

Requiem Mass for Mgr David Manson
Brentwood Cathedral
28 January 2026

First reading: Wisdom 3:1-9

Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 22

Second Reading: Romans 8:31-35, 37-39

Gospel: Luke 24:13-35

Homily by Mgr Paul McPartlan

Fr David loved being a priest, and he didn't want to retire — at least, not yet. He loved the communities he served, and they very much loved him. 'He was the kindest priest I ever met', said one of the many tributes online and in the book of remembrance; 'the kindest, most loving man', said another; 'a wonderful welcoming soul', wrote another; 'a one in a million parish priest', said another. I was always amazed that he seemed to know everyone's name in the parish, and special occasions that were coming up, which he often mentioned at the end of Mass, leading to a chorus of Happy Birthday, or a round of applause, or whatever — making the parish a family.

He loved the liturgy, the source and summit of the Christian life, as the Second Vatican Council taught. He loved celebrating it and helping others to understand it and participate in it, as Vatican II wanted. The Council's teaching exactly reflects the thrilling Gospel we just heard: in the liturgy the risen Lord himself is present among his disciples, teaching them and feeding them — and here's the Easter candle burning brightly! The fact that he vanishes from their sight at the breaking of bread in the story makes us think that he could just as suddenly reappear when we ourselves break bread in the Eucharist, so close is he when we do what he commanded us to do in his memory, close with his promise of life everlasting, to which we cling.

Fr David was Director of Liturgical Formation in the diocese and Chairman of the Liturgical Commission under Bishop Thomas. There's a wonderful video on YouTube of a liturgical talk he gave just a couple of years ago at Gidea Park. In a masterly way, he combines great knowledge with a very engaging delivery, and lovely dashes of humour. It's easy to see why he was such a popular speaker around the diocese, and such a remarkable preacher of the Word.

But he had a narrow escape, because Bishop Thomas at first wanted him to do a licence in canon law in Rome after he finished his priestly formation at the Venerable English College! That was very understandable because David had been a solicitor before entering the seminary.

He was born in the East end of London, grew up in Stratford, and the family then moved to Chelmsford when he was nine. He was an altar boy in Chelmsford and loved it. That's no doubt why he encouraged lots of altar servers in all the parishes he served. He felt the call to be a priest when he was fourteen. His dad thought that he ought to have some qualifications to fall back on if it didn't work out, and David chose the law. After gaining his LL.B, he became an articled clerk at H. J. Smith and Co. in Braintree in 1972 and was then offered a job in the same firm. That's when he discovered the church of Our Lady Queen of Peace, and from 1973-77 after a ham sandwich and a coffee at lunchtime he would call in regularly to pray before the Blessed

Sacrament for the Lord's guidance. That experience surely gave him the great patience and understanding that so many people valued when they came to him in difficult times or periods of discernment. They found someone with great empathy, great humanity. He very naturally practised what Pope Francis called the ministry of accompaniment. And I think we know why he always wanted his church to be open for prayer during the day.

During those years, the family moved to Great Bentley, and David took a year off from 1977-78 to help look after his younger brother, Andrew, who had learning difficulties and who wasn't at all well at that time. David was instinctively kind and compassionate, and his lifelong love and care for Andrew, who died in 2023, surely played a part in that. In 1978, he went back to work at a different legal firm, Sparlings in Colchester, and within two years his boss asked him what his plans were for the future, which as David said was legal code for offering him a partnership. David told him that in fact he was thinking of the priesthood, and he was very impressed that his boss, who was an Anglican, said OK, you go and try that, and if it doesn't work out the offer is still open.

Happily, as we know, it did work out! David went to Rome in 1980, and that's where he and I met. Thursday was the day off at the Gregorian University and students used to head off on intrepid day trips called gitas to explore various destinations. David and I became firm friends on a gita to Perugia in 1981, and that most wonderful friendship and fraternity simply grew and deepened in all the years that followed.

After being ordained in Colchester by Bishop Thomas in 1985, Fr David was of course willing to do canon law if that's what the bishop wanted, but it really wasn't his own preference. Happily, the bishop relented and asked him to study liturgy instead, which he did with great joy and success at the famous Benedictine college of Sant'Anselmo in Rome. He particularly remembered a field-trip with several professors and a group of students to Ravenna, where they marvelled at the 5th and 6th century Byzantine mosaics in the churches, so full of symbolism. Two images in the great apse mosaic of the Basilica of Sant'Apollinare in Classe made a deep and lasting impression.

