

Fr Peter Morrissey

14 August 1928 - 28 April 2020

'A home-visiting priest is a Mass-going people'

Through the death of Fr Peter Morrissey, the Sydney church has lost a devoted and humble priest. Aged 91, Fr Morrissey, was one of the oldest priests in the Archdiocese and he will be sorely missed by many, including friends in the parishes that he served with dedication.

Born at Hornsby on 14 August 1928, Peter was the second youngest child of John Daniel Morrissey and Stella Gurney (a convert). Mr Morrissey ran a small nursery at Hornsby and was highly regarded for his knowledge of native plants. His Irish ancestors were Hornsby district pioneers, including the Reddy family, who donated land for community benefit – today Reddy Park.

Fr Peter attended the Waitara Convent School operated by the Sisters of Mercy, before moving to Eastwood Marist Brothers, where he left, aged 15, with the Intermediate Certificate.

He initially worked on a sheep station as a rouse-about and then he went to Leeton where his sister, who worked for Australian Women's Land Army, secured him work as a general farm hand. He returned to Sydney and worked in a clerical position at Johnson and Johnson.

In 1947, after being interviewed by Cardinal Norman Gilroy, Peter commenced studies at Springwood, where first he undertook the Leaving Certificate. After matriculation he commenced theology studies. The motivation to devote his life in service to God had been inspired by Fr Mick Farrell of Waitara Parish. In an interview on Australia Day this year for an upcoming history of his final parish, Mortlake, Fr Morrissey recalled:

I felt I could be storing up Grace for heaven ... rather than working for material/secular interests, which had no value by comparison.

Fr Morrissey's first parish was the historic St Michael's at Hurstville, where the legendary Fr Tom Dunlea, gave the new priest wonderful example of pastoral service. 'Fr Dunlea was charismatic – he loved everyone and had a tremendous impression on me. He became a great part of my life', Fr Morrissey recalled.

At North Ryde, Father suffered pneumonia several times as a result of getting wet while riding a motorcycle to visit parishioners and undertake funerals. He obtained a small car, but even with the support of his parish priest, Fr Martin Crehan, such a decision attracted punishment from St Mary's Cathedral and he was moved immediately to Belmont Parish

(now in the Maitland-Newcastle Diocese), then one of the most northern parishes under the administration of the Sydney Archdiocese.

In 1964, Fr Peter served as a chaplain on a migrant ship before taking perhaps the most challenging position of his life – the Five Dock Parish, where the cantankerous Monsignor John Peoples had ruled since 1919. Fr Morrissey is remembered for his warmth and personal outreach to Five Dock's parishioners and for bringing stability to the rocky parish. Many families recall Father's daily visitation of the sick, especially the comfort he provided to the dying and their distressed relatives.

In July 1968, at Fr Dunlea's prompting, Cardinal Gilroy sent Father to Hurstville again, where he supported his close friend in his last years.

Fr Morrissey then had postings at Kogarah, Kensington, Northbridge and in Christmas 1973 he was sent to Toukley on the Central Coast to run 'housie' for Fr Fitzgerald. He also served at Earlwood and Padstow before his first appointment as Parish Priest of Leura in 1975, which later also included being Administrator of Lawson Parish until 1990.

Father was well respected for being a clear and a concise communicator. Those talents were evident through his work for many years at Catholic Radio and Television at Homebush, where he hosted several programmes.

Due to illness, Cardinal Edward Clancy and Bishop (later Archbishop) Frank Carroll, agreed that Fr Morrissey move to a drier climate and he was appointed to Lake Cargelligo. After a brief return to Leura, he was appointed Parish Priest of Woollahra (1991-1997), a very different parish given its socioeconomics. Father loyally served the omnipresent Archbishop James Carroll. He recalled that he often took phone messages for the archbishop from notable people, including the Prime Minister.

In 1997 he applied for St Patrick's Mortlake parish to rekindle his pastoral zeal. In the (then) predominantly working-class parish of Mortlake, he felt more at home. 'They were nice, homely people and I very much enjoyed my years at Mortlake'. A kind and down-to-earth priest, Fr Morrissey quickly became much loved in Mortlake.

In his straight-talking humility, Fr Morrissey said: 'I did not build anything, but I knocked on doors all my life and had thousands of cups of tea with ordinary people'. 'Cardinal James Freeman used to say: "A home-visiting priest is a Mass-going people" – I believed that faithfully: I knew everyone in the parish – I knocked on every door – this is the only boast of my life.'

During his tenure as the sixth Parish Priest of Mortlake, Fr Morrissey instilled inclusiveness into the parish. Whether Catholic or not, he welcomed everyone, and was widely respected by the broader community. In 2000, the Great Jubilee year, he organised the parish's special celebrations.

In 2003 Fr Morrisey retired from Mortlake. For the next 16 years he continued to serve the Archdiocese as a supply priest each weekend. He was very well-read, an avid historian, and not someone who could be pigeonholed as either conservative or progressive. His topical and concise letters to editors were published in a range of clerical and secular publications, alike.

In his last 12 months Fr Morrissey was slowed by illness though remained positive and always interested in the needs of others. After the Covid-19 lockdown he worried that his friends would not have enough food. His mind remained alert and his detailed memories of earlier days and events in the church's history remained undiminished. He was one of the last of a generation of priests who could recall the significance of Irish culture in the Sydney Archdiocese.

May he Rest in Peace

Dr Damian John Gleeson

