Reluctant Prophet

Tributes to Albert Nolan OP



Edited by Mike Deeb OP,
Philippe Denis OP and Mark James OP

Foreword by Timothy Radcliffe OP

'Life-long dedication to the struggle for democracy, human rights and justice and for challenging the religious dogma including the theological justification for apartheid. In the 1970s, Nolan became the central figure for young black and white Christians seeking liberation.'
Citation when awarded the 'Order of Luthuli in Silver' by then President **Thabo Mbeki** in 2003

'His deep care for humanity radiated from the Dominican Order, as his spiritual home, to communities and institutions across the country and around the globe with whom he built friendships, partnerships and alliances.
He was not afraid to act. Indeed, his was a life of action. Nor was he afraid to think, to reflect, to learn, to disagree and to be proved wrong.
We are blessed to have his ideas live on in his writings. While his books were seminal to our liberation, they are equally valuable as guides for the individual and institutional renewal of our democratic society.'
President Cyril Ramaphosa

'The news of the passing of Fr Albert Nolan OP reached us this morning with a mixture of joyful and sad feelings. Joyful because Fr Nolan, in his lifetime, with his clarity of thought driven by compassion, was a beacon of hope for the poor and the oppressed in a world and country that is still characterised by gross inequality and injustice. His example of life made the poor feel at home with him.'
Bishop Sithembele Sipuka
President, South African Catholic Bishops' Conference

'Through the years I got to know Albert better. Not only was he a great intellectual and academic, but he had the special gift of being able to speak and write profound thoughts and ideas in a way that was easily understandable to people. There was no complicated language disguising or softening what he taught—he was straight forward and to the point. He lived what he taught, especially through his simple lifestyle. Always kind and gentle, he had a wonderful sense of humour.'
Archbishop Stephen Brislin
Cape Town

'Father Albert Nolan, the beacon of hope that was the light of this country in the darkest of days, will continue to shine that light of hope onto South Africa through his works, and a society that must be galvanised to reflect the impact of his lifelong call for a caring society, where the social structures that feed the ego, greed and the self-centredness of 'me-ness' are replaced with just structures that cater for the common good.'
SACC General Secretary Bishop Malusi Mpumlwana
Johannesburg

'I remember Albert Nolan with deep admiration and appreciation, indeed, awe. His theological insight in the struggle against Apartheid was clear, uncompromising and deeply embedded in his reading of the gospel and years of spiritual discipline. He was one of the most unassuming and humble theologians I have ever met, without pretence he simply tried to follow Jesus. We can truly celebrate his life and witness as a faithful disciple of Christ. Having struggled so courageously for justice, may you rest in a well-deserved peace, brother Albert.'
John de Gruchy
Emeritus Professor University of Cape Town

'Jesus before Christianity started me on a lifelong quest to learn as much as I could about the historical Jesus. And that quest continues today. Such quests are sometimes denigrated as contrary to faith. Why? Mainly because study of the historical Jesus is placed into false contrast with devotion to the "Christ of faith", the one who has risen from the dead and is alive to us through the Holy Spirit. But of course the "Jesus of history" and the "Christ of faith" are one and the same.'
James Martin SJ
Writer, and editor-at-large of the Jesuit magazine *America*

'In the late 1980s I was a student in Geneva and was a member of YCS. In 1986 and 1987 we dedicated most of our time and reflections to analysing and struggling against the oppressive apartheid system and supporting our YCS friends in South Africa. A delegation of them came to visit us. Still today I vividly remember some conversations. Albert Nolan came to Switzerland and took time to be with us . . . his love and his radical clarity shook many of us out of our comfort zone.'
Véronique Schoeffel
Switzerland
Dominican Series

Reluctant Prophet

Mike Deeb OP
Philippe Denis OP and Mark James OP

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Philippe Denis OP and Mark James OP

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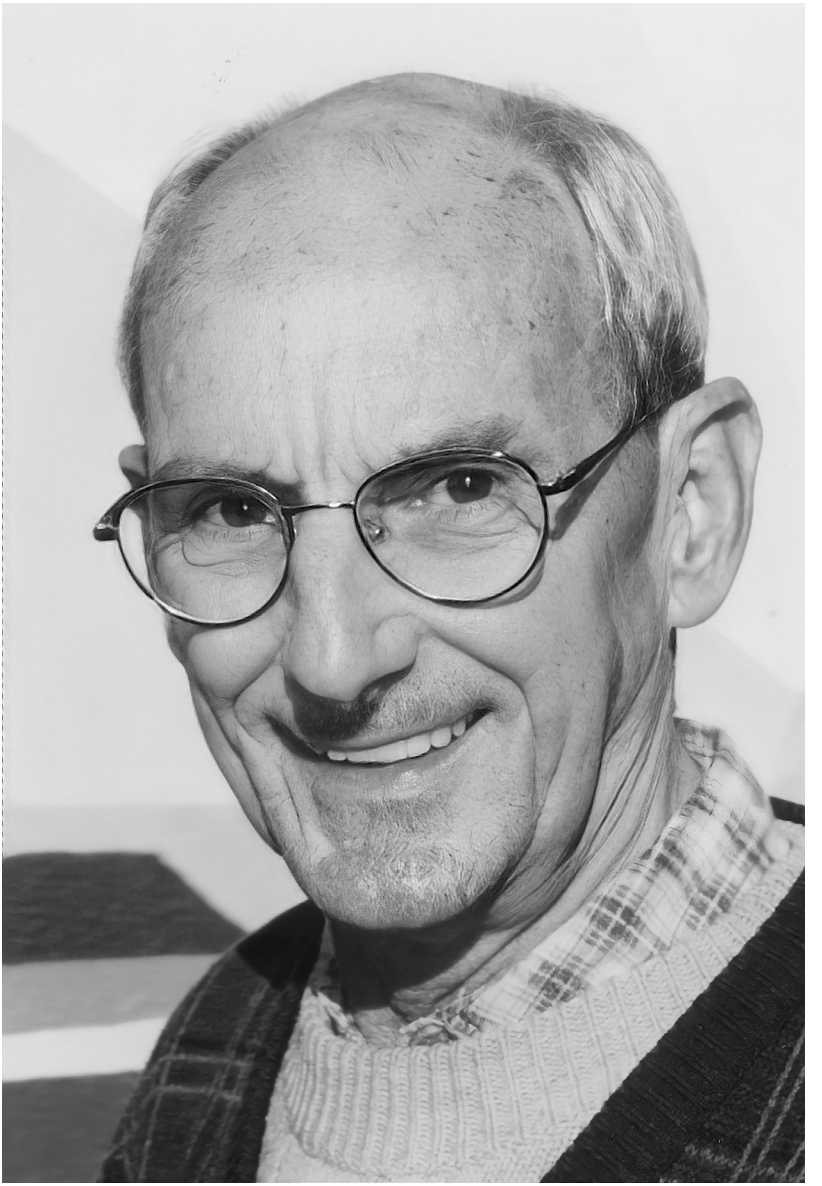
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List of Abbreviations and Definitions

ACTS:	Association of Catholic Tertiary Students
AIDS:	Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome
AFM:	Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa
ANC:	African National Congress
ACTS:	Association of Catholic Tertiary Students
Acts:	Acts of the Apostles
ART:	Antiretroviral Treatment
AZASO:	Azanian Students Organisation
BCM:	Black Consciousness Movement
CAM:	Christian Action Movement
CARE:	Catholic Action for Racial Education
CASA:	Catholic Students Association
Cathsoc:	Catholic Student Society
CBS:	Contextual Bible Study
CCFD:	Catholic Committee against Hunger and for Development
CDF:	Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith
CE:	Concerned Evangelicals
CI:	Christian Institute of Southern Africa
CIDSE:	International Cooperation for Development and Solidarity
CIIR:	Catholic Institute of International Relations
CLG:	Christian Life Group
COSAS:	Congress of South African Students
CSsR:	Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer, Redemptorist.
DSI:	Dominican Sisters International

