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Fr Robert Farrell (1933-2025)

Fr Robert Farrell was the first Scottish numerary of Opus Dei. He was ordained to the priesthood in 1978.

19/09/2025

Robert Casimir Farrel was born on 9th June 1933 in Glasgow, the youngest of six children born to Francis, a slater's labourer, and Gertrude. He was baptized six days later, and confirmed at the age of ten. He received a thorough catholic education at St Mungo's Primary

School and then at St Mungo's Academy. He was always a proud Scotsman, and was a lifelong supporter of Glasgow Celtic FC.

Robert enrolled at the Royal Technical College (now the University of Strathclyde) in 1951 and graduated in 1955 with a BSc degree in pharmacy. He was called to National Service and joined the Royal Air Force. He completed his Officer Cadet Training at RAF Jurby on the Isle of Man in 1957, and was on the teaching staff with the rank of Flying Officer at the School of Technical Training at RAF Halton in Buckinghamshire.

On completing his military service, he moved to London, and obtained a Diploma from Chelsea College of Science and Technology in 1960. He was appointed external examiner to Kumasi University in Ghana, at a time that coincided with the Queen's

visit in November 1961. He met the Queen with the Duke of Edinburgh, and remembered especially Prince Philip's sense of humour. On his return to Britain, he realized that he could travel via the Holy land at no extra cost, and so spent Christmas of 1961 there. He was able to attend Midnight Mass in Bethlehem, but was unable to return to his lodgings in Jerusalem afterwards as all the buses had stopped running. He ended up, most appropriately, spending Christmas night in a cave in Bethlehem.

On returning to London, he worked as a Lecturer at Chelsea College, becoming a member of the Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain, the Society of General Microbiology, and the Society of Applied Bacteriology. It was during this time that he met Opus Dei and asked for admission. He joined first as a supernumerary member, and

then, on 15th July 1962, as a numerary, just in time for the last visit of the founder, St Josemaría Escrivá, to London. Later on, he was given a wooden cross by St Josemaría as the first Scottish numerary of Opus Dei.

For the next 15 years he spent his time combining his work as a Lecturer at Chelsea College with apostolic tasks for Opus Dei. He was director of the Netherhall House international student residence in Hampstead when a new wing was completed. As director, he was able to receive the Queen Mother in her capacity as Chancellor of London University for the formal opening in November 1966. Later he was the director of Kelston Boys' Club in south London for two years. From 1969 to 1976 he was a member of the Regional Commission of Opus Dei in Great Britain.

In the autumn of 1977 he entered the Roman College of the Holy Cross to finish his studies for the priesthood. He had been pursuing ecclesiastical studies over the years before entering the Roman College, following the curriculum established for the lay numerary members of Opus Dei. This meant that he had already completed the philosophical biennium and the theological quadriennium by the time he moved to Rome, and needed very little time to complete his training. He was ordained to the priesthood on 15th August 1978 by Cardinal Franz König of Vienna, at the Shrine of our Lady of Torreciudad, along with 61 other members of Opus Dei. His first public Mass was celebrated in Glasgow on 27th August 1978 at St Philip's Church, Ruchazie. After ordination, he remained in Spain to complete his licentiate and then his ecclesiastical doctorate (STD) at the Faculty of

Theology of the University of Navarre.

Fr Robert was back in Britain by the summer of 1980, which coincided with the visit of St Josemaría's successor, Blessed Álvaro del Portillo. Encouraged by Blessed Álvaro, Fr Robert and others immediately started making visits to Scotland to start the work of Opus Dei there. Eventually Fr Robert moved to Glasgow in November 1981 and the first Opus Dei centre was set up there the following year at Beaumont Gate.

He remained for a few years in Glasgow, exercising his pastoral ministry there and helping out at the Cathedral, especially hearing confessions. Among those he came to know and befriend was the great Celtic footballer Tommy Burns, who told him his life was dominated by the “three Fs” — Faith, Family, and Football — in that order. Fr Robert

always had a very high regard for Tommy, and was a strong supporter of starting his cause of canonization.

In 1987 Fr Robert was present when Bl. Álvaro made a day trip to Glasgow, together with his successor Don Javier Echevarría, during a short pastoral visit to Britain. There was a get-together at Beaumont Gate with some members of Opus Dei. Soon afterwards Fr Robert returned to London to continue his ministry there, but he stayed in touch as best he could with all those he had known in Glasgow, and his memory lives on there many years later.

In 1991 Fr Robert was invited by the Bishop of Jhansi in India to preach a retreat for diocesan priests. This provided a good opportunity to visit several cities ahead of the opening of the first centre of Opus Dei in India. One of the cities he visited was Calcutta, where he met Mother

Teresa. Later on, he commented that he had perceived something special three times in his life when he had been in the presence of very holy people: St Josemaría, St John Paul II (whom he had met in an audience) and St Teresa of Calcutta.

Fr Robert continued working in London until 2005 when he moved to Manchester where he remained for the rest of his life. He exercised his ministry by saying Mass and hearing confessions in the Centres of Opus Dei, preaching meditations, days of recollection and retreats, and in teaching philosophy and theology to the lay members of Opus Dei.

His health slowly declined as he got older, but his mind remained clear right to the end. He started getting breathing problems in 2023, and was diagnosed with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). From that point on, he had to use an

oxygen machine most of the day, but was able to carry on saying Mass every day and operate more or less normally.

In April 2025 he was hospitalized after catching an infection. He was able to return home, but was very weak and required a much larger oxygen dosage. He was readmitted to the Manchester Royal Infirmary in July 2025. He slowly declined, but remained lucid until his last day. He always had his rosary in hand and a copy of Tanqueray's *The Spiritual life: a treatise on ascetical and mystical theology* by his bedside. He very gladly received Holy Communion daily whenever he was well enough to do so.

Fr Robert took a turn for the worse on the night of 13th August. People from his centre accompanied him during his last day, Thursday 14th August, the Vigil of the Assumption.

He received the Anointing of the Sick around midday and was given absolution by the priest attending him as he breathed his last at about 8.45pm.

On hearing of his death, the Prelate of Opus Dei, Mgr Fernando Ocáriz, wrote; “Robert is the first priest from Scotland; he has been a very generous man, in love with his call to the Work and to the priesthood, who has been available at any time for what was needed. We can think of the quantity of souls who have benefitted from his effort to draw them to Christ. Moreover, he has left us on the Vigil of the Assumption of the Most Holy Virgin, the day on which he also celebrated the anniversary of his ordination. Our Lady will have welcomed him and he will be rejoicing in God.”

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