

Father Alan Cheales O.P.

5 April 1913 — 30 July 1996

It is not given to many priests to serve in the same parish without a break for thirty-three years. Father Alan went to St Dominic's, the Dominican parish in North London, at the beginning of 1963. Nor is it given to many parishes to be blessed for so long by such untiring and selfless care as his.

He came of a long line of Church of England vicars of Friskney, a small village in the Lincolnshire marshes close to the Wash. His paternal grandfather and his uncle were vicars there and through his mother, of Leicestershire stock, he was able to count as ancestors another three vicars of Friskney going back 200 years.

Fr Alan was not however born in Lincolnshire. His father, an earlier Alan, after trying his fortune in U.S.A. (only to be swindled) returned home to join the Leicestershire Yeomanry and fought with distinction in the Boer War. Eventually he settled as a farmer in Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe, where Fr Alan was born on 5 April 1913.

In 1919 Clement (Alan's baptismal name) came to Lincolnshire, his parents being obliged by health and financial stresses to leave Africa. Before they left (and this was one of Alan's earliest memories) they had done all they could to relieve people dying of the dreadful 1918 'flu epidemic. They took up a small property and land agency near Boston. Here the six-year old Alan, his sister Miriam and his younger brother Miles, seem to have been blissfully happy in "the toft-land and marshland and the wonderful freedom of the Lincolnshire seacoast". But that was during the holidays, for soon Alan was at prep school at West Runton in Norfolk where, as chief prefect, he had to denounce the headmaster for immoral behaviour with the boys, and see the school closed.

After that fiasco he went to his father's old school, Marlborough College — he remembered the great struggle to raise the fees as his parents were never rich, he remembered his "mother's glee when she sold some old 'firedogs' for £1200" to pay them. Later a cousin made it possible for him to go to Gonville and Caius College at Cambridge where he studied French and German and took his degree.

It was at Cambridge that he first began to think of becoming a

Catholic. Always sensitive to suffering, he had seen the tragic aftermath of the first World War — ruins everywhere as he travelled the continent, millions unemployed in Germany and England (“I remember a very pathetic sight: four burly Welsh miners singing a quartet beautifully in Trafalgar Square begging for pennies”). And now at the testing time of the Spanish civil war he was confronted by so many conflicting loyalties. Maclean and Burgess and Kenelm Foster (later a Dominican) had attended the same lectures. “I saw the need for a faith and turned to my supervisor Professor Bullough (Professor of Italian and father of two Dominicans to be, Fr Sebastian and Sister Mark) for help. He gave me a fine Belgian missal, and I had some catechetical lessons with Alfred Gilbey”, then Catholic Chaplain at Cambridge.

Fr Alan was all his life grateful to Monsignor Gilbey, but at the time the lessons bore no immediate fruit. His family was deeply distressed, sent him to see C.A Alington, former headmaster of Eton and his father’s cousin, and Archbishop Temple. Their arguments prevailed. He was restless in two small-time jobs, then another cousin provided the fees for him to spend two years at the Anglican Theological College of Lincoln, where his teachers included Michael Ramsey and several others who were to obtain high eminence in the Church of England. For Ramsey, later Archbishop of Canterbury, Alan retained great reverence all his life. After ordination in Durham Cathedral (a diocese he chose because of the unemployment there and from respect for Bishop Hensley Henson’s “pellucid writing”) he served as a curate for two years at Billingham-on-Tees.

With the outbreak of the Second World War, he wanted to serve as a chaplain for prison camps (his predilection for the marginalised was with him all his life) but was rejected. Then “I suddenly realised I would prefer to die as a Catholic”. Professor Bullough had died just before, so Alan turned to his son, Fr Sebastian. He was instructed and received by him into the Catholic Church. Again in 1940 he volunteered for war conscription in the dark moments of the collapse of France, but was rejected as still, officially, a clergyman. Momentarily disinherited by his family (though they never withheld their love), he was advised to go in for a Dominican vocation.

