

'ECCE SACERDOS MAGNUS'

REMEMBERING FR. SEAN CONATY - A TRIBUTE

It was 1975 and I had just returned from the International Charismatic Congress in Rome and was missioned to Newcastle – as a member of the Good Shepherd Community in Benton Park Rd. I had been involved with charismatic prayer groups in Bristol and I was delighted to find that the movement was alive and well in the North-East. Not only that but the main leader in our area was our local parish priest who was also the chaplain to the Good Shepherd community – Fr. Sean Conaty.

Fr. Sean had recently returned from his mission in Chile where he had been lucky to escape with his life from the brutal Pinochet regime. He befriended many of the Chileans who arrived in the Newcastle area at that time as refugees from Pinochet. But he also suffered a culture-shock on re-entry to the West. He had strong views on injustice and did not believe in a spirituality that failed to take account of the needs of the poor and oppressed. With his great qualities of leadership and his deep faith, he very soon inspired a number of lay people as well as Sisters and priests, who became deeply involved in the Charismatic Prayer movement.

It is well-known that Fr. Sean was the diocesan exorcist and while exorcisms may be rare, he took the ministry of Deliverance very seriously. When someone appealed for his help to be delivered from some evil oppression which had no rational explanation, Fr. Sean would fast and pray in preparation and get his prayer groups to support this ministry. I remember one evening, our prayer group had been asked to intercede while Fr. Sean was praying with a lady who felt she needed liberation from some unseen force. We prayed for some hours and eventually Fr. Sean returned to the group – looking rather exhausted and holding a copy of the Bible. He held it open at a section where there was a distinct sign of a hand having burnt through a number of pages. He told us that the lady had been unable (or prevented) to say the Name of Jesus but when he asked her to put her hand on the open Bible, it burnt through the pages which we saw – but she was freed and able to praise God!

Many people came to him for advice and the ministry of prayer and sacraments. He never turned anyone away – though, like Jesus and the apostles, he often had hardly time to eat! We will never know the extent of all the good he did and the many healings that took place - spiritual, emotional and physical, especially when he led prayers for healing – often in 'tongues' with large or small groups. But there were people who found him too challenging, who disliked him and could not cope with his honest and often blunt appraisal of situations. He was aware of this and felt hurt by it. It could be said that he had the gift of 'Discernment of Spirits', which showed in his very perceptive understanding of the dynamics that went on in groups – power-play, rivalries, jealousies etc. He had great insight too, into people's abilities and hidden talents – seeing gifts of leadership and service that they were unaware of themselves and encouraging people to use their gifts.

I often asked Sean for guidance in coping with various life-changing decisions. At one point, he encouraged me to take on the ministry of Student Chaplaincy – at

Newcastle University, where there was a vacancy for such a role. It had never occurred to me that I would be called to such a ministry but I 'gave it a go' and found it a very fruitful ministry to young people, many of whom were likely to become future leaders in Church and State. However, two years into the role, I felt it was time to resign but he encouraged me to give it another year! I stayed another two years - till 1980, - and gained valuable experience which deepened my conviction as to the value of this pastoral service to young Catholics. Since then and in between other ministries over the next thirty years, I served as Chaplain in six different Universities in both England and Scotland! I do feel it was thanks to Fr. Sean that I discovered my calling in this area.

I leave it to others to describe his ministry as a Retreat-giver - not only in English but in Spanish and German. He spoke fluent Spanish as a result of his time in S. America, but he deliberately learnt German in order to respond to requests to give Retreats in that country. Altogether a truly dedicated and holy priest! **“Sacerdos Magnus”!**