

FATHER ALBERT (BIBBY)

By JIM MAHER

THOMAS FRANCIS BIBBY was born in Muine Bheag (Bagenalstown), Co. Carlow, on October 21, 1877. He was the third child of John and Julia Bibby, and the only boy in a family of six children, all born between 1874 and 1883. John Bibby, his father, was a shopkeeper in Regent St., Muine Bheag, and he was also a woollen merchant and agent for Greenvale Woollen Mills, Kilkenny.

Thomas Bibby was brought up at 8 High Street, Kilkenny, and he was educated at the Christian Brothers' School, James's Street. His name appears on the register for that school for the years 1890 and 1891. As he went through his teenage years in Kilkenny, he attended Mass regularly in the Capuchin Friary, only a stone's throw from where he lived. As he got older, the lifestyle of the brown friars appealed to him more and more. He left Kilkenny in 1894 for Rochestown, Co. Cork, where he entered the Capuchin Order on July 7 of that year.

Father Albert was ordained a priest at the Church Street Monastery, Dublin, in February, 1902, after proving himself to be a brilliant student while in university. After his ordination he became a professor of philosophy and theology and taught these subjects to the Capuchin students for some years. One of his young scholars was Father Dominic who became Father Albert's trusted friend and co-worker during the years 1917 to 1925.

This saintly Capuchin spent many years in Church Street, Dublin, where he was worshipped by the poor, the lowly and the children. As he walked along Dublin's streets, he had a kind word for everyone - with the less fortunate always the object of his special attention. He was Provincial Secretary from 1913, and he was serenely happy and at peace with the quiet and unobtrusive life of a brown friar.

He was keenly interested in learning and speaking the Irish language. He was one of the pioneers of the Gaelic League, and a constant adviser to the Colmcille Branch in its early years. He loved to visit the Gaeltacht and hear the Irish language spoken in all its natural beauty.

But this friar's quiet and serene lifestyle was about to be shattered by events which were moving forward outside the domain of his own field of action. The 1916 Rising came on Easter Monday, the fighting lasted for a week, and the inevitable surrender was ordered by Pearse on Saturday after he had seen some innocent civilians being killed on the streets of Dublin. The courtmartial followed and many of the leaders were sentenced to death.

ATTENDED THE EXECUTIONS

Father Albert was at home in the Capuchin Friary, Church Street, on Wednesday night, May 3, 1916, when the message came to Father Aloysius, O.F.M. Cap., to say that some of the Fathers were wanted to attend the executions of Plunkett, Daly, O'Hanrahan and Willie Pearse. Fathers Albert, Augustine and probably Sebastian attended.

On Sunday night, May 7, Father Augustine and Father Albert were notified that they would be required at Kilmainham Gaol the following morning as more executions were to take place. At 1.30 a.m. a military motor car came to Church Street for them, and on their arrival at Kilmainham they were brought to the wing of the jail where the leaders were confined.

Father Augustine went to the cell of Eamonn Ceannt, and Father Albert went to visit Commandant Michael Mallin. He did not remain long with him as he was on his knees with two friends. He then saw Con Colbert and spent some time in prayer with this young Volunteer Leader and the third teacher on the staff of Pearse's all-Irish school, St. Enda's, to be executed.

Father Albert then went to see Sean Heuston, one of the youngest of the leaders about to face death. He later wrote an account of how Sean Heuston met his death, and it was first published in the Capuchin Annual of 1942.

He wrote: "When I saw him, he was kneeling beside a small table with the Rosary beads in his hand, and on the table was a little piece of candle and some letters he had written to some near relatives and friends. He wore his overcoat as the morning was extremely cold. During his last quarter of an hour on this earth I spoke to him in complete darkness as the little piece of candle had burned out. Sean Heuston's one thought was to prepare with all fervour and earnestness to meet his Divine Saviour. He had been to Confession and had received Holy Communion early that morning, and was not afraid to die. He awaited the end with that calmness and fortitude which peace of mind brings to noble souls. We said together short Acts of Faith, Hope, Contrition and Love; we prayed together to St. Patrick, St. Brigid, St. Colmcille and all the Saints of Ireland; we said many times that very beautiful little ejaculatory prayer: 'Jesus, Mary and Joseph, I give you my heart and my soul'.