DRC:	Dutch Reformed Church
EATWOT:	Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians
EED:	Evangelischer Entwicklungsdienst
EWISA:	Evangelical Witness in South Africa
Ex:	Book of Exodus
Ezra:	Book of Ezra
FEDOSA:	Federation of Dominicans in South Africa
Fedsem:	The Federal Theological Seminary
FFP:	Freedom Front Plus
Heb:	Letter to the Hebrews
ICT:	Institute for Contextual Theology
ICY:	Inter-Church Youth
IFA:	Interfederal Assembly
IHM:	Congregation of the Sisters, Servants of Immaculate Heart of Mary
IMCS:	International Movement of Catholic Students
IPBES:	Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem
IPCC:	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
ISB:	Institute for the Study of the Bible
IYCS:	International Young Catholic Students
Jer:	Book of Jeremiah
Jn:	Gospel of John
JOC:	Jeunesse Ouvrière Chrétienne
Joceto:	Johannesburg Central Township (Name of a Community)
JODAC:	Johannesburg Democratic Action Committee
JTSA:	Journal of Theology for Southern Africa
KP:	Kairos Palestine document
Kweekskool:	Seminary (in Afrikaans) for Dutch Reformed Ministers
LGBTQIA:	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, (questioning), intersex, asexual, and agender
Lk:	Gospel of Luke
MIEC-JECI:	Movement International des Etudiants Catholiques-Jeunesse Etudiante Catholique Internationale
Mk:	Gospel of Mark
Mt:	Gospel of Matthew
MG:	Master General
MO:	Master of the Order

MUCCOR:	Ministers United for Christian Co-responsibility
MK:	Umkhonto we Sizwe
NDCs:	Nationally Determined Contributions
NCFS:	National Catholic Federation of Students
NEUSA:	National Educational Union of South Africa
NGO:	Non-Governmental Organisation
NUSAS:	National Union of South African Students
OCU:	Orthodox Church of Ukraine
OMI:	Oblates of Mary Immaculate
OP:	Order of Preachers
PAC:	Pan Africanist Congress
PCI:	Pax Christi International
PACSA:	Pietermaritzburg Agency for Christian Social Awareness
PhD:	Doctor of Philosophy
RCC:	Roman Catholic Church
ROL:	Review of Life.
Rom:	*Paul's Letter to the Romans*
SACBC:	Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference
SACC:	South African Council of Churches
SACLA:	South African Christian Leadership Assembly
SADF:	South African Defence Force
SAFCEI:	Southern African Faith Communities Environment Institute
SAHA:	South African Historical Archives
SAKD:	South African Kairos Document
SACP:	South African Communist Party
SASL:	South African Sign Language
SASSA:	South African Social Security Agency
SCM:	Student Christian Movement
S-J-A:	See-Judge-Act
SJA groups:	See-Judge-Act groups
SLUCSM:	Sri Lanka University Catholic Students Movement
SNDdeN:	Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur
SPOBA:	St Peter's Old Boys Association
SUCA:	Students Union for Christian Action
TCFA:	Tertiary Catholic Federation of Australia
TEP:	Theology Exchange Program
TEASA:	The Evangelical Alliance of South Africa

TRC:	Truth and Reconciliation Commission
UCM:	University Christian Movement
UCT:	University of Cape Town
UCCSA:	United Congregational Church of South Africa
UDF:	United Democratic Front
Udusa:	Union of Democratic University Staff Associations.
UKZN:	University of KwaZulu-Natal
UMC:	United Methodist Church (Mozambique)
UNISA:	University of South Africa
UNEC:	Unión Nacional de Estudiantes Católicos
VCA:	Vaal Civic Association
Veiligsheid:	Reference to Security Police (in Afrikaans)
Veritas:	Truth (in Latin)
WAACSA:	We Are All Church South Africa
Wits:	University of the Witwatersrand
WAACSA:	We Are All Church South Africa
WARC:	World Alliance of Reformed Churches
WLTP:	Women's Leadership and Training Programme

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Foreword

Timothy Radcliffe OP

The Church is engaged in the biggest listening exercise in the history of humanity. Hundreds of millions of Catholics in every country on the planet are being asked by Pope Francis to help us hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church today. This is the Synodal path on which the Pope is asking us to embark, so that the Body of Christ may discern the will of God for humanity and creation. It is also a sign of hope for humanity in a difficult and dangerous moment when the future is obscure.

Most people are excited by this extraordinary journey the Church is undertaking, but some are nervous. Where will it take us? What does it look like? Many Church leaders doubtless think that they know best and wonder why it is necessary to consult the faithful.

Albert understood profoundly why it is so vital and right that this listening to the People of God is happening. This collection of pieces written by Albert's friends and colleagues gives us a glimpse of why Albert, like Pope Francis, was a thoroughly Vatican II Catholic. He was studying in Rome when the Council was taking place and, like Pope Francis, he believed that we are only at the beginning of implementing its vision. Fundamental to this is the conviction that if the Holy Spirit is poured on every baptised Christian, every one of us should have a voice in discerning the will of God for the Church and the world. Albert advised Larry Kaufmann to ask what ordinary people think about Jesus. What are their questions and their insights? He is reported as saying that 'the Spirit of truth moved through the faith questions which ordinary people were asking'. Theological truth is attained not just by academics working in libraries but in conversations about our faith and hope on the streets and in our homes.

Albert told Mark James OP: 'If people want to know who I was, what I believed and what I stood for, they can read my books.' I would add 'and meet my friends'. So, this is an unusual book since it contains pieces by Albert's former students and colleagues, his Dominican brothers and sisters, academics and activists, Catholics and Christians of other denominations. It is rare to have a collection of such different sorts of contributions, ranging from the highly personal to the academic. But this is what the People of God is like, a deeply and beautifully diverse community of pilgrims on the way to the Kingdom, conversing as we travel.

People are often anxious and even angry that it takes so long for the Church to change. All these meetings and endless documents and yet still so many people, especially women, continue to feel marginalised and not fully recognised. Albert felt this too, but he understood the slowness of all organic change. He wrote at the end of *Jesus Today: A Spirituality of Radical Freedom*, 'God's Work sometimes appears to be very slow. Perhaps that is because we do not always appreciate the immensity of what we are involved in. Yet, precisely because it is God's work, the future is secure'.

Having read the contributions to this collection, I feel humbled to be asked to write a Foreword. Everyone writing here has, as far as I can see, shared with Albert in the struggle for justice, especially in the cruel world of Apartheid. Albert called for an active engagement in the struggle. The authors in this book are mainly those who responded with a resounding 'yes'. Robert Ellsberg quotes Albert: 'I am concerned about people, the daily suffering of so many millions of people, and the prospect of much greater suffering in the near future. My purpose is to find out what can be done about it.' *Veritas*, Truth, is the motto of the Order, and Albert wished to be true to what people lived and suffered, true to how they expressed themselves, true to their dreams and to their faith.

But I am deeply aware that I have spent much of my Dominican life in the safety of the ivory towers of Oxford University. What right have I to speak? Only that I am one of so many brethren who loved and admired Albert, even from afar.

Forty years ago, Albert came to stay in Blackfriars, our Priory in Oxford. I was the Prior and so his host. We were all excited by a visit from this famous brother but I was a little nervous. Might he not think that we were rather mediocre and compromised, living in rela-

tive comfort and safety in this privileged environment? The night of his arrival I took him to the pub. This was a typically Dominican act of welcome. St Dominic is said to have first thought of founding the Order in a pub, when he argued all night with the publican who was a Cathar. The pub to which Albert and I went was called The Royal Oak, named in honour of the tree in which the fugitive King Charles II hid to escape his enemies who wished to kill him. Even though Albert was not a Royalist, he too had had to hide from those who wished to kill him.

My memory of that first encounter was of Albert's simple, wholehearted joy. It so overflowed that when the time came for the pub to be closed for the night, the publican invited us to stay on and share some more drinks with him. I had never had that honour before or since. Albert did not accuse us for not being in the frontline of the struggle. The challenge that he made was all the more powerful for being embodied in who he was, his joy and freedom, rather than in words which might have cast us down. He accepted his Oxford brethren as we were and so invited us to be more. As a group of his friends write in this book, he was 'the least prejudiced person we knew'.

In 1983 Albert was elected Master of the Order. Nick Punch OP reports on how he asked to be excused from taking on this role because of the inescapable duty of opposing Apartheid in his homeland. His brethren showed their respect for his engagement in this combat by electing him as Master and even more so in accepting his reasons for not accepting. Nick tells us that the brother whom they then elected, Damian Byrne, said that we should be obedient to Albert! So, I write on behalf of all of his Dominican brothers and sisters who were so proud of him, and challenged by him, even if we were not with him in South Africa at his side.