One was a very large Cross, studded with jewels. Why? because the Cross is the sign of the Lord's victory, and the doorway to life everlasting for us as for him. As St Paul says to the Romans: Christ died and rose again for us. Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ. Whatever trials may come we offer them to him and 'we are more than conquerors through him who loved us'. David subsequently wrote his thesis on the solemn Adoration of the Cross in the Church's liturgy for Good Friday. Yes, we adore the Cross and embrace the Cross as the means of our salvation in Christ. It sparkles with glory for us!

In his ministry, he helped people cope with the crosses that came to them. He took enormous care with the preparation of funerals, helping those who were grieving, and seeking the right words to comfort and uplift them in funeral homilies. He was grieved himself by the restrictions of COVID and nurtured Braintree parish back to vigorous life afterwards, stressing the importance of learning lessons from those trials about our dependence on God, on one another, and on the environment.

The other image in the apse mosaic was of the bishop and martyr, Saint Apollinaris, wearing a

chasuble covered in bees! Why bees? Because his preaching was sweet as honey and attracted so many people to Christ! Fr David firmly believed that ‘Good preaching is an essential part of what you do as a pastor’. Week in and week out, his goal was to give ‘a good scriptural homily’, breaking the Word of God to feed and inspire his people. He researched the background of the readings, he prayed and pondered through the week, and time after time, come Sunday, he brought the readings alive for the parish, standing in the centre of the church, no notes, it was all in his head, in precise detail. He had an amazing memory — the legal training! — ‘thank you for everything, especially your sermons’, said one of the tributes; ‘we all learnt so much from your homilies’, said another, ‘and you always made us smile’.

Fr David loved the Word of God, and he wanted his people to be fed and fired by it, as the disciples were on the road to Emmaus: their hearts burned within them as Jesus opened the scriptures to them!

After several very happy years apprenticed to Fr Frank Kerrigan at Hornchurch, David came to this newly-opened Cathedral as assistant priest in 1991, but within a year he was appointed pro-Administrator and then Administrator in 1993 — the position now known as Dean. After the tensions of the building project, he revitalised the Cathedral parish. Mass attendance tripled in his ten years here. Well aware of his remarkable talents, Bishop Thomas appointed Fr David as Vicar General in 2001, looking after the Essex part of the diocese, a responsibility he exercised with great skill and sensitivity into the early months of Bishop Alan’s tenure in 2014. Bishop Alan himself kept Fr David as a trusted advisor on the appointments board right up to now. Meanwhile, Fr David went from the Cathedral to be parish priest at Colchester till 2005, and then at Ingatestone till 2016, when to his great delight he returned to Braintree, to the very church where he discerned his vocation.

Fr David had an extraordinary mind and a wide range of interests. He loved Handel, Bach and Mozart. He could recite and sing great chunks of Gilbert and Sullivan from memory. Poetry likewise, and his legal mind would eagerly read and digest rulings of the Supreme Court both here and in the USA. He had a vivid sense of humour, a great fund of hilarious anecdotes, and an unforgettable laugh! He loved nature and birds. He loved words and was very adept in his use of them. He was in the midst of writing a fascinating book on the life and times of John Henry Newman. What was the City of London like when Newman’s father worked there? What was Oxford like when Newman himself studied there? It was a glorious distillation of his vast knowledge of social history. As someone said: he was so wise and at the same time such fun!

As the Book of Wisdom says, to all appearances, death looks like destruction — particularly, we might say, when it happens so suddenly. However, in truth it is not so. With the precious gift of faith, we know, as Wisdom says, that the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, they are at peace. God has tested them and found them worthy of himself.

Fr David loved being a priest, and he was generous and gentle in his ministry. In the book of remembrance, someone wrote very beautifully: ‘Your life was a blessing, your memory is a treasure’. Thank you, Lord, for giving us David. May we love your holy Word as he did; cling to your promise of eternal life, especially in the Mass, as he did; and know, as he did, that, whatever trials may come, we are more than conquerors with your unfailing help. AMEN.