Being Compassionate Contemplatives: Dominican Engagement With The World



Albert Nolan OP
Foreword by Alison Munro OP

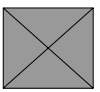
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Albert Nolan OP

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Dominican Engagement With The World

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Adelaide
2025

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ATF Press wishes to thank the following groups for their support of this volume:
Cabra Dominican Sisters, Dublin, Ireland
Dominican Friars, Province of the Assumption, Australia
Dominican Congregation of the Sisters of St Catherine of Siena of Oakford, Natal
Adrian Dominican Sisters, USA
Thomas More Center for Preaching and Prayer, USA
Holy Cross Dominican Sisters, Adelaide, Australia

ISBN:
978-1-923385-26-9 Softcover
978-1-923385-27-6 Hardcover
978-1-923385-28-3 Epub
978-1-923385-29-0 PDF

SCAN ME

Published by:

Making a lasting impact
An imprint of the ATF Press Publishing Group
owned by ATF (Australia) Ltd.
PO Box 234
Brompton, SA 5007
Australia
ABN 90 116 359 963
www.atfpress.com

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Foreword

Alison Munro, OP

The essays published here cover insights into Dominican life and spirituality, prayer, contemplation and preaching, commitment to following Jesus, and the place of social analysis, as experienced by Albert Nolan over many years. Some were published as chapters of books or articles in journals, others were given as talks at conferences or gatherings, some were notes for sermons. While one at least is clearly biographical, many of the others provide the reader with an insight into the person of Albert, what he believed, how he lived and what he shared with his Dominican Family and beyond. He grew in understanding of what it means to be human and to follow Jesus, to be committed to the poor and marginalised, and to integrate contemplation and preaching in a particular Dominican way. In his Dominican life he drew on the wisdom, teaching and lives of Dominican saints, though it was Thomas Merton who had drawn him into religious life.

Dominican Heritage

St Dominic's Order was founded to revive the original spirit of the first apostles. Albert often reminded his readers and listeners that 'today it remains our Dominican heritage, that which we *inherit* from our father Dominic . . . the apostolic life of preaching and poverty'. St Dominic was able to listen, to take note of what the people were saying. He became a poor man to preach, to communicate with the people. He taught us, said Albert, that now, as in his time there is a need to study the world around us, the sciences, the mystery of God, the Gospels, the life of Jesus 'for the sake of teaching and preaching, of communicating'.

For him was clear that 'Jesus was the prophet *par excellence* and it is his prophetic or preaching office which we as a Dominican community try to imitate'. The followers of St Dominic are 'a sign of contradiction, criticising the society in which they live and stand(ing) out as the conscience of the people, condemning every form of worldliness'. He recognised the important role in the life of the Order played by St Catherine of Siena, 'a powerful example of what it means to be a true Dominican'. And while Catherine's first aim was to dedicate herself totally to contemplation, it was precisely her union with God in Jesus that drove her out of her cell to give to others the fruits of her contemplation.

Prayer, Contemplation and Preaching

Several essays are devoted to the themes of prayer, preaching and contemplation, sometimes singly, often together. Together they can perhaps be seen as the over-arching theme of Albert's life as a Dominican preacher. Life for him was about integrating prayer and contemplation with his preaching, *contemplata aliis tradere*, taking the fruits of his contemplation to others. He was deeply aware that the following of Jesus was what his Dominican life was about, and that to preach to others he needed to understand himself and the context in which he lived.

In more than one essay, Albert bemoaned the fact that many Christians today regard contemplation as the special vocation of a chosen few. And yet he noted, in 2003, there is a powerful movement throughout Christianity of returning to the Catholic tradition of contemplation and meditation for everyone. Contemplative preaching, he suggested, has been the way of preaching of the prophets, the saints, and the mystics through the ages. We learn to thank God for the "many good things in life, for nature, for the universe, for other people and for the wonder of human consciousness."

> Contemplation, situated in time and place, in relation to God and others, has always marked our Dominican life. The challenges of the present time only increase our taste for it and our need to return to it. The new generation wishes to put it at the heart of our common life. In fact, only an enriched contemplative life can ensure authentic witness (Dominican Chapter 2001, Acts #202).

'People today are suspicious of ideologies, dogmas, doctrines, and any other absolute truths. They are looking for authenticity rather than authority', he wrote. Yet, at the same time, 'the postmodern attitude of mind is not necessarily an obstacle to the preaching of the Good News of Jesus Christ. [. . .] It often leads to a greater interest than before in our Christian experience of spirituality, meditation, contemplation, prayer, mysticism, and inner peace.'

For him, 'contemplation is the experience of waking up to reality, developing a heightened awareness of what is happening around us and within us, and above all, a deeper consciousness of the presence of God in everything'. He believed that 'genuine contemplative prayer helps us to overcome our selfishness and self-centredness by making us more and more conscious of the unity of all things in God'. The contemplative learns to see himself or herself 'as lovable in the eyes of God' and to see 'God's plan, God's providence and God's work everywhere all the time'. Contemplation is a way of seeing things with the eyes of Jesus, with compassion. 'The true contemplative, like Jesus, will be deeply concerned about the poor, the sick, injustice. The true contemplative will develop a passion for justice' and is challenged 'to search for God in our world, in nature and in human affairs'.