When I was provincial of the English Province, I was invited to come to South Africa to spend some time with the brethren and help them reflect on how to plan for the next Provincial Chapter. At this stage in my life, I had never planned a Chapter myself and so I felt rather a fraud, but I could not resist the invitation. Albert collected me from Johannesburg airport and we drove south for several hours to the meeting. On the way a young boy suddenly ran out into the road and was hit by our car. I held his bleeding body in my arms as Albert drove him to the nearest hospital and ensured that he would receive the best possible care. On the way back after the meeting, we

went to visit the boy, to be sure that he was recovering well. I was moved by his profound and unhesitating compassion for the boy and his personal response to the lad's suffering.

Then I stayed with the community in Mayfair, the poor neighbourhood in which the provincial was based. Several pieces in this book recount what a simple way of life the brethren lived there. Albert shared a bedroom with two or three of the brethren, which was my idea of a nightmare. In our prayers, the psalms were recited slowly and reverently. The Magnificat, the song of the young Mary, was the prayer that daily enunciated their faith in the one who 'raises the lowly'. I was overwhelmed by the joy of the brethren. I often told provincials who lived in more luxurious quarters that nowhere had I seen a more joyful provincial community than in Mayfair. How can the gospel be 'Good News', the original meaning of the word, if the preacher is not joyful? I was amused to discover that our brother Finbar (who had passed on a few years before) had to be kept from answering the phone since he would be inclined to answer all questions truthfully, as a good Dominican, even if this meant revealing the presence of someone sought by the security police!

Albert was highly intelligent, a gifted scholar, but he was, as Edwin Arrison remarks, 'uncomplicated'. He was simply himself. There were no hidden sides to him, as far as I could see. Ann Wigley OP quotes the wonderful lines by the Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'What I do is me, for that I came' (*As Kingfishers catch fire*). He was a witness to the gospel in how and who he was. His words rang true, with an authority like those of our master, Jesus. No wonder he was seen as a threat by the regime and so had to hide for a while with the Notre Dame community in Melville, Johannesburg. Albert told me once that he was now too well known to be assassinated openly, but he lived with the knowledge that an 'accident' might be arranged.

In 1992, I moved to Rome as the newly elected Master of the Order. I had no valid reason to ask to be excused! One of my first visits to the Vatican was to meet Cardinal Ratzinger, later Pope Benedict XVI. I had expected the meeting to be difficult. I had swallowed the idea current in the press at the time that he was God's Rottweiler. In fact, during my nine years of encounters with him, I discovered that he was the easiest person with whom to deal in the Vatican, always humble, simple and open to dialogue if one was open to dialogue with him.

He did however express his concerns with Albert's famous book *Jesus before Christianity* (1976). My duty was always to stand up for the brethren, and so I argued that any action that was undertaken against the book would increase its sales, which I was sure the Cardinal did not wish to do. He agreed, smiling. But I have always been a little uneasy about the search for 'the historical Jesus', which the book does undertake. I felt that there is always the danger that in trying to find Jesus prior to the interpretations of the Gospels and tradition, one will usually end up with the person whom one wishes to find. I was therefore rather relieved to read in this collection of essays, Paul Burke's expression of his own hesitations. Albert would never mind one posing questions and having a good argument about them.

After reading the frequent references to this book in the essays collected here, I have finally, rather late in the day, understood why for so many people, reading the book was such a transformative experience. Here they met *That man Jesus*, in the words of Mark James OP. Albert enabled an encounter with the One who changed the world and who changes us if we dare to meet him. Ellsberg writes, 'I felt I was meeting him [Jesus] for the first time'. It is this encounter with the person of Jesus that was for Albert so central, as indeed it was for Pope Benedict!

Albert could bring about such an authentic encounter with the Lord because his own experience of Christ radiated from his very being. This is why he was such an attractive preacher and a beloved friend of so many. Bishop Sylvester David describes Albert as 'a man I could not help but love and want to follow'.

Albert had qualified for his doctorate at the Dominican University in Rome, but since he did not wish to waste money on publishing it, the honour was never officially bestowed. It was typical of Albert not to bother about any such titles. So, it was a tremendous joy to invite him back to the Angelicum to lecture, together with another remarkable Dominican theologian Herbert McCabe. We celebrated on the balcony with Damian Byrne, who had been elected when Albert had declined the position.

It was my joy to keep regularly in touch with Albert in later years. In Chicago he shared with me his vast delight that Gustavo Gutiérrez, the Father of Liberation Theology, had entered the Order. As the years passed, Albert increasingly stressed the inseparability of political liberation from spiritual freedom. In one of his last messages to me, he explained that because of his state of health,

> I am no longer chaplain here in this retirement home which belongs to the Newcastle Dominican Sisters. I am now a resident. I don't preside at Mass any longer. But I am very happy here. Well looked after. I have nurses and caregivers and morning and evening prayer and sometimes Mass. I have plenty of time to read and to deepen my spiritual life.

Here is the witness of his final days, when this most active of people could no longer do much, and yet his life is filled with joy and gratitude to the end. We give thanks to God for you, dear Albert.

Introduction

Mike Deeb OP

Albert Nolan died on 17 October, 2022. His death resulted in an outpouring of emotion, in many, many tributes, that was fascinating to witness—in memorials, social media groups, in the press and even in the minutes of a government cabinet meeting. These reflected just how much he meant to so many people. Immediately after the funeral, I was approached by Hilary Regan of ATF Press in Australia about the possibility of producing a book of essays in honour of Albert. I came to know Hilary while working with him in editing a book, published in three languages, on *Dominicans and Human Rights* between 2016 and 2020. After resisting his request and trying to fob him off on to other Dominicans, I was eventually persuaded to help him, especially since I felt I owed it to Albert and to the many people whose tributes yearned for his legacy to be sustained. This resulted in a four-month, almost full-time project. Thankfully, my Dominican brothers, Mark James and Philippe Denis, agreed to assist me in an editorial team and with invaluable support from our journalist friend, Terence Creamer, and daily encouragements from our indefatigable publisher, Hilary—to all of whom I am greatly indebted—this book has seen the light of day!

We decided to seek articles that would honour Albert in the different aspects of his life—chronologically, along with his different areas of activity—and to throw the net wide, expecting that the majority would decline. However, very few declined and we have ended up with a book of seventy contributions from seventy-one people (two with two articles each and three articles each written jointly by two people).

The book therefore consists of a variety of genres: historical accounts, personal biographical stories, reflections on Albert's preoccupations, and several academic articles grappling with Albert's thought and contribution. This diversity provides a rich kaleidoscope of Albert the brother, the Dominican preacher, the priest, the chaplain, the pastor, the mentor, the theologian, the intellectual, the political activist and the friend.

The collection

This privileged collection of first-hand accounts from each stage of his life has yielded many gems. The interview Virginia Zweigenthal conducted with Albert's sister, Iris, on his early years is one of them, along with the accounts of his contemporaries in his early years as a priest in Stellenbosch (Joseph Falkiner, Andrew Prior and Brian Robertson).

Albert really made his mark as a chaplain to university and, later, secondary school students in the National Catholic Federation of Students (NCFS) and the Young Christian Students (YCS), and at least fourteen of these students offer insights into the role he played in their lives at that time and ever since. His impact further afield—in the International Movement of Catholic Students (IMCS–Pax Romana) and even among students in Australia is also recounted.

There are also many stories of Albert in his Dominican life, especially as the provincial, when he established the Mayfair community which impressed many as a witness to solidarity with the poor. Furthermore, interesting light is shed on his friendship and collaboration with Dominican sisters and his accompanying role to novices from his time as novice master. And his broader engagement within the Catholic Church is also highlighted, particularly with the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference (SACBC), with leaders of other religious congregations who were contemporaries of Albert, such as the Redemptorists and the Jesuits, and with the Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI) at St Joseph's Theological Institute in Cedara.

