

Fr Robert Arthure (1925-2021)

A personal appreciation

by Sr Eleanor Campion ocso

In March 2020, at the beginning of the first Covid lockdown, Fr Bob Arthure, priest of the diocese of Waterford and Lismore, reluctantly (though not ungraciously) accepted our invitation to cocoon at St Mary's Abbey, Glencairn. Up to that point he was working as Assistant Priest in the parish of Cappoquin, despite his 94 years and significantly failing eyesight. Coming here, he thought it would be for a week. We, knowing better, expected that it would be for two or three weeks. It turned into a thirteen-month stay.

Fr Bob's connection with Glencairn was a long one. He had visited here even before the nuns' arrival in 1932, as his father, a bank manager in Lismore, came to examine the property at some point during the sale process, and brought two of his young sons with him. Bob cannot have been more than five or six years old, but ninety years later could recall the occasion clearly. As a priest, he used to visit his cousin, Mother Dominic Lee (d. 2006), a member of the community here. When he was parish priest in Butlerstown he drove one of his parishioners, Kitty Cleary (Sr Kate, d. 2019), to the monastery on the day she entered, and subsequently visited her too. Assigned to nearby Cappoquin, he became a faithful attendee at Sunday evening Exposition and Compline, and presided at Benediction every week for years. So he was no stranger to us – yet coming to live here was quite a shock to his system. “Never in all my life,” he wrote in April 2020, “did I imagine that I would spend several weeks living at a monastery of Cistercian nuns.” He had appreciated monastic life from a respectful distance, but had no desire at all to plunge into it himself.

Ordained in 1951, Bob was a totally dedicated diocesan priest. He loved people, he loved being with them, talking to them, sharing their joys and sorrows, celebrating the sacraments with them, explaining the word of God to them, serving them however he could.

On the First Friday after he came here, not being able to do his usual calls to the sick, he was filled with doubts about having come. “Did I do the right thing?” he asked. “Did I leave the people when they needed me?” A full year later he was still sometimes troubled by this thought, wondering, “What would the Curé of Ars have done?” I shuttled the question back to him: “What do *you* think the Curé of Ars would have done?” “He would have stayed in the parish,” Bob replied. “He would have died serving the people.”

Of course Bob served while he was here, though differently from before. His eyesight had already deteriorated to the point where he could no longer preside at Mass, but he preached, as often as every second day in the months up to Christmas. Concise, carefully constructed, insightful, and usually illustrated by a witty story, he worked out what he wanted to say, committed it to memory, delivered it with sincerity and with masterful, superbly timed pauses. Purple stole always in his pocket, Bob also heard Confessions, of the sisters and of guests who sought him out. People came to see him here when Covid restrictions permitted, not just for a chat but for advice, to share a worry, to unburden themselves. He received everyone graciously with deep personal concern.

And he took to Facebook. It was our idea; a couple of posts by him on the Abbey’s Facebook page were so popular that it seemed right to set up a page for himself. At first he was reluctant, thinking it self-promotional. But when he learned that his words had reached two parishes in the diocese that are currently without a priest, he saw the potential for communication – and he was on a mission. At least once a week he dictated a post, as carefully and clearly thought-out as his homilies, which we typed and uploaded. He was astonished after a while to learn that he had followers in the Philippines, in New York, in Venezuela – but he was much more concerned to connect with the local people in Aglish and Ballyporeen and Kilrossanty, to address their concerns and give them a word of hope.

He joined us in work too, as much as he could – cleaning ivy off a wall in summer, folding Christmas cards in winter. And he joined us in the refectory for dinner, slipping unobtrusively into his place, adapting easily to our rituals including the reading during the meal, which he said reminded him of Maynooth.

Bob was a man of prayer. Day after day he made his way to the oratory in our new guest house where he was quartered, with his brown-paper covered, well-worn New Testament, and his big magnifier, to ponder the Word of God. It was evident that he had pondered that Word deeply for decades. Some themes he came back to again and again. The Incarnation was central for him. In the jubilee millennium year (2000) a visiting preacher was invited to Cappoquin. Sitting in the sanctuary listening, Bob had a powerful moment of graced insight into the meaning of that reality, that the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity became a member of the human race. The impact of that insight never left him, and coloured all the rest of his thinking. He saw every other truth in the light of the Incarnation: Jesus as the revelation of the immense mercy of God; the shedding of his blood on the cross to its last drop; the sacraments; the reality of the Church as the Body of Christ; the role of Mary. Bob pondered these things daily.

