

FR FRANCIS DAVIDSON OSB

1939-2018

FR BERNARD MCINULTY OSB



George Davidson was born in Edinburgh on 10th February 1939 to an Edinburgh family. He was one of two children, the other being his sister Amelia. George was sent to the preparatory school at Carlekemp, North Berwick, and later to the Abbey school, Fort Augustus, which was run by the Benedictine monks. He was a very able student and a good cricketer, a bowler of deadly accuracy. He was Head Boy at both schools. He was one of the first Scottish schoolboy Hockey Internationals from Fort Augustus School. Fort Augustus Abbey is situated at the south end of Loch Ness, commanding a magnificent view. In a setting of outstanding natural beauty the Abbey is surrounded by mountains and forestry on the shores of Loch Ness. Founded in 1876, the monastery incorporated Lamspringe Abbey and the ancient Scots Abbey Schottenkloster at Ratisbon, Germany. St Benedict's Abbey was the first post-Reformation Benedictine Abbey in Scotland and an important centre in its early history and a seat of learning. It was to this community of monks that the 18 year old George Davidson joined straight from school being clothed in the habit by Abbot Oswald Eaves in 1956. He took the monastic name Francis after the famous St Francis of Assisi, the man of peace.

On completing his noviciate and making his simple profession, Brother Francis was sent to Fribourg, Switzerland, to study Philosophy with the Dominicans and to St Benet's, Oxford for Theology. Francis proved to be a good student – he was conscientious and a voracious reader. He gained a licence in Theology STL. Br Francis became fluent in German and French, and could get by in Italian. He was also a good Latinist. Among other talents he was quite an accomplished pianist. Francis was ordained Priest in the Abbey Church at Fort Augustus in 1965.

Fr Francis was a very determined and capable man. So it was no surprise that he was appointed Headmaster of the Abbey school. He was also to teach Philosophy to generations of young monks, including the Pluscarden brethren and Dom Hugh Gilbert now the Bishop of Aberdeen with whom he formed a friendship. The sudden death of his long time school friend and fellow monk Fr Vincent Pirie-Watson OSB at only 49, just after Easter 1983, was a particular blow.

For much of his time as Headmaster, the Abbey school did well but towards the late 1980s numbers declined. Fr Francis, after consulting the Abbot, proposed to Chapter that the school should close. This motion was opposed and Fr Francis left to live at Ampleforth where he taught in the College for a time. There was a vacancy for a Headmaster at the Abbey School in Portsmouth, Rhode Island, USA, a post to which Fr Francis was appointed. This was a particularly fruitful and happy period in his monastic life. Under his headmastership the Abbey school became co-educational. It flourished and was successful. Fr Francis liked America.

Earlier in his life he contributed to a major study on the theology of the Monastic life – to a book entitled *Consider your Call* by Fr Daniel Rees and other EBC Monastics. For a brief period Fr Francis served as Chaplain to the Tyburn Benedictine sisters at their convent in Largs, Ayrshire. At a Sunday Mass in Fort Augustus he once gave a very eloquent commentary on the meaning of the Mass. At another time he gave an excellent series of lectures to junior monks on John Cassian and the Rule of the Master.

Fr Francis returned to the UK after his sojourn in America to work as Parish Priest on Ampleforth parishes. But back at Fort Augustus the community was experiencing difficulties and an uncertain future. The Abbot resigned to live at Laureston in Edinburgh and Fr Francis was appointed Prior Administrator in 1997 by the Abbot President. He seemed set to close the Monastery in the face of financial and community difficulties. But all this was discussed over a period of several months with the monastic community. Eventually, in the autumn of 1998 the majority of the community voted to close the Monastery. This was met with further difficulties and conflict. Fr Francis had the very difficult and painful task of overseeing the closure of Fort Augustus Abbey. This involved considerable work. It could be said he made history, but a long-standing Abbey was closed. It was not an easy time for the brethren and perhaps especially for the last Abbot, Dom Mark Dilworth. The resident community eventually dispersed to other communities or to a diocese in January 1999.

In 2000, along with four other monks of Fort Augustus – Fr Gregory Brusey, Fr Edward Delepine, Fr Antony Hain, and Fr Bernard McInulty – Fr Francis transferred his monastic stability to the Monastery of St Laurence at Ampleforth Abbey. Again he proved to be a very capable member of the community and his gifts were recognised. He served from 2001-06 as Parish Priest of St Mary's Bamber Bridge, Preston, where he was liked among the Parishioners. He became a councillor to the Abbot of Ampleforth and later Prior of St Benets, Oxford, a post which he much enjoyed and in which the Hall benefitted. The historical sexual abuse allegations, which were to afflict the Church did not escape Fort Augustus and he came into the firing line. As a result, he stepped down from his Oxford post – something which

was a disappointment to him. On his return to Ampleforth, his last years became gradually more difficult with health problems. He had a heart condition which together with other health difficulties became increasingly hard. Fr Francis found his last months, spent in the Monastery infirmary, a real trial. It was a time of suffering, and he found his situation frustrating. Shortly before the end he did become reconciled to his fate. Like an angel of mercy his sister Amelia (Lady Dunbar) told him firmly to accept his condition and the will of God. He died peacefully on 9th April having completed 60 years of monastic life and 50 years of Priesthood. He was not a demonstrative person but rather more cerebral. A very intelligent man, a teacher, a thinker, a philosopher, something of him eluded us. He could seem to appear at times distant and detached, pre-occupied in thought. He was a man of principle; fair, just and hardworking. An old Abbey guide book to Fort Augustus ends with the exhortation to the reader: "The monks try to give the visitor to the Abbey what they seek to impart to their pupils: the vision of Christ." We pray that Fr Francis, who sought Christ for many years in the monastic life both in good times and in bad, who did much as Headmaster of Benedictine schools, as adviser to Abbots, as Parish Priest and Administrator is now with the Lord whom he so earnestly sought and served so ably. May he now rest in peace and share in the Lord's Resurrection.