He wrote movingly about the Prayer of Wonder, seeing wonder as a *profound form of consciousness,* 'a prayer making contact in some way or another with God'. We marvel, he suggested, about the mystery, the glory, the grandeur, and the beauty of God, the 'uselessness' of wonder itself. Yet, children have it and Jesus wanted us to become human beings who 'wonder the way children do'. And while the mechanistic view of the universe took all the mystery and wonder out of life, nothing, he suggested, has contributed more to the revival of the sense of wonder than the new cosmology, the new universe story. 'It's the scientists often enough who are talking about mystery and about wonder . . . We can only know so much, and then we come to a point where even what happens inside an atom is just beyond us. Mystery. And there is only one human response to that. And that is wonder.' Wonder, he believed, is a shortcut to contemplation.

Jesus and Leadership

Albert viewed Jesus as 'a leader who built leadership with others', not a kind of dictator who bossed people around. Jesus focussed

his attention on the twelve apostles 'as a group and not only as individuals', trying to get them to work together to serve people. He told them the goal of their leadership was the kingdom of God, and their commitment to this goal is faith. He built leadership with them by encouraging them. He pointed out the need for them to be 'self-critical and disciplined', to be humble leaders. He expected much of them, as he did of himself.

Yet, it was clear for Albert that 'God loves us just as we are. God loves us unconditionally. God's love has no ifs and buts. And therefore, we ought to learn to love ourselves as God loves us.' Holiness, therefore, is quite simply a matter of accepting God's will which 'is about being loved and loving others'. 'God is there in the suffering, in the poverty of the poor, in the mystery of all suffering or all that is unjust or oppressive.'

Social Analysis, Theology from Below, The Option for the Poor

A group of essays on doing theology from below, on exercising an option for the poor, on doing social analysis of the context in which we find ourselves covers another major theme in Albert's writings. In an essay entitled 'The Great Divorce' he showed how spirituality and social justice were originally united, and how over time came to be separated. 'Politics was divorced from prayer; prophetic action for justice . . . from mysticism and contemplation; social problems . . . from individual and personal needs.' By and large, Christians, he believed, remain divided into two camps: 'social justice Christians and spiritual Christians.'

For Albert it was clear 'that the concept of the poor is central to the whole biblical revelation'. The prophets took up the cause of justice for the poor as Yahweh's cause. After the Exile to be God's chosen people, the religious remnant of Israel was called imitate the virtues of the poor. He pointed out that the spirituality of the Old Testament makes no distinction between spirituality and justice or between God's law and social justice, while the New Testament focuses on love, which in the teaching of Jesus is simply 'the interiorisation of justice'. The theology of the Desert Fathers and Mothers 'included everything that we would today call a social justice issue'. Albert suggested that 'the rift began with the conflict between the Church and Galileo whose scientific discoveries were regarded as contrary to God's revelation'.

God, faith, prayer, and spirituality were relegated to the private sphere, with the public sphere governed by reason. This is the dualistic world we have inherited.

On the other hand, there were 'always Christians who tried to remain faithful to the prophets, the gospel and the traditions of the Church [. . .] Their teaching came to be known as the social teaching of the Church.'

People are called to serve God in the present social, political, economic, and cultural situation. God does not call us to serve him in a vacuum. 'Moreover when God calls us to serve him', said Albert, he calls us in and through the personal and social circumstances in which we find ourselves, 'inviting us to participate in his work of saving or liberating the world from sin and suffering'. Social Analysis, he wrote at a particular time in South Africa's *Apartheid* history, is a way of diagnosing the causes of suffering in our society: the suffering of the people is the most obvious symptom of sin; a second symptom is violence; fear is the overriding emotion; and separation keeps the races ignorant of one another. It is wrong, he believed, to attribute all the social evils of South Africa to racial prejudice or ideology. Behind much of the suffering is the sin of greed. We need people he believed 'who will witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ and fearlessly speak out against the sin of racial prejudice, the sin of greed for money, the sin of domination and oppression, the sin of lying propaganda and deceit, the sin of hatred for those who are perceived as enemies'.

For him the option for the poor 'is not a choice about the r*ecipients* of the gospel message; it is concerned with the c*ontent* of the gospel message itself. The gospel may be good news for the poor and bad news for the rich, but it is a message for both the poor and the rich.' The option for the poor is concerned with *the sin of oppression* and what Christians should be doing about it. 'The central challenge in the gospels is the challenge that Jesus presented to the rich and the powerful and to all those who had sided with them. He faced them with a simple and uncompromising option—the choice between God and money . . .'

His Experience of Being a Religious in South Africa

Albert speaking to Jesuits at the height of Apartheid in 1986 indicated that 'the spiritual life has been my primary and abiding concern in life'. Compassion, he said, 'helped me to overcome ambition—so that