Always a lover of the Divine Office, not being able to read his breviary was a big disappointment for Bob. He was delighted when we introduced him to an audio version of the Office, downloadable daily, which he could play on his MP3 player. Often he would comment on some phrase from the patristic Reading which had struck him. And he said the Rosary daily, frequently while walking our lengthy avenue, for he insisted on daily exercise as much as possible. (Admonished to bring his walking stick, I found him proceeding up the avenue with the stick tucked under his arm so that he could hold his Rosary beads in both hands in case he dropped them!). He concelebrated Mass with love and great reverence. As he became more frail in the last months we encouraged him to sit for all of the Mass, but he

was horrified at the idea of not standing for the Consecration and for Holy Communion, and with iron will would struggle to his feet at those moments right up to his final weeks. On Holy Thursday he watched – not just watched, but truly united himself with – the Chrism Mass online and, in his 70th year of priesthood, renewed his priestly promises firmly and gladly.

Bob was great company. He was a superb conversationalist with a wide range of interests and a phenomenal memory for names, faces, and events. After almost seventy years he could remember not just the names of people from his first parish (St Gregory's, South Shields, in the north of England), but even their precise addresses. And he had a wealth of stories, together with the ability to tell them well. He had stories about his childhood in Lismore ("I love every inch of Lismore," he said to me once). He had stories about his student days in Maynooth (1944-1951, after a year in St John's College, Waterford), which he loved, even living through the terrible winter of 1947, one of the severest on record, with no heating in the College. He had a wealth of stories from the various parishes in which he served after returning from England in 1955. However he completely rejected the idea of writing his memoirs – he would never put anything into a book about a parishioner, good or bad, he said. And on that he would not budge. His stories, however, gave us nuns a new appreciation of the life and vocation of a diocesan priest.

And what did Bob learn from us? Like many another person, he came to understand that life inside the monastery walls is not all sweetness and light, because he saw some of our dark sides, our feet of clay (as we saw his). He also learned that "community spirit" is a reality. "Diocesan priests are like lone rangers," he wrote; "the nuns in the monastery truly form a community, as is clear in their praying together and their concern for one another." Above all, and especially in the last months, he learned to be gentle towards himself and to allow others to minister to him.

From about Christmas, Bob's health began to decline. In January he had a strong sense that his time was coming soon. He looked forward to seeing God face to face, and to being reunited with his family members including a baby sister he had never known. We talked, regularly but not obsessively, about death, and prayed. Yet it did not come as quickly as he wished. Surgery in February (a general anaesthetic at 95-and-a-half!) was not very successful. He became more and more dependent, moved less out of his room. While his body declined, his mind remained as sharp and as interested as ever in all that was going on, and his witty conversation delighted us right to the end.

Eventually, in mid-April, the decision was made that he needed nursing home care. There was heartbreak on all sides, and many tears, as Bob left us after exactly thirteen months in Glencairn. For him, it was a final stripping. He had already lost his three brothers and their spouses; he had been parted from the vast majority of the priest-friends who were his contemporaries; he lost his sight and with it the ability to celebrate Mass, to read, to drive, to play music (he had learned piano in his 80s). Covid took from him his parish ministry, and the regular contact with the people he loved. Sickness took his independence. Now he was stripped of the last thing he had come to love – the Glencairn community and his life with us. He never settled in the nursing home, and died after just one week there, on April 27th. His niece, Audrey, was present at his death.

One incident from his last 48 hours stands out: Bishop Phonsie came to visit and pray. When he said, "Father Bob, I'm going to celebrate Holy Mass now, here in your room," Bob, though apparently unconscious, moved his body and tried to say something – the only such occurrence in those final two days. Witnessing it, I knew it was not an involuntary jerk or a coincidence, but a clear affirmation, a "Yes!", a desire for the Mass and an appreciation of the bishop's action. It was a powerful testimony to his faith.

Bob was always passionately concerned about education, and contributed enormously to primary education in Cappoquin in particular. After his funeral Mass on Friday April 30th, the cortege passed by Bunscoil Gleann Sidheáin where, with the tricolour flying at half-mast, the pupils assembled in the yard and under the direction of their teachers, sang Abba's "I have a dream." Bob had once heard it sung in the school and said he would like it at his funeral. It was a beautiful tribute in challenging social distancing circumstances, a credit to the teachers and to the children who will surely remember it all their lives.

It also reminded me of something that had happened two weeks earlier. Around 6 a.m. one morning I checked on Bob. He was in bed, awake. "I had a lovely dream," he told me, a faraway look in his eyes. "There were lots of young people, all singing and dancing and enjoying themselves..." Then he snuggled down a bit further and grinned, "I'm going back to sleep now, to find out who they were!"

His body sleeps now in the peaceful earth of St Declan's cemetery, among the people whom he loved so much. But Bob's soul lives, I am sure, in that place he dreamed of; a place of eternal youthfulness, where he delights to meet and know everyone, enjoys the vision of God, and dances with the angels.

Slán tamall, Bob. Thank you for everything.

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