the Archdiocese: in St Columba's Edinburgh, in St John's Portobello and in St Patrick's Kilsyth. In each of these parishes his zeal was unflagging, and his ministry characterised by three things in particular. His love of the housebound and the elderly – shown in his devotion to his own elderly mother in Falkirk; and in his care and respect for those old people to whom he ministered, including the mother of our Cardinal and the mother of Canon Gordon; his ministry was also characterised by his ability as a good confessor, always willing to hear confessions, always ready to hand on very practical advice as well in Christ's forgiveness; and, thirdly, in his parishes, he always tried to encourage vocations to the priesthood, by his prayer and by his own priestly example. I know that I learned much from him as one of his altar boys in St Columba's as did another member of the Blairs staff Father Johnston, when he was father Andrew's altar boy in Portobello.

As a young priest, the activities of Father Shiels were not confined to the Parishes to which he was appointed. In addition to these duties, Father Shiels was also diocesan Scout Chaplin and was appointed diocesan chapel to the deaf and dumb people who sought a priest to help them in their particular need.

Father Shiels' first appointment as parish priest was to the parish of St Joseph's in Kelty. There he delighted to serve, and his particular joy was in the small primary school literally sitting on his doorstep. He was assiduous in his visitation of his people and in the care of the sick. His priesthood was simple and uncomplicated – unaffected by the winds of change. He suffered from no identity crisis in the priesthood. He did not lose any time trying to define his priesthood or in asking who he was. What was important for himself and for his people was trying to live his priesthood.

Over the years Father Andrew's health was beginning to deteriorate; he began to suffer from a crippling arthritis. And when he was asked to move from Kelty to West Calder, his poor health began to give cause for concern. His arthritis slowed him down and he was not as mobile as he had been, he could not always accomplish all his targets in parish and school visitation. And all this led to him becoming increasingly frustrated with himself – at his inability to work as he had once been able. But the good people of West Calder, were only too ready to forgive his shortcomings and to help him in every way. They saw in him the sort of priest recently described by Pope John Paul II: "A priest who prayed and who tried to get close to his people; a priest who was loyal to his vocation of following the poor, the chaste and the obedient Christ".

However the strains of parochial life were too much for him and he suffered a paralysing stroke one Sunday evening at the end of his celebration of Mass with his people.

It is then that we might say that another and perhaps even more fruitful apostolate became his – the Mary part of his life came to the fore. In and out of hospital, residing in his own home, he could no longer be busy about many things – he concentrated on the one thing necessary, he grew closer to God in his prayer, all the while continuing to give a priestly example to all who came to him.

His own home in Falkirk became for him a little Bethany, a haven of peace and rest, where love and devoted attention were lavished on him by his beloved sister Bella. He was close to Our Lord in his daily sacrifice of the Mass at home, in his praying of the breviary and the rosary. And he was close to his family and friends. I feel that I must pay public thanks here to Bella, on behalf of the Cardinal, The Bishop and all our priests for the way in which she cared for Andrew over these last few years – she herself became a Martha for her brother.

Father Andrew found peace and calm in his own home – but also in the only other company that he really loved; that of his fellow priests. His brother priests came to see him, especially those of the Falkirk Parish. He was an honoured guest in Falkirk Presbytery every week when he joined them for concelebrated Mass, for a meal and for the usual clerical chit-chat. And he enjoyed his frequent trips in their cars around the countryside and neighbouring presbyteries. With his ready quips and his very down to earth comments about every day affairs, I know he frequently enlivened the Falkirk presbytery table.

Father Andrew also enjoyed the company of the priests and the students for the priesthood at Blairs where he joined us for holidays. There his priestly example was striking. Despite his handicaps almost his first request was to know where he could say Mass and where was his breviary. Priests and Boys saw him at Mass, saw him at prayer and we knew that when he went to bed with his rosary around his neck so that any sleepless hours could be spent fruitfully occupied in prayer, thinking about the great mysteries of our redemption and praying for others.

Most would agree that his apostolate in ill health – his life as ‘Mary’ devoted to the one thing necessary – was perhaps even more fruitful than his life as Martha, occupied in the vineyard of the Lord.

But now Father Andrew has entered upon a great new adventure. Like Lazarus he is about to descend into the tomb... “our great brother Andrew has died”. But says Jesus, “our brother will rise again.” Jesus says, “I am the resurrection. If anyone believes in me, even though he dies, he will live, and whosoever lives and believes in me will never die”.

Like Martha and Mary we also believe this. We pray that Andrew will rejoice in the glory of the resurrection with all his sins forgiven. And as we pray in the third Eucharistic prayer, “May he share in your glory when every tear will be wiped away; may he see you, our God, as you are; may he become like you, and praise you for ever through Christ our Lord from whom all good things come.”

May God grant eternal rest to this good and faithful priest.
Amen.

The following tribute by a Blairs student indicates the influence exercised by Father Shiels on a young man preparing for the priesthood and is reproduced from 'Blairs 1985' with permission:

“Father Shiels was an old man who was quite ill and could only walk with a stick very slowly. I used to come and visit him in his room where he spent the best part of the day reading books and saying office. He used to tell me he was studying Greek and Dutch. When I visited him he would give me jobs to do such as opening all the Christmas cards from the year before from his friends and read them to him. He used to call me his ‘Doctor’ since another job I did for him was to get all his pills and medicine ready and get some water for him.

He used to tell me about his life in the Navy during the war as a young man before he went on for the priesthood. He described some of things that happened to him and his ‘mates’ and he would tell me some of the Navy expressions that they used! I enjoyed his stories and the conversations that we had. He had a very comical and pleasant character, which all of the students here enjoyed.

I know that he will be joining God’s presence in heaven, since his death last October I often pray for him and ask him to pray for me.”

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