

## **Br. Bruno Rowswell, R.I.P.**

Frederick Charles and Alice (nee Sheelley) Rowswell had a son, born on 31<sup>st</sup> January 1922, and whom they named Desmond. They lived in Forest Gate to the east of London and he went to the local schools.

He also obtained qualifications in book-keeping, commerce, shorthand and typing, which were to stand him in good stead for the future.

He was received into the Catholic Church in St George's Church on 31<sup>st</sup> May 1940, and was confirmed a year later by Bishop Lee at Warminster on 18<sup>th</sup> May 1941.

During the Second World War he served in the RAF and spent two and a half years in South East Asia, where he was an enthusiastic member of the chaplaincy team and met the Capuchins for the first time, especially Father Finbar McCabe of the English Province. This led him to write to ask to be considered for a place in the Novitiate. He left the RAF and as Corporal Rowswell returned to England from India, having completed almost five years of exemplary service.

So it was that in late 1946 he went to Olton to study Latin with Father Alphonsus May and then went on to Pantasaph to be clothed on 17<sup>th</sup> May 1947. One year later he was simply professed at Pantasaph on 18<sup>th</sup> May 1948 and proceeded to Olton for three years of Philosophy and Church History. He was solemnly professed on 18<sup>th</sup> May 1951 at Olton and then went on to Crawley to study Theology. His short hand and typing came into its own and his fellow students would receive copious notes on the classes taken down and typed up for them to refer to. Archbishop Cowderoy ordained him at Aylesford Priory on 18<sup>th</sup> July 1954.

Bruno had been troubled with a hyperactive thyroid for some time and it was to plague him for much of his life. He had gone to Pantasaph in 1955 but his thyroid treatment had to be stopped and he underwent an operation to remove part of the thyroid in the middle of 1956. The treatment stopped him from completing his studies in the normal way. By February 1957 however, he had been examined and passed his Theology examinations and was granted his faculties for preaching by Father General.

In May 1958 Bruno was appointed as Prefect of Discipline in our Juniorate at Upper Norwood. In 1960 he moved to Olton to be part of the Mission

Band. In 1961 he moved again, this time to Chester for nine months, until his appointment in March 1962 as teacher for our late Vocations at Birkenhead. During this time he acted as Director of Vocations for the North of England. In June 1964 he was appointed as Commissary provincial of the Third Order, while still living at Birkenhead. Over the next 18 months he had a full programme of visitations and preaching engagements, which are evidence of his keenness for this type of work.

However his illness flared up once more and this time he needed specialist help and treatment. He was afraid to say Mass in public, especially in large spaces, and this fear continued with him for the rest of his life. As the numbers of friar-priests dwindled, it became a pain which he could not always share with others. To ease the situation he sought ways of ensuring that he could offer Mass in small chapels and with small groups.

In the spring of 1966 Birkenhead was closed and the friars moved to Childer Thornton. This became his base until the Provincial Chapter of 1966, when he was made Provincial Archivist in Peckham. He was met with a vast array of material which needed to be sorted into proper categories and made available as a Provincial resource. This he did with great application and left a wonderful legacy to future Provincial staff. In 1968 he was asked to be one of the typists for the General Chapter and returned to Rome to help in the post-Chapter work. The strain told and at the end of May 1969 his illness returned. The Provincial Curia was moved to Erith in 1969 and as a member of the Curia Bruno went with them. Here he spent his time between the work as Archivist and Mission Secretary and in preaching retreats. He remained as Archivist until the autumn of 1975.

In August 1973 he moved to Chester but his illness one more took hold and he had to undergo hospital treatment. He completed his treatment successfully and was assigned to the Curia in Erith in May 1982, where he was appointed Director of Saint Anthony's Guild. There he stayed until June 1989 when he moved to Peckham and was appointed National Assistant to the Secular Franciscans, for whom he did excellent work throughout the country. In October 1989 his work for the Secular Franciscans ceased but he continued to visit many of the Franciscan communities of Sisters with whom he had previously made contact. And here he stayed until September 2000, when Peckham ceased to be a Friary and he was sent to Erith.

For the last ten years of his life Bruno was a member of the Erith Fraternity. His health still continued to give concern. He had been one of the tallest priests in the country as is clear from any of his early photos as a friar. This caused a problem in his later years and he had to undergo surgery on his spine in 2005, which proved very successful.

One of the early themes in his Retreats was based on a popular song of the 1940s: “Accentuate the positive and eliminate the negative”. He strove to do this in his own life in good times and bad. A good epitaph for a good friar! He died peacefully in Erith on the morning of 10<sup>th</sup> August and was buried in Erith on 19<sup>th</sup> August 2010. May he rest in peace!

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### **Diamonds are not for ever**

*(a personnel assessment by Bruno after 60 years of Capuchin life)*

“And it don’t seem a day too long!” So sang the veteran cockney entertainer musing upon years of marital bliss with his dear old dutch. Celebrating sixty years in religious life arouses similar sentiments. No wonder I’m taking the opportunity to thank God for the blessing of my religious life as a Capuchin Franciscan. It certainly doesn’t seem so long since I was formally clothed in the brown religious habit and everyday since I have put on the religious habit thereby being reminded of what I vowed to be faithful to all those years.

The friars accepted me into the Order at Olton in October 1946 and I became a postulant when, despite everything the war-torn country had endured, the Capuchin Province had never been more flourishing. We then had a record 158 friars (105 of them priests) and 15 houses. At Pantasaph there were a dozen of us in the novitiate and with the wise spiritual blend of Richard Payne and Alfred Spencer we were happily introduced to a same and purposeful Franciscan discipline which has always characterized the Province. Most of us survived the formative years and eventually progressed into our various apostolates.

Quite soon I was introduced to parish missioning, then to spiritual retreats to religious and eventually to diocesan clergy. On the home front much earlier I found myself trying to introduce a filing system into the Provincial Curia at

Peckham, where a frightening accumulation of unsorted archives had been gathering dust. Elsewhere there was St Anthony's Guild to look after and also the Secular Franciscan Order. The latter will always be dear to my heart for I found the privilege of encouraging its members in the basic principles of genuine Franciscan spirituality often meant I would come away from fraternities having learnt much more from them than I was presuming to give. Indeed quite a challenge!

Across the years I have been able to celebrate jubilees of the priesthood and the religious life with the friars but surely this year's is the big one: the Diamond! So now what next? Perhaps we could plan just a few more and give the brethren something to look forward to. Remember dear old Crispin of St Helens? He found so many to chalk up that he became affectionately known as Jubilee Jones. But today my ageing and aching bones warn me not to presume even to think far ahead. As someone once said: "If you want to make God laugh tell him your plans." So be it then. Let's leave it at that.

***Brother Bruno Rowswell***