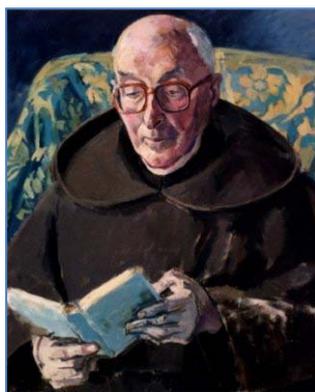


Homily at the Requiem Mass for Fr. Brocard Sewell, O.Carm. (April 2000)



*Portrait of Brocard Sewell
by Jane Percival*

When someone dies, and especially when that person is as well known as Fr. Brocard Sewell, there is a time for writing obituaries (and we have seen a series of these published on Fr. Brocard during the past week), and, possibly some time in the future, there will be a moment for a scholarly evaluation of Fr. Brocard's contribution to literature. Now, at the celebration of this funeral Mass, it is time to rejoice at Fr. Brocard's long life among us, to feel humbled by his love for the God to whom he dedicated his life, and grateful for the many ways in which his kindness and generosity blessed those who were privileged to know him.

Rejoice is a right and proper word here, amidst our sadness at losing Brocard's company, because for those of us who share his faith, his passing is a final movement towards the God he served so well. That is not to say that Brocard ever found his long journey of faith simple or easy. He started life as an Anglican and was nourished in the strong Church of England atmosphere that he found at Cheltenham and Weymouth Colleges. However, after leaving school, it was not long before he sought his spiritual home in the Roman Catholic tradition. In this, he followed in the footsteps of some of his literary heroes, notably G. K. Chesterton.

However, Brocard was never a person to settle down and meekly accept opinions from others, so throughout his life he frequently found himself at odds with his fellow Catholics and with the Church authorities. It is a truism to say that he was a man who made up his own mind on issues and then acted on his convictions. When his beliefs ran counter to the "official" position of the Church, he would say so openly and without hesitation. Such actions could and did disconcert his religious superiors. Brocard's famous protest against *Humanae vitae* in 1968, culminating in a letter to *The Times* calling on Pope Paul VI to resign, was done without his Carmelite brethren knowing anything beforehand. Such actions did not endear him to those in authority, who found it difficult to understand how Brocard's thoughts and beliefs flowed naturally into written words. In the 1980s, as his prior in Cheltenham, I suffered a similar experience when a controversial letter penned by Brocard appeared in *The Guardian*. Some of the community were incensed by Brocard signing himself as from "Whitefriars School, Cheltenham", so involving the school by association in his views. However, rather than the confrontation suggested by some, I approached Brocard tentatively, suggesting that he omit the name of the school from any further correspondence, and he was, as ever, the perfect gentleman and courteously complied.

Personally, I admired Brocard's single-mindedness and his committed search for the truth. He was concerned with many of the key issues facing the Church during his life and, if I could

not always agree with his conclusions, it was impossible not to respect his passion and his courage in proclaiming his beliefs. Such actions frequently led him into controversy and it would not be unfair to say that, at times, he gained some enjoyment from his notoriety. At the time of the *Humanae vitae* episode, for example, he did not wait for his faculties to preach and hear confessions to be withdrawn but he anticipated any official action and posted them to Bishop Cyril Cowderoy himself. Brocard's departure from the diocese at that moment in time was, it must be admitted, a move which probably pleased both of them.

Looking back at the issues which concerned Brocard, there were clearly times during which he fulfilled, as all Carmelites should, a prophetic role. He stood up for what he believed and was willing to take the consequences whatever they were: rejection, censure, or even temporary banishment from the province. One might disagree with his beliefs, and there were times when I thought that his lack of worldly experience and naivety led him astray, but he was concerned about the Church, the way we lived and especially for anyone who suffered unjustly.

What was noticeable throughout Brocard's life was this concern for others and especially anyone in need. He could always spare time for anyone who came seeking his advice and counsel. The number of people who came to consult him is enormous and we shall never know just how many. Some were famous and well-known public figures, but the vast majority were simple, ordinary folk who found in him a priest who was gentle, understanding and patient. Some years ago, when I was living in Aylesford, one of the office staff apologised for calling me down to hear a confession because she judged that I was rather busy. She explained that normally they asked Fr. Brocard but he was out, and she added: "It doesn't matter how occupied he is, he is always willing to come down to hear confessions or to listen to someone". Similarly, when I lived with Brocard at Whitefriars School in Cheltenham, he was one of those who would always help if there was a need for a priest. He was a man for whom service and help to others was part of his very nature. Many of those who came seeking his advice, later became his friends and he was wonderful at keeping in contact with them.

