

RT. REVD. MICHAEL EVANS MTh
3rd BISHOP OF EAST ANGLIA
2003-2011

Michael Evans was born on 10th August 1951 in South London, and moved to Whitstable in Kent when he was five. He attended St Mary's Catholic Primary School there, and went on to Simon Langton Grammar School in Canterbury where he gained A-level passes in French, History and Latin. He went straight from the Sixth Form to study for the priesthood at St John's Seminary, Wonersh, near Guildford in Surrey.

He was ordained a priest for the Archdiocese of Southwark on 22nd June 1975, and spent two years as assistant priest at St Elizabeth's in Richmond, Surrey. From 1977-1979 he studied for a Master of Theology degree at Heythrop College, University of London, and then returned to St John's Seminary for eight years as lecturer in Christian Doctrine. While there, he was also chaplain to St Teresa's Convent School in Effingham, Surrey. From 1985-1987 he was Vice-Rector at the seminary, with the then Monsignor Peter Smith (later the second Bishop of East Anglia, and now Archbishop of Southwark) as Rector.

From 1987-1993, he was a university chaplain at the South London Universities Chaplaincy, returning to the seminary from 1993-1995, once again as lecturer and Vice-Rector. He was one of the two assisting priests at Mgr Peter Smith's ordination as Bishop of East Anglia in May 1995.

From 1995 Canon Michael Evans was parish priest of St Augustine's in Tunbridge Wells, Kent, a thriving parish with a Sunday Mass attendance of 1300 and with many young people actively involved in its life and worship. He is still remembered with love there as 'Father Michael'.

He was appointed Canon Theologian of the Archdiocese of Southwark by Archbishop Michael Bowen in 1996, and had many other responsibilities. He has been a regular writer of articles and pamphlets on theological issues.

Canon Michael Evans was appointed to the Diocese of East Anglia by Pope John Paul II. He was ordained Bishop at St. John's Cathedral in Norwich on 19th March, 2003 in a ceremony marked by a great involvement of young people and Taize chant. This was to set the tone for a ministry that had a strong focus on young people, and on bringing them into the heart of the life and mission of the Church. His regular meetings with the Diocesan Youth Council which he established continued until shortly before his death, and his home at Poringland saw regular Youth retreats, Masses and Candlelight Vigils, as well as pizza, bonfires, fireworks and his trademark chilli-con-carne in various guises. He led two of the largest Diocesan groups of young people from this country to join with millions of young people from all over the globe at the Pope's World Youth Day celebrations, as well as establishing an annual youth pilgrimage from East Anglia to Taize. Unbeknown to this year's pilgrims, he was hoping and planning to join them there in a few weeks time – and looking forward to surprising them by appearing at Sunday Mass shortly after their arrival!

He was great supporter of Catholic Education and immensely proud of the excellent schools within the Diocese. He visited all the schools within the first year as Bishop, and in subsequent years was a regular visitor, finding joy and bringing joy to staff and young people alike. Whether it was a year group assembly, or a big event he was a friendly, inspiring and enthusiastic participant. Despite his serious decline in health he was still looking forward to attending year end celebrations at St. Louis Middle School in Bury and St Louis Primary School in Newmarket later this month.

Bishop Michael's enduring and deep commitment to the gospel of justice and peace was reflected in his own personal way of life which was marked by simplicity and integrity. He dealt with problems compassionately, methodically, pastorally and justly. He drew inspiration from his Catholic faith and the teaching of the Church, in particular Pope Paul VI and his great encyclical *Populorum Progressio*. The martyred Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador was also a great hero in his championing of the rights of the poor and disenfranchised and Bishop Michael was a founder member of the Romero Trust. He was privileged to celebrate Mass at the altar where Romero was killed, and has taken an active interest in the proposed establishment of a shrine in his honour at Southwark Cathedral.

The Bishop's faith was a faith that bore fruit in practical ways, reaching out to those in need. Already a committed supporter of the work being done by the Catholic Church in Cambodia – work which sought to serve the whole of the community, not just Catholics and Christians – he established a 'twinning' between the Diocese of East Anglia and Battambang. Through this twinning, much material help has been provided for community projects and above all a lasting and mutual friendship has been established between the people of the two Dioceses with regular visits and exchanges, adults, young people, seminarians and clergy. One particular characteristic of the Cambodian people that he always noted was their smiles – and the motto of his fellow bishop, Mgr Kike Figaredo – 'The happiness of God is our strength'.

A second 'twinning' was also established with the Latin Patriarchate of the Holy Land, where East Anglia sought to reach out to a church 'under seige', bringing hope through solidarity. Many projects have brought renewed hope to people in that troubled area, Palestinians of both the Christian and Moslem faiths and Jews.

A committed Ecumenist, Bishop Michael, was a member of the British Catholic/Methodist Committee from 1991, appointed as a member of the International Joint Commission for Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Methodist Council in 1996 and following his ordination as Bishop was appointed Chariman of the Bishops' Conference Committee for Dialogue and Christian Unity. His knowledge, commitment and contribution to dialogue with the Methodist communion was immense. As Chairman of the Committee responsible for dialogue with other faiths, he was appointed Co-President of the Christian-Muslim Forum on which he served alongside the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams. At a local level, his relationships with leaders of other Churches and faiths were always marked by warmth and genuine friendship.

Bishop Michael was a renowned life-long supporter of Leeds United Football Club, and indeed I suspect this will be reflected in the colour of the flowers at his Funeral Mass as it was at his Ordination Mass as Bishop.

A diagnosis of 'advanced and aggressive' prostate cancer early in his time in East Anglia could have brought about a lessening of energy in another person, but right from the beginning, whilst accepting that he was dying, Bishop Michael was determined to carry on living and working. His diary commitments during the last six years tended to increase rather than diminish as he drove himself to engagements all around the counties of Norfolk, Suffolk, Cambridgeshire and the Unitary Authority of Peterborough which comprise the Catholic Diocese of East Anglia. Indeed most of his achievements in reinvigorating the Catholic community, reaching out to the young, nurturing vocations and preparing a growing Catholic community for a future with fewer priests took place during the period of his illness. Only following a stroke last September did he slow down, but still continued to travel widely around the Diocese until at the beginning of 2011 he announced that his consultants had given him 'weeks rather than months' to live. Even then, he was determined to 'live with dying' rather than give up, and has continued to exercise pastoral care of the Diocese as well as fulfilling engagements that were possible given his condition. On Pentecost Sunday he confirmed 46 young people at St John's Cathedral in Norwich, followed by more adult confirmations at the National Shrine of Our Lady at Walsingham. In the weeks immediately before his death, he celebrated First Holy Communion and Confirmation for young people in the Parish Church at Poringland which was next to his home, and had been looking forward to preach at the Ordination of one of his student, Fr Padraig Hawkins on Saturday 9th July. He was admitted to the Norfolk & Norwich University Hospital on Thursday of last week after collapsing at his home. He never regained consciousness, but died peacefully surrounded by some of his friends and under the excellent care of the staff of the Hospital.

Bishop Michael will be received into his Cathedral in Norwich on Tuesday 19th July at 5.30pm in readiness for his Funeral Mass on Wednesday 20th July at 1.30pm.

Fr. Mark Hackeson,
Bishop's Private Secretary

12th July, 2011.