Our regular novitiate at Woodchester was discontinued for the duration of the War. He served, as Brother John Dominic, his novitiate and the seven years of study at Hawkesyard and Oxford with a tiny handful of men free to pursue their vocation; they were

under the guidance of such men as Hyacinth Koos, Francis Moncrieff, Roland Potter, Dominicans of deep faith and devoted to that regular religious observance of which Alan himself would be so conspicuous an example. But it was no arid observance for its own sake; everything was geared towards his generous, immensely loving apostolate to people.

The rest of his life was a faithful, even dogged, day-to-day living out of the lessons his life had thus far taught him. For eight years he taught in our preparatory school at Llanarth with Fr Henry St John, that pioneer long before Vatican II of Roman Catholic ecumenism. Alan had long since "vowed to keep the Unity Octave which had been my solace in the Church of England from 1936 to 1939". For a year he was our Novice Master till carried off to Rome to learn how to do it, a course which unfitted many who attended it to ever hold the office! Not so with Alan; he returned to work for a couple of years as a curate in Leicester and Salford, then went again to be Novice Master from 1959–1963.

After a few months in the Caribbean he came to London. The parish knows too well the rest of his story. He was everything to everybody, always willing to serve, always smiling, always welcoming, riding everywhere on his ancient battered bicycle. For thirty years and more he assiduously visited parishioners and others, particularly those in trouble, so that he seemed to know everybody and everybody knew and loved him. He was chaplain and governor of St Richard's Comprehensive School in Kentish Town. He started and for years watched over a family Mass and organised catechists. He gave unstinted time and care to discotheques for the young, the Simon Community for the homeless, the Pax Christi Movement which had its offices in the Priory buildings, a Third World Group, a book and newspaper stall at the back of the church. He conducted endless baptisms, marriages, funerals. He regularly attended Priests' Deanery meetings, assiduously promoted Fraternal with other Churches. He was founder and chairman of the London branch of the British Retinitis Pigmentosa Association to help a congenital condition leading to blindness. Nothing was too unimportant for him; he made a point of calling in every week on the parish Bingo sessions, or (when they happened) on the old peoples' parties, jumble sales, car boot sales. Nearly every Sunday he went to preach at Speaker's Corner in Hyde Park, even on the last Sunday, the day before he died.

Within the Community, as Guestmaster for 30 years he welcomed Dominicans and others from all over the world, so that they came to expect him every time they returned, he collected the daily papers, often opened and locked the Church door — anything which gave him an excuse to meet the people he loved; which meant everybody. He tended the garden, making bare places bloom (and that, to go back to his origins, was a love he inherited from his father).

Most of these things he did to the day before his sudden death. Some of the things he cared deeply for, had founded and maintained, were taken from him as he grew older, against his will. The last blow was the proposed closure of St Richard's School. He grieved over many things, yet in everything he remained calm, unruffled, and at deep peace with God and his people.

There will be many orphans in the parish, many lamentations. But the belief he increasingly voiced in his old age was this: *Magna est veritas et praevalabit* — mighty is the truth, and it will prevail.

Columba Ryan OP

Natural law and ethics: some second thoughts

Jordan Bishop

Students of the Thomistic synthesis have always had to deal with the ambiguities inherent in the project of bringing together an Aristotelian vision of ethics and the inevitable—for a Christian—intrusion of the law-centred vision of the Bible. And because of the centrality of the Bible in Western culture, discourse about ethics has remained largely law-centred. We think of ethics in terms of law, even, as been suggested, long after belief in, or acceptance of, a notion of divine law had been largely eroded'. In the Church, in spite of Aquinas's espousal of Aristotelianism, the law-centred idiom remained dominant. And it can be argued that this conception of ethics is a source of many of the problems faced in discussions of ethics in the Church today.

In the light of this, it may be worthwhile to look again at Aquinas's