Nearly thirty per cent of the articles are written by Albert's ecumenical partners, those of other denominations and faiths or with no professed faith, especially from his time working for the Institute for Contextual Theology (ICT) and as editor of *Challenge* magazine. The testimonies of the evangelicals who were touched by Albert are particularly interesting. This was the period when he was also an underground operative, and the accounts of Frank Chikane and Horst Kleinschmidt particularly reveal this.

Then we have stories of those who personally accompanied Albert during the writing and publication of his celebrated books as well as those whose engagements with Albert provoked lots of interesting disagreements and debate. Despite the differences, the admiration for Albert still shines through.

Finally, there are several stories that follow Albert's spiritual evolution with regard to the environment, gender issues, contemplation and eventually his aging process. These bring out the wholesomeness of his spirituality.

Many of the articles border on being hagiographic with several explicitly describing Albert as a modern-day saint, a prophet and doctor of the Church. Yet, even if less effusive or even critical of him, all the contributors reveal their deep respect and love for Albert.

Reluctant prophet

Since so many contributions refer to Albert as a 'prophet', it is unsurprising that this word is part of the title of this volume. One may ask, 'Is this designation not overused?' Not if our experience matches that of Ann Wigley who says that he was not afraid to speak Truth as he understood it, regardless of the consequences—even exposing himself to severe criticism by many in the Church. Nevertheless, most—even bishops—could not ignore him, even if they did not always like what he was saying.

In condemning the political and economic structures prevailing in South Africa and in the world, Albert primarily saw himself following in the footsteps of the biblical prophets. He loved them—especially Jeremiah, and he always insisted that Jesus, in affirming John the Baptist, directly aligned himself with the prophetic tradition in the Bible.

Designating Albert as a 'prophet' is furthermore unsurprising since, like the biblical prophets, his starting point was always 'reading the signs of the times'. All his books are a profound witness to this: from *Jesus before Christianity*, which he begins by highlighting 'Catastrophe' in the world and Jesus' response to it; to *God in South Africa*, where he highlights the particular signs of the times in South Africa under Apartheid; to *Jesus Today*, where he identified the new signs of the times: globalisation, search for spirituality, rampant individualism and the absence of a consciousness of the interconnectedness of the universe. Having identified these 'signs', Albert did not stop there. He then attempted to offer alternatives.

Many of the stories in this book point to his prophetic initiatives: reminding the world of the humanity of Jesus; having the courage to establish the Mayfair Dominican community in a poor neighbourhood; declining his election as Master of the Dominican Order; spearheading a way of doing theology different from traditional theological education; collaborating in the underground with the liberation movement to topple Apartheid; active support for the struggle of women for full equality; promoting the Universe Story in the face of derision. These and many other initiatives fill these pages without exhausting them since some of his prophetic actions could not find their way here. One such initiative was the establishment, in 1981, of a formation house in Maseru, Lesotho. This was a non-racial community that could function without police harassment and also welcome vocations from other Southern African countries.

Some might question his stance as prophetic in the light of his close relationship with the ANC and his apparent sympathy for Marxism (which several of the authors in this book assume)—especially in an age when communist practice has largely been discredited globally and is associated only with authoritarian regimes. In the 1970s and 1980s, Albert certainly did believe that Marxism offered a profound analysis of the systemic causes of the poverty and suffering of millions. And he agreed with analysts who saw an integral link between the development of Apartheid and capitalist development in South Africa. However, while he continued to see the socialist value of sharing—and not the individualism promoted by capitalist ideology—being more in tune with the Kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed, Albert would not identify himself as a Marxist. In fact, he would say that Marxism, while articulating truths about society, was not radical enough. Jesus offered a path that went much, much deeper, transforming the hearts of all people.

That Albert was a prophet, therefore, few may dispute. But, in some respects, the profile does not fully fit. One often associates a prophet with a person who, being appalled by evil abounding, is serious and even grumpy. Many stories in this book paint a picture of Albert that contradicts this, pointing to his joyfulness and his signature outbursts of laughter. Also, one often associates a prophet with an abrasive and aggressive person who is always at the forefront upbraiding people, yet Albert never sought the limelight. Author after author in this book point to his humility. Even though he was a world-renowned theologian, he had no airs and people immediately felt comfortable with him—even if he was challenging them.

This humility was also reflected in Albert's political activity. While he was passionate about the struggle for change in South Africa, seldom would he be seen in political rallies or marches. He always played a background role, as attested to by Molefe Tsele, Smangaliso Mkhatshwa and Frank Chikane. His activism was primarily with his pen—writing his books, editing the *Kairos Document* and *Challenge* magazine, initiating a journalism course—and in promoting a different way of doing theology. His unobtrusiveness was particularly evident in his underground activism, as Horst Kleinschmidt and Ian Linden reveal, which was done without any of his own brethren knowing about it.

Albert was a very private person. Just three months before he died, when I sent him a draft chapter of my own memoirs, in response he remarked, 'You are clearly a people's person which I am not. I am, in comparison, a very private person'. He didn't like talking about himself and he would never promote himself.

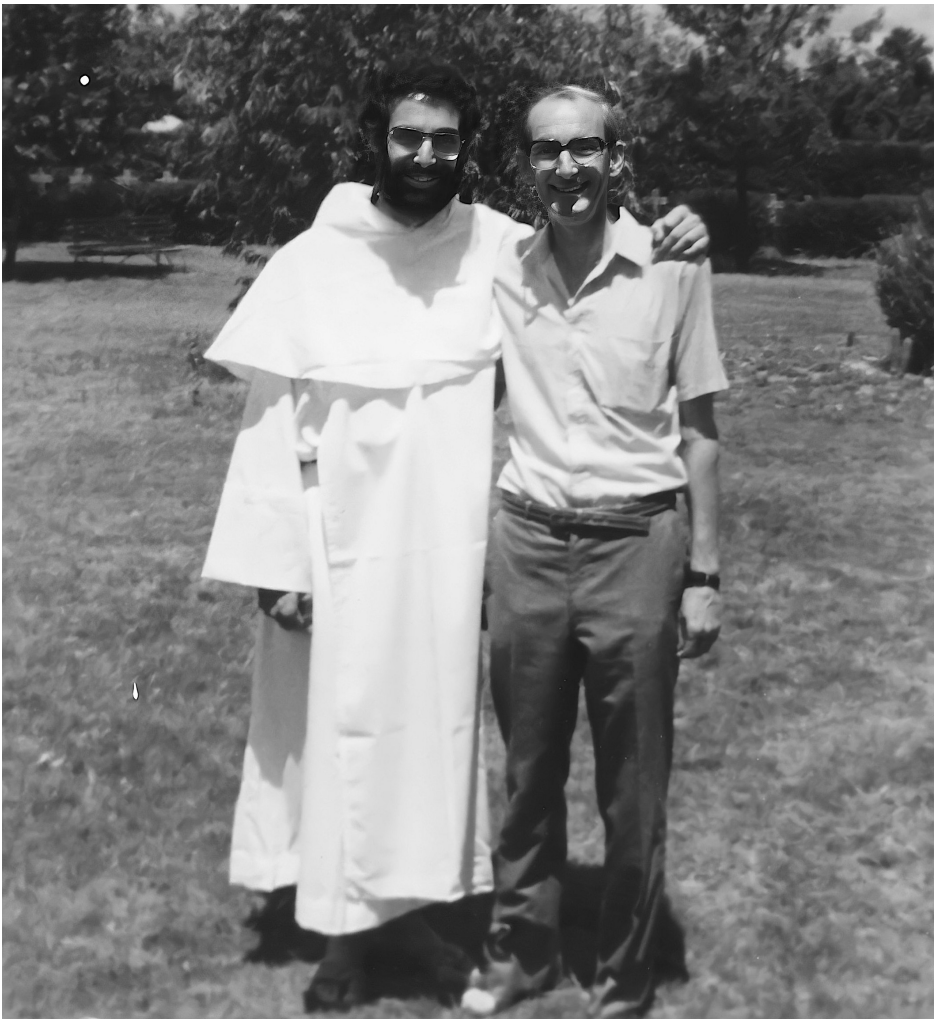
In a documentary by the Irish Catholic media organisation, *Radharc* (described in Joseph Dunn's book, *No Lions in the Hierarchy*), an interview with Albert is entitled, 'Like Jeremiah, I am a very reluctant prophet'. This comes from a comment he made:

> If I look into my heart of hearts, I would prefer a peaceful relationship with authority, it makes life so much easier. If sometimes I speak up, I assure you it's not because I like being a rebel, but because I feel that is what I must do, that is what God is calling me to do. And if there's any sense in which that is prophetic, then like Jeremiah I'm a very reluctant prophet, and I wish to God that I didn't have to do it.[1]

This resonated with all the experiences mentioned of Albert's humility and hence we decided to entitle this book, *Reluctant Prophet*.

