

The Right Reverend John Cunningham

Bishop Emeritus of Galloway

(taken from the order of service at his funeral mass)
St Mirin's Cathedral, Paisley - 13th December 2021



Bishop John Cunningham was born in Paisley on 2nd February 1938. He was preceded by two brothers. His family lived in the Parish of St Mary's in Paisley, where they were very active in church life. John said that he admired the Parish Priest of St Mary's at the time, and when he was asked what he would like to do when he grew up he said that he wanted to become a priest.

John went to Blairs when he was 11 years old in 1949, and studied there for five years. From there he went to St Peter's in Cardross, studying for six years, and he was then sent as a student of the Scots College in Rome, and attended the Pontifical Gregorian University. He was ordained after his first year, on 29th June 1961 in St Mary's Parish Paisley, and then returned to Rome where he obtained a Doctorate in Canon Law.

During his years in Paisley diocese, Father and later Monsignor Cunningham was remembered as a kind, gentle and faithful pastor in the parishes and the convent he served. He was assistant priest in Our Lady of Lourdes, Bishopton (1964-69), chaplain to Moredun Convent (1969-74), assistant priest in St Columba's, Renfrew (1974-86), Officialis of the Scottish National Tribunal (1986-92), and parish priest of St Patrick's, Greenock (1992-2004). Father Cunningham was nominated prelate of honour in 1994 - bestowing on him the title of Monsignor. From 1997-2004 he served as vicar general of Paisley diocese. He was nominated bishop of Galloway on 7th April 2004.

Bishop Cunningham was ordained the seventh bishop of Galloway on 28th May 2004 in Good Shepherd Cathedral, Ayr. The principal consecrator was Cardinal Keith Patrick O'Brien with Bishop Emeritus Maurice Taylor and Bishop John Mone as co-consecrators. Fittingly, Bishop Cunningham's two brothers Canons James and Thomas Cunningham served as the assisting priests. The ordination Mass on a warm evening in late spring was an occasion of joy and celebration for the whole diocese, the last episcopal ordination having taken place a generation - some 23 years - previously. The priests of Paisley and Galloway dioceses gathered in great number along with clergy from other places, family and friends. Although Galloway's Cathedral had capacity for around 600 people, a marquee had to be erected in the grounds to broadcast the event to more of the faithful. Hospitality was provided afterwards in the suite at Ayr Racecourse.

Bishop Cunningham chose as his episcopal motto "Congregare in unum" (to bring together as one) from the Holy Thursday offertory antiphon *Ubi Caritas*. In his early days as bishop, he recognised the value that the ministry of permanent diaconate could bring to Galloway. Soon after, three candidates began their formation and were later ordained, and others followed the same path in subsequent years.

The condition of the fabric of Good Shepherd Cathedral had deteriorated over many years. Although Bishop Cunningham had fond memories of his ordination Mass there, he pursued the efforts of his predecessor to petition the Holy Father to move the cathedra (bishop's chair) to St Margaret's Church in Ayr. Permission was granted in February 2007 and the new Cathedral of St Margaret was re-dedicated on the following 14th September in a solemn Mass in the presence of the bishops of Scotland and large numbers of faithful from all parts of the diocese.

Bishop Cunningham took part in the diocesan pilgrimages to Lourdes and to the Holy Land, enjoying the spiritual and pastoral opportunities as well as spending time socially with the priests and pilgrims. He also enjoyed the pilgrimages to Whithorn, a place he last visited as a young boy.

'Embracing the Future' was the name given to the discussions and preparations of priests and lay people to meet the needs of the future. Bishop Cunningham actively encouraged the groups involved in preparing for the pastoral, vocational and material needs of the years ahead.

When Bishop Cunningham retired at the time of the appointment of Bishop Nolan, he carried the burden of poor health. He spent the years of his retirement in the Little Sisters of the Poor in Greenock where he was well cared for and content.