Many of those who remember Brocard will do so because of his literary interests. In his own right he was a noted author, writing over a dozen books himself, editing and contributing to others and publishing numerous articles and reviews. He is the most prolific and distinguished author that this Carmelite province has had since the Reformation. A master of English style, he wrote about the people and topics that mattered to him and, through print, he was able to share his enthusiasms with others. The two versions of his autobiography and his collection of essays, *Like Black Swans*, are perhaps those which will last best. Through his editing of the *Aylesford Review* in the 1950s & early 1960s, he was able to encourage many young writers and poets, as well as tempting some better known authors to contribute. But Brocard was not an author caught up only in his own works, he was a great supporter of others who were learning the craft of writing. There are many authors who owe a debt of gratitude to Brocard for his interest and encouragement for their work. We Carmelites owe him a special debt because it was due to his endeavours that we have such a fine library in Aylesford. Some of our most valuable books were acquired during his time as librarian and the diversity of subjects found in our collection reflects Brocard's own wide-ranging interests.

Even in his writing of biographies, Brocard always remained courteous and sensitive to the feelings of others. Some years ago, whilst helping him to do the research for a biography of

the founder of a modern religious order, it became clear to us that some unsavoury accusations had been made against the subject of the biography. When I asked Brocard whether he would include these in his biography, I remember that he smiled and said that it would not be “appropriate”.

In the Carmelite Order, Brocard found a spiritual home which he enriched by his presence. He had had a chequered career in religious life before arriving finally at Aylesford and the Carmelites. In the 1930s, he joined the Dominicans but after three months in the novitiate, they felt his talents were best suited elsewhere. However, the parting was amicable and Brocard always maintained a high regard for the Dominican Order and continued many friendships that he had begun whilst with them. After the war, he tried again with the small community of the Servants of Christ the King in Frensham, a community which had originally been Anglican. There he met Donald Halliday, who was to become a lifelong friend, and the two novices found themselves commenting unfavourably on the liturgical practices of the community – a practice that they have indulged in throughout their lives. Donald recommended the Canons Regular of the Lateran at Bodmin for their liturgical excellence so Brocard left Frensham to join them instead. However, again, he lasted only a few months in the novitiate before applying to return to Frensham. The superior, Br. Joseph Gard’ner, agreed but, to make sure that Brocard was not distracted again, he ordered Donald Halliday to leave before Brocard returned. Brocard stayed a little longer the second time but then returned to the Canons Regular where he progressed through to become a subdeacon, studying for his theology in Belgium. Then Brocard found Fr. Elias Lynch and Faversham and made his final transfer to the Carmelite Order.

As a Carmelite, Brocard was always unique and somewhat different, but as a member of a community it was a pleasure to be in his company; always courteous, a delightful companion and a great conversationalist. His major interests being literary and somewhat erudite were not always to the taste of some of my brethren, but I shall always be grateful to him for his kindness and for his delight in educating me in some of the literary topics where he judged my education “sadly lacking”. I remember with pleasure days spent exploring the countryside, visiting places of literary interest and engaging in our shared passion for delving in second-hand bookshops. Although the Order incurred some financial expenses, the library at Aylesford benefitted greatly from the finds made during our expeditions. I am sure that there are many friends of Brocard here today who will have similar memories of enjoyable times spent in his company.

However, ignoring all chronological order, it is my first memories of Brocard which linger in the mind at this moment. When I joined the novitiate in the early 1960s, Brocard was a member of the community in Aylesford and, as a novice, I found myself frequently serving his Mass in the Cloister Chapel. Idiosyncratic as always, he refused to use the electric lights, arguing that the two candles on the altar were there to provide sufficient light for reading the missal. However, there was no denying his deep faith and the sincerity of his celebration of the Mass. Kneeling behind him, serving his Mass, his example made a great impression on me and there was no doubt that the Mass for him was a moment of real encounter with God.

Sadly, we have lost a friend who was one of nature’s gentlemen, courteous, kind and a marvellous companion. A man who was the personification of generosity and whose kindness and interest were experienced by many. A person inspired by a deeply held faith who did not hesitate to stand up in public for his beliefs.

At this moment, it is to be expected that we should feel sad and mourn our loss but our faith teaches us otherwise. Brocard has passed on ahead of us, he has lived his life and in doing so, he has enriched ours. Now he is with the God whom he loved and served so constantly. He is not lost to us, only gone on ahead. His gentle smile and soft laughter are still there; only now they come from a different direction. Now we have a friend in heaven to remember us before God, to smile gently at our mistakes and whose memory will inspire us in our own efforts to serve the Lord who has redeemed us.

Richard Copsey, O.Carm.