It is our hope that all these stories and reflections will preserve the legacy of Albert and re-ignite the memories we have of him. And we hope that they will inspire the reader—even if Albert was not known personally—to catch and emulate his humble and prophetic spirit as we struggle to make the Reign of God—proclaimed by Jesus and championed by Albert—more present in our world.

1. Dunn, Joseph. *No Lions in the Hierarchy* (Dublin: Columba Press, 1994), 270.



Albert with Mike Deeb after his solemn vows, 20 January 1990.

Homily Preached at the Requiem Mass

Our Lady of Mercy Catholic Church, Springs,
Wednesday 19 October 2022

Mark James OP

Today we come to bid farewell to our brother, Albert Nolan. Many of us would not know this, but Albert was actually born Dennis James Harry Nolan on 2 September 1934. He was born to South African parents of Irish descent and grew up in Gardens in Cape Town. He went to high school at St Joseph's Marist Brothers in Rondebosch and after school he worked in a bank for a few years. He was actively involved in St Mary's parish and he read the writings of a prominent spiritual writer at that time—Thomas Merton. Merton was originally a non-believer whose father was an artist born in New Zealand and his mother was from the United States. After having lived a wayward life—a bit like St Augustine—Merton underwent a profound spiritual transformation. After his baptism as a Catholic, Merton desired to be a priest. At first, he considered being a Franciscan but later chose to become a Cistercian or Trappist monk and joined the monastery of Gethsemane in Kentucky in the USA. He developed a writing ministry and in his first number of books he romanticised religious life as leaving behind the world and moving into the perfection of God's Kingdom—namely, the Church or the monastery. But over the years, he developed a deeper appreciation of the presence of Christ as not just leaving the world behind, but really immersing oneself more fully in the world as Jesus did—coming among us as Word made flesh—pitching his tent among us.

By reading Thomas Merton, Albert realised that he had a call to be a religious. He wanted to follow Christ and give his whole life in his service. But Albert did not see himself being a monk. He did not want to spend his life in a monastery—singing, reading the Bible and praying. He wanted to bring the Word of God to others and he searched

for a religious order that would assist him to do this. Eventually, he discovered the Dominican Order. The Dominicans were dedicated to study, to prayer and to proclaiming Christ, the Word of God. They also had as their motto *Veritas*, or Truth, which appealed to Albert.

Albert entered the novitiate in 1954, where he received his religious name of Albert. He was professed in 1955 and ordained in 1961. Shortly after his ordination he was sent to study at the Angelicum, the Dominican University in Rome, to do his licentiate and his PhD in biblical theology. I remember him telling us at the dinner table one day that being in Rome in those years was one of the most formative events of his life. While he was there, the Second Vatican Council got underway and he was influenced by the debates and the new ideas that were emerging at the time. Albert realised that this was a seminal moment in the history of the Church as it was undergoing a radical transformation.

When he finished his studies in about 1963 or 1964, he came back to South Africa and was sent back to Stellenbosch, where he had done his novitiate and his priestly formation as a Dominican. He worked a bit with the parish, but he was also doing teaching in our *studium* (house of studies) in Stellenbosch at the time, were we had a number of students, including thirteen novices. Albert would have taught these students and novices.

On one occasion while in Stellenbosch, Albert decided to attend the New Testament Society's conference that was taking place at the University of Stellenbosch that year. And, as he tells the story, he went to this conference as a New Testament scholar himself and he listened to the talks. And, he said, he started to feel more and more uncomfortable as one speaker after the next spoke. He said he felt 'something was amiss'—something did not sit well for him. He felt uneasy about what was being said in the talks. The emphasis of the scripture scholars who spoke focused on the philological approach to scripture. This meant researching each word in the scriptural text, analysing it so that one can understand the meaning in Greek and see its relationship and its associations with accounts in the Old or New Testament. While it was interesting what some of the scholars were coming up with, Albert said, he felt that they were missing the point of the text. The passage they were reflecting on was the one from Matthew's Gospel (11:25): 'you hide these things from the learned and the clever and you reveal them to mere children'.

Albert decided that there must be another way of doing scripture, rather than just the scholarly way. And this typified Albert's approach to Scripture and theology for the rest of his life. He realised that the Scriptures were powerful because they were the Word of God. The Word of God was alive and active, and the Word of God was there to touch people's hearts, to change them and to bring them to conversion. The Word of God transformed people's hearts so that they can change the world and to transform the reality in which they live. For Albert, Scripture was not just for academics. He wanted ordinary people to be able to read the Bible and to understand its significance for their lives. And that was what made his preaching, what made his theology, so vibrant—it freed people to be truly themselves. Perhaps he learnt this from Thomas Merton, who himself believed that the Scriptures exist to help us follow Christ, which means to become authentically oneself, to become a person who is alive and active in Christ.

Albert passed on this great enthusiasm for Scripture, for theology, to the university students when he became chaplain to the Catholic students at Stellenbosch University in the 1970s. Albert really touched the lives of these students, enabling them to understand that the reality of faith was not something that you practised in church on Sunday, but that which you had to live in your daily life. That Scripture was not only to be read but to be lived. This meant not saying of scripture: 'Oh, what lovely words; how inspiring and awesome they are!' No, the Word of God was more challenging that—it was a challenge to recognise your true dignity and authenticity as a human being, but then to go out and recognise the dignity and authenticity of every other human being in the world today. Live the Word of God!

We must remember that Albert was preaching this message during the time of Apartheid. Apartheid as the official ideology of the country at the time held that whites were the special loved ones of God and black people were second class at best. Albert always believed the scriptures: that every person created in God's image and likeness is a child of God. For Albert, all God's children need to have their dignity respected and their rights upheld. It was beholden to every Christian to ensure that they do this. This truth he believed was central to the teaching of Jesus. In his writings, Albert was always keen to point out that 'this is not *me* who is saying this to you' but *That man Jesus*. This was the phrase that he used as the title of his talks that he gave to the university students at the NCFS conference in 1972. All his preaching, all his theology, pointed to *That man Jesus*.

Albert's theological approach was really to motivate all people—white, black, rich, poor—to anticipate or to look forward to the coming of God's Kingdom or Reign of love, justice and peace among us. In the first book that he wrote called *Jesus before Christianity*, a revision of his lecture notes on *That man Jesus* that he gave to the NCFS conference, Albert starts with a warning of impending catastrophe awaiting us if we persist in the direction we are presently travelling in South Africa. For him, if we are to avert a future catastrophe, we need to take the present moment seriously by undergoing a radical change of heart and mind. 'Now is the time.' Later this would be referred to as the *kairos*.

Albert was influential in writing parts of the *Kairos Document*, or at least being its final editor. He often preached that:

> Now is the time, now is the *kairos*. Now is the opportunity for us to change our hearts, to live in a new way. We must take this opportunity now and not delay because we might not have enough time. It might be too late when we eventually wake up.

And so, throughout his life, Albert sought to bring theology down from its lofty academic heights and bring it to the people; bring it to us who were students; bring it to workers; bring it to all people in the country, to understand that theology was not just to be read, to be prayed about, but more importantly, to be lived.

When I came to Wits University in 1981, I joined the Catholic Student Society on campus. Albert's book was influential in shaping our faith as idealistic students. We used to say jokingly, 'The Protestant churches walk around with the Bible under their arms, we have *Jesus before Christianity*!' Albert's interpretation of the Scriptures for us, reminded us, as white South Africans, that we should not buy into the ideology of Apartheid, that we had to stand against it, and resist it even to the point of giving up our lives. Albert could be uncompromising in his preaching. It is interesting that in today's Gospel (Lk 6:20–23), we have 'blessed are the poor, blessed are the hungry, blessed are those who weep now, blessed are you when people hate you'. But the 'woes' have been left out. 'Woe to you who are rich, woe to you who are satisfied, woe to you who are comfortable.' Albert would not have left those words out, for sure. He will have reminded us that the gospel is not just about consolation and comfort, it was also about challenge.

Another opportunity arose when Albert attended a conference in 1975 in Peru, where he had contact with the thinking of the theologians in South America, particularly Gustavo Gutiérrez. Gutiérrez was a diocesan priest at the time, who wrote a book called *A Theology of Liberation*. In this book, Gutiérrez highlighted the challenges facing the Church in the Latin American context. Gustavo was himself involved in an organisation linked to the Young Christian Students (YCS), which employed the Cardijn methodology called See–Judge–Act. Gutiérrez also emphasised the need to bring the Word of God down from its lofty heights, to become a word that nourishes the lives of people, especially the poor and marginalised, to look at the reality in which they live, to evaluate it, and to understand it in the context of the Bible, and in terms of the context of Scripture. And then the third step, most important of all, not just to leave it at an academic level, but to *act*, to bring it into the lives of people, to make a difference in our world.

And in that sense, See–Judge–Act became a means within the Church to point the way to Christ in a more prophetic way. Not just to write statements of protest against injustices, but to realise that we have to do something about it. It is not enough for us just to condemn or to moralistically point fingers. Rather, Christians have to be actively involved and change the reality in which the poor and oppressed live. It meant becoming like *That man Jesus*, who was concerned about the suffering of others, who wanted the humanity of the poor and sinners of his time recognised. But it also meant seeing through the ideologies of oppression, so that in a system like Apartheid not only are the poor dehumanised but so is the oppressor.

To follow *That man Jesus* meant to free and liberate all people from oppression so that they can live as Christ did—by being more compassionate, more loving, more forgiving and to strive for social justice. Albert believed Jesus did not die on the cross because he just went against the doctrines of Judaism, but because he stood up for those who were in greatest need. And so, we see in Albert's theology, a concern for the suffering of humanity, for people's suffering, and that we as Christians cannot stand above it aloof, but to do something about ending this suffering.

In using the See–Judge–Act method in theology, Albert wrote his second book called *God in South Africa* in 1989. It was an attempt to write a South African contextual theology. Together with others he

was part of the Institute for Contextual Theology (ICT) in Johannesburg, to try and develop this type of theology that follows the See–Judge–Act method, that brings the Bible to the people and speaks to the context of humanity's suffering. Contextual theology seeks to be a prophetic witness, a radical living out of the life-giving and transforming Word of God. As the struggle against Apartheid was intensifying, Albert also wanted people to be aware that God was active and at work bringing about transformation in the South African context through the struggle. He also wanted to give people hope in the midst of the pain and suffering they were enduring.

Years later in 2008, Albert received an official recognition from the Dominican Order for his work as a theologian. He was granted an honorary title as a Master of Sacred Theology by the Master of the Order. At the reception of his award, he gave a talk at St Vincent School for the Deaf in Johannesburg, entitled 'Hope in an age of despair'. It was a talk that typified Albert himself. Hope characterised the person that Albert was! He was a person who never despaired, because he had a deep trust and faith in *That man Jesus* and in the work of God. He believed that God was *in* all the situations in which we find ourselves so there was no need to fear. Yes, we are faced with catastrophe; yes, we are in danger; yes, we need to do something urgently; but if we respond to God's invitation to *do* something, God will provide the increase. It is really about God doing his work for us. We are only his assistants. It is all God's work, not ours.

In this respect, Albert had this unshakeable hope in life reminiscent of today's first reading (Isa 25:6–9). Isaiah envisages the final redemption God's people will receive even though they presently are being assaulted by the forces of chaos. The people of Judah are facing an invasion by the Assyrians. This is one of the most traumatic times of their history, where ten tribes of the northern kingdom have already been conquered and destroyed. Only Judah and Benjamin have survived so far, but they are under threat.

In the midst of this chaos and the Assyrian genocide being afflicted upon the people of Israel, Isaiah speaks these prophetic and hope-filled words. In the midst of their trauma—Isaiah speaks of God's salvation as a glorious banquet that will take place on Mount Zion. In this passage, Isaiah contrasts the present suffering, the trauma that Israel is undergoing, with a banquet of God's victory—a very hopeful message, in the face of an impending catastrophe. Rather than

disaster, there will be a banquet of exuberant joy, where tables will overflow with rich food and glorious wine. Isaiah gives people hope by reminding them of God's glorious desire for his people.

But Isaiah also points out that God's liberation extends not just to the people of Israel, but to all people. God's saving actions will not just be for the salvation of Israel only but for all peoples on the earth, even Israel's enemies—the oppressive Assyrians, and the Moabites, and the Hittites. God's vision for the glory of Israel is for the glory of humanity. On this mountain, even death itself will be ultimately eaten or swallowed up. Death will be overcome by God's saving power. Even though darkness prevails, there is always hope in God's salvation. There is hope because God's message is a message of God's life-giving presence to his people.

Like Isaiah, Albert himself always pointed to the hope in any situation. I remember times when I used to complain when I was provincial, about this problem or that problem. Albert was always able to turn it around, and help me see the hope in the situation, or what needed to be done. He was always encouraging one never to give up hope, that you must give people another chance, or see the problem one is confronted with from a new angle or a different perspective.

In our world today, Albert's way of living for Christ, pointing to *That man Jesus*, is as necessary as it was when he wrote during the time of Apartheid. After 1994, and when the enthusiasm to build up the rainbow nation dissipated and the corruption of the ANC became so prevalent, Albert wrote another book, *Jesus Today*. It was obvious that the freedom many had fought so hard for was being eroded by the greed of a new elite that was jumping on the bandwagon to get rich quick. They did not care that they were hollowing out the institutions of our society and the organs of our civil society for personal gain and to the detriment of the common good. In this book, Albert acknowledged the need for structural change in society, but it was useless if it was not accompanied by a personal conversion of heart too. The corrupt and selfish values of this world need to be replaced by the values of the Reign of God. This means moving from a preoccupation with the demands of our little or false self and opting to live from what Merton called the true self. It means putting individualism and selfishness aside and living for the common good. For Albert, it is only when human beings can learn to act from their true selves rather than their egotistical selves that change can happen that will help our world avert poverty, corruption, war and ecological devastation.

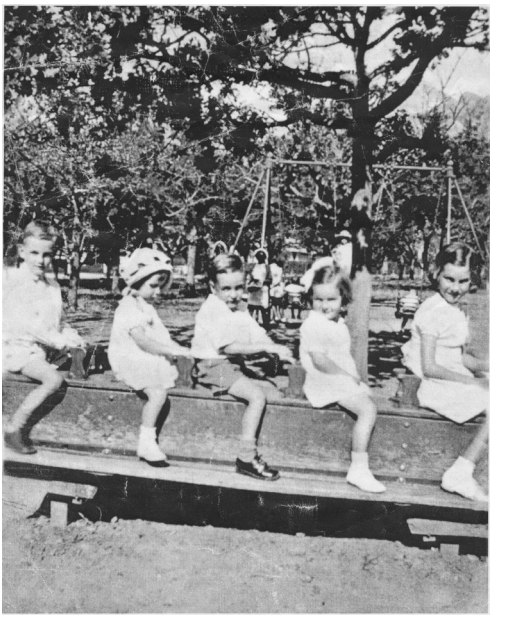
In conclusion, let us end with the words of Albert. When once I asked him to write down his memoirs, he smiled wryly and said he did not want his life dissected and analysed. 'I am not important', he said, 'if people want to know who I was, what I believed and what I stood for, then they can read my books'.

So hopefully, I have given you a taste that will encourage you to go from here and do what Albert suggested: 'read my books and follow *That man Jesus*'.

Section One

The Early Years







Photos left to right: 1. Dennis aged 4 years. 2. Dennis with sister Iris, brother Ronnie and cousins Sheila and Jean. 3. Dennis as altar server wth Ronnie.

Beginnings

Virginia Zweigenthal

Fr Albert Nolan was the first born of three children of James (Jimmy) and Dorothy Margaret Nolan (neé Kiddle) and was named Dennis James Harry. He was born in a maternity home in Newlands Cape Town, on 2 September 1934. His brother, Ronnie, followed two years later. The family then moved to 26 Wandel Street in Gardens where his sister, Iris, was born two years later.

Albert, as most of us knew him, was a private person and his family background was largely unknown. Two rich resources for the writing of this article reflecting on his early life were a presentation he gave to the Jesuits in 1986, entitled 'My Experience of Being a Religious in South Africa', and an interview I conducted in March 2023 with Iris Prinsloo, Albert's eighty-five-year-old sister, at her home in a retirement village in Tableview, Cape Town.

This exploration of Albert's family and early life could provide a more contextual and rounded sense of Albert, the priest, theologian and intellectual; the person who impacted on theology as well as on the local and global Church, and who has touched so many people's lives. This chapter refers to him as both Albert and Dennis, and these names are used interchangeably. When he refers to himself, he is Albert; when Iris talks about him, he is Dennis; before he becomes a Dominican religious, he is Dennis and afterwards he is Albert.

I first met Iris when she came to our Cape Town memorial service to commemorate Albert's life in late November 2022. She brought black and white photographs of the family from their childhood to the service for everyone to look at before and after the service. They included portraits of him as a toddler and young child, pictures of him with siblings and cousins and after his ordination with his par-

ents. There were newspaper photographs of Albert shaking John Paul II's hand at the Vatican and receiving the Order of Luthuli, shaking Thabo Mbeki's hand.

Iris, a slight woman with a broad smile, exuded a calm serenity. She spoke confidently and proudly at the memorial service about her brother, whose life she celebrated and embraced. It was clear that Albert was Iris' brother. She had a similar defined chin, and threw her head back when she laughed, much like my memory of Albert who too laughed often. She was delighted when I called her in February 2023 to ask if she would be up for talking about Albert, and we made a time for me to visit her in her home a few days later.

Iris told me that theirs was not a wealthy family. Their home, which still stands, is a semi-detached terraced Victorian house, in one of the oldest quarters of Cape Town, Gardens. An inner-city suburb, Gardens was named after and developed around the original Dutch East India Company gardens. That land, now a heritage park in contemporary Cape Town, was appropriated by the Dutch to grow vegetables for company vessels that docked in Cape Town on their way to the East. Bordering on the city centre, Gardens was not an upmarket area as it is now. The Nolans did not own their home, and Iris remembers the landlord coming to collect rent each month. The three children looked forward to his visit as he was fond of them, giving each child a few pennies every month. Dennis, the eldest received six pence, Ronnie, four, and Iris two pence!

Albert, in his talk to the Jesuits, also recalls their street in Gardens, which sounds much like a contemporary inner city setting. He remarks that early in life he confronted 'the hard realities of drunkenness, violence, sexual exploitation, poverty, prostitution and even murder'. While many neighbourhood children grew up to become professionals, there were some girls who became prostitutes and boys who became policemen.

Although Dorothy—their mother—was not a Catholic herself, the family was deeply involved in the Catholic Church. Their father, Jimmy, was the Catholic, and their local parish was St Mary's Cathedral, where all three children were baptised and confirmed. Both Dennis and Ronnie were altar boys and photographs of them serving at Mass are centre points of Iris' family photograph collection. Dorothy promoted the children's attendance at Mass, and Iris recalls her mother reminding the children to express thankfulness at church.

All three children were educated at Catholic schools. Dennis was first educated at St Mary's Convent, a Dominican girls' convent school, which admitted boys in the early grades. It is located next to the cathedral and was a short walking distance from their home and still operates today. After completing Grade Four, Dennis transferred to the Marist Brothers' junior school, in Hatfield Street, Gardens very near St Mary's. This school closed in 1983. The original Marist brothers' high school in Gardens moved in 1933 to St Joseph's College in Rondebosch where Dennis completed Standard Eight (modern-day Grade Ten).

Both boys, Dennis and Ronnie, left school at the end of Standard Eight, taking jobs at the Standard Bank to contribute to the family income. Dennis went to a correspondence college in the evening, putting himself through the last years of schooling and matriculated in 1952 at the age of eighteen. He worked for four years at the bank and for three of these years bought and sold stocks and shares for the bank's clients. Albert comments that he found that world 'vicious', with people delighting in crushing competitors financially. He perceived that 'survival of the fittest' was the order of the day.

Iris remembers that Dennis told their mother that it was while he was working in the bank that he 'had a calling'. This he put to his mother as, 'rather than helping people with money, [I'd like to] help them with themselves'. Dorothy confirmed with him that this was his own decision, checked with him that there was no coercion involved and gave Dennis her blessing.

Albert's mother, Dorothy was the centre of the family, and her values permeated their day-to-day life. Albert credits his mother with instilling him with the value of compassion, a deep emotional concern for people who suffer. Albert remembers his mother daily reminding the children of the starving millions in India. Iris framed this as her mother's kindness. She recalls Dorothy speaking about there being rich and poor people in the world and that one always needed to think about that. Examples of her concern for others are two stories that Iris relayed to me.

Across the road from their home in Gardens, there were flower sellers, who sold bouquets daily to customers even in the 1940s. Now, selling flowers is a long-standing occupation of people of colour in Cape Town, and even though this was a pre-Apartheid era, racial segregation was firmly entrenched in society. Dorothy went against

those norms and regularly made the flower sellers a flask of coffee to see them through their long working days. To show their appreciation, they reciprocated, giving her a bunch of flowers which she loved and which gave her joy. Iris also reminisced about a scene of her mom scolding the police for roughing up a man of colour who 'had a few toots', admonishing them as he had done no harm. Dorothy maintained that it was important to 'be kind when you can and do what you can'.

Dorothy did not work when the Nolan children were young. Their father, Jimmy, was a carpenter, but his employment was not constant. Consequently, as Albert relays, the family was always in debt but did not think of themselves as poor. Iris remembers that Jimmy smoked and consequently suffered poor lung health. She remembers his difficult, laboured breathing as he slowly climbed the stairs to the bedrooms on the upstairs floor in the house. In time, his compromised health resulted in him giving up his carpentry work. Towards the end of his working life, he too worked at the Standard Bank, directing customers where to go. Jimmy died in Groote Schuur Hospital in Observatory, Cape Town, soon after Dennis—by then Albert—was ordained as a priest in 1961.

Life at home was not always easy. Besides financial woes, Albert indicates that his parents argued and their displays of anger frightened him as a young boy. As an adult, Albert says that he was known as someone who did not get angry. He avoided interpersonal conflict at all cost even among his fellow religious. He rather looked for a middle ground and a compromise to keep the peace. Later in life, he realised that many of his concerns and approaches grew out of his early life experiences and his social conditioning. He then learnt to speak out and focus his energy—his anger—against social and political systems that underlie human suffering and pain.

Despite the family circumstances, Iris recalls that there was always food on the table at home. Dorothy reminded the children that it was important to have one decent meal a day. Before setting out for school, Dorothy prepared the children's Jungle Oats for breakfast. It was dished out into three bowls, and Iris, who enjoyed her porridge hot, was there first. She remembers that Ronnie complained if it was cold, but Dennis did not mind!

Iris remembers Dennis, the schoolboy as a great reader, not particularly outgoing, although he had friends. She recalled two Polish girls

who frequently passed their house looking for Dennis, who escaped when he saw them coming! He had a good friend in his eldest cousin, Jean, the daughter of his maternal aunt, and they spent many afternoons talking at family events, particularly at the Nolan Christmas.

The family stayed on at the Wandel Street house after Dennis entered his novitiate in 1954 at St Nicholas' Priory in Stellenbosch along with his lifelong friend Gregory Brooke. Dennis took on his religious name Albert and was finally professed in 1958. Iris remembers that news had spread in the neighbourhood that Dennis had decided to become a priest, and one young boy often came past their house asking Dorothy about him as he too wished to become a priest. The family visited Dennis in Stellenbosch when they could, taking him his favourite treats. Iris laughingly remembers their mom taking Albert a packet of Sunrise toffees for himself, and Albert retorting 'No ma, Dominicans share. We put it on the table!'Iris highlighted Albert's concern and love for the family. He offered to baptise his mom, which he later did. Although he no longer contributed to the family finances, he helped out where he could. Iris had moved to Stellenbosch and worked as a saleslady for Woolworths. Her husband Colin, who had worked for the Navy, needed work and Albert helped find him office work. After Dorothy became ill and Jimmy had died, Albert helped find a place for her at Villa Maria, a Catholic residential home in central Cape Town for women. She soon moved to live with Iris in Stellenbosch, but the family moved back to Cape Town into a small house once Iris' husband had re-joined the Navy and was based in Simonstown. Again, Albert helped his mom find a place in an old-aged home in Observatory. Soon afterwards, it was discovered that Dorothy had diabetes and cancer and she passed away, also at Groote Schuur hospital in 1989.

Albert maintained his relationships with his family and siblings. He officiated at the marriages of Ronnie to Edith and Iris to Colin as well as the weddings of Iris' two sons, Lance and Wayne. Iris and 'Dennis', as she continued to call him, often spoke on the phone, particularly when pension pay-outs were due. Both Iris and Albert physically went to collect their South African state pension—a South African Social Security Agency (SASSA) grant—an amount of less than R2000, or USD110 monthly, which is grossly inadequate to support families or individuals. She highlighted Dennis' concern with the family's health and welfare and on occasion he helped family mem-

bers experiencing financial difficulties with his grant. He visited his family regularly when he was on leave, and Iris fondly remembers his visits and outings with him to visit other Dominican priests' families.

Iris has a set of birthday cards from Albert, some gently teasing about her love of animals. All signed, 'Dennis', they were always sent in time for her birthday until 2019. These are treasured mementos, symbols of his care and love for his 'little sister'. While he remembered her birthday, she had to remind him of other family members' birthdays which he had forgotten, and he was grateful for the reminder. She remembers Dennis as an 'even-keeled person', who guided her, encouraging her to call on her own strength and patience to manage life's difficulties. When she told Dennis that he was the clever sibling, followed by Ronnie, he retorted that he 'could never be a saleslady like you. Because if you put me behind the counter, I wouldn't know what to do. So that's your profession'. She remembers that he emphasised that she and every person was valuable and worthy, that people should always treasure and not limit themselves.

Albert's formative experiences as a child are evident in the man he became. He had insight into the world he was born into, which with reflection, enabled him to 'read the signs of the times' in South Africa. While his disposition was to avoid conflict, he learnt to speak out, harnessing his experience of injustice and using his sharp mind to confront Church and State. He was deeply appreciative and cognisant of the values and person that he saw in his mother, Dorothy. Like her, he responded to both individuals and communities with compassion, living and walking with them. Albert enabled people, wherever they found themselves to reflect, to 'do theology' and act to transform their circumstance and the world. His kind demeanour and his sense of humour were always present. These qualities also shone in Iris, his sister. She too loves her family and Church. She was so keen to help us know Dennis as she knew him.

Aggiornamento

Andrew Prior

Albert Nolan knew the word *aggiornamento*. He had learnt it after arriving in Rome in 1962 to study at the Angelicum, the Dominican University in Rome. But he did not learn it immediately. A few months elapsed between his arrival and Pope John XXIII announcing the beginning of the Second Vatican Council and his learning of the word.

When Albert went to study in Rome he met the medieval Church. On his first days at the University he visited the barber to have a tonsure, the top part of his head shaved bare like the medieval friars, and always wearing the Dominican habit in the priory and the Roman streets. And thus began his studies, attending lectures on dogmatic and moral theology given by habited, learned, elderly friars in fluent medieval Latin as spoken in the thirteenth century by Thomas Aquinas. Leaving Cape Town he now found himself in another world, the world of Latin, monkish habits and private prayers, in the formula of past ages. Then Pope John XXIII, aware of the outdated character of the Church, announced that the time had come to 'update, renovate and modernise' the Church. The word that he used was *aggiornamento* (update). And Albert learnt it.

Albert was in Rome for the opening of the Second Vatican Council on 11 October 1962. And he, like many Catholics, religious or secular, had to confront the new reality. 'Open the Church's windows; let in fresh air; shake off the imperial dust accumulated on the throne of St Peter!' And so Albert and his contemporaries in Rome, who had arrived at the centre of Roman Catholicism to find it dogmatic and hidebound in its traditions, were forced to confront the disturbing world of institutional change, theological criticism, and implement it. Critical institutional analysis, examining codes of belief and moral behaviour became the order of the day.

But the invitation to the new world brought words of warning. An example came from Denis Hurley, Archbishop of Durban: 'Go into the Church with your broom', he advised his flock, 'and sweep out the accumulated dust of the ages!' This was quickly followed by a qualification: 'But don't throw away the furniture, the sacred traditions of the past!'

Armed with this new vision and fully identifying with it, the young Albert Nolan returned to St Nicholas Priory in Stellenbosch, near Cape Town, in 1964. His aim was to implement the vision of the Vatican Council: respect tradition, remove what is defective in it, be open minded and engage in dialogue with the world.

Not long after returning Albert was contacted by aspirant *dominees* (pastors) from the Dutch Reformed *Kweekskool*, the training school for *predikants* (ministers) in their Church. Aware of the open mindedness of the Vatican Council, Albert agreed to a meeting. Two enthusiastic Afrikaans-speaking young men arrived, wearing dark suits, white ties and each grasping a Bible. Opposite them sat the habit-clad Dominicans eager to implement what Pope John had advised and what these young men wanted. The *predikant* students were the first to speak. They spoke in the manner of a sermon drawing to the attention of their seated audience the failures of the Roman Catholic Church, quoting extracts from their Bibles, and what they should do to become true, Bible-believing Christians. Then it was the Dominican students turn to speak with a vigour equal to that of the *predikant* students, pointing out the failures of the Reformation and their proponents. It was as if each group was in an opposite pulpit preaching to the other and expecting the other to listen and accept what they were saying with the humility of church-goers listening to the Sunday sermon. But they weren't in a church and neither group was prepared to accept what the other had said.

Leaving the meeting Albert knew that an impasse was reached; mutual preaching does not result in the one accepting, or even respecting, the views of the other. Preaching might work in a church, but not in a seminar room. How do you break it? He knew that only through open-minded discussion, mutual respect, listening and evaluating by both groups, could there be any hope for finding common ground. How do you find the means to do this? To his surprise, he discovered that there was a way. And, ironically, it came from a Professor at the University of Stellenbosch.

That man was a thirty-year-old South African, Johan Degenaar, educated at Stellenbosch and in the Netherlands, and now a professor in his own department. His early appointment as a professor was unusual. Returning from the Netherlands he lectured in the Philosophy Department but his method of teaching met with opposition from the *Kweekskool*. Their problem was that aspirant Dutch Reformed ministers were expected to do a course in philosophy, and their lecturer was Johan Degenaar. Finding that his teaching methods resulted in a critical approach to life and philosophy and, in their opinion, undermined the teachings of the Reformed Church, they campaigned to force him from the University. They were partially successful. The agreement was that Degenaar would leave the Philosophy Department and so release the aspirant *predikante* from his classrooms, and he would establish his own department, *Staatsfilosofie*, Political Philosophy.

His method of teaching was straightforward. Instead of seeing philosophy teaching as the dogmatic transmission of philosophical systems, he placed himself in the tradition of the ancient Greek philosophers, Anaximander and Socrates. 'The secret to understanding nature's secrets is through asking questions', Anaximander had said, 'Don't accept beliefs as truth simply because they are beliefs. Don't accept dogmatic assertions because of faith; question what you believe'.

Initially the size of Degenaar's classes were small because of the *Kweekskool* opposition to him but this benefitted his teaching method. Classes were turned into discussion groups; the most critical phrase used by Degenaar was 'What do you mean?' Questioning, examining through discussion became his critical tool. Ironically, even though many academics at the University opposed Degenaar and his teaching methods, there were many who supported him.

Two events forced the attention of the university academics on the country's racial policies. They were the police killings of sixty-nine pass law protestors at Sharpeville on 21 March 1960 and the arrest, trial and imprisonment of prominent anti-Apartheid activists, including Nelson Mandela, in 1964. Some Afrikaners, including academics at Stellenbosch, began to question the government's Apartheid policies, others demanded that the policy of racial segregation be implemented more strongly. Stellenbosch's academics found themselves in this turmoil of self-examination. Among them was Johan Degenaar.