"He showed me his last letter to his sister - a Dominican nun. In it he wrote:

'If you really love me, teach the children the history of their own land'.

"At about 3.45 a.m. a British soldier knocked at the door of the cell and told us time was up. We both walked out together down to the end of the large open space from which the corridor leads to the gaol yards. Here his hands were tied behind his back, a cloth tied over his eyes and a small piece of white paper about four or five inches square, pinned to his coat over his heart. We now proceeded towards the yard where the execution was to take place, my left arm was linked in his right. Sean bent his head and kissed the Crucifix I had in my hand. Having reached a second yard, a soldier directed Sean and myself to a corner of the yard. Here there was a box (seemingly a soap box) and Sean was told to sit on it. He was perfectly calm and said with me for the last time, 'My Jesus Mercy'. I had scarcely moved away a few yards when the volley went off. I rushed over to anoint him. His whole face seemed transformed and lit up with a grandeur and brightness I had never before noticed".

MUCH APPRECIATED

The attention given by Father Albert, other Capuchin friars and other priests to the leaders of the 1916 Rising before the executions was much appreciated by these men themselves, and by their close relatives. Father Aloysius, O.F.M. Cap., received a message that James Connolly wanted to see him in Dublin Castle. Connolly had been away from the Sacraments for some time. "I want to see you as a priest", Connolly said to Father Aloysius. "I have seen and heard of the brave conduct of the priests and nuns during the week and I believe they are the best friends of the workers". James Connolly then made his confession to Father Aloysius and received Holy Communion on the following morning.

Father Albert did not forget the families of the dead patriots of 1916. His kindness and consideration for the bereaved relatives was manifested by the fact that he visited them often in the subsequent years, always consoling and comforting them.

There followed the War of Independence from 1919 to 1921 and Father Albert continued to minister to Republican prisoners in jail and "on the run". During the last crowded hours of Kevin Barry's life, he was visited by Father Albert, Father Augustine, O.F.M. Cap., and by other priests. Father Albert was arrested by Black and Tans in Church Street Friary, Dublin, in January 1921, and he was taken with Father Dominic, O.F.M. Cap., to Dublin Castle where both priests were tortured.

Father Albert was a gentle, inspiring man, a mystic type. He constantly thought of the splendid ideal which the young men of 1916 had set before themselves and he was lost in the grandeur of that ideal. Father Albert was a dreamer. The smaller things of life had no place in his scheme of things. He had a steadfastness of purpose which is characteristic of all visionaries.

It was no wonder that this patriotic friar missed Ireland greatly when he was sent by his superiors to the United States in June, 1924. He was sent with another Capuchin priest and brother as pastor to Santa Inez Mission in California. At the same time, his appointment to

Santa Inez appealed very much to him because from his novitiate days he had been particularly devoted to Saint Agnes whose youthful innocence and great courage charmed him. With his usual enthusiasm he set himself to his new task of caring for her mission. Everything seemed to augur a fruitful apostolate. But it was not to be. In December, 1924, a few weeks after he had assumed his charge, he became gravely ill and was taken to Saint Francis hospital, Santa Barbara. When Father Dominic, who was his trusted co-worker during the War of Independence, heard how seriously ill he was, he travelled to his bedside, from his place of domicile in America, and remained with him during his last illness.

IT WOULD HAVE BEEN AN AGONY

God spared Father Albert from living in exile. It would have been an agony for him, because his love of homeland was a love of rare purity. Death came to him in Santa Barbara, California, on February 14, 1925. He was the first of the Irish Friars to die in Western America. He was buried in the hallowed ground of the old Mission of Santa Inez, far from the land he adored.

For years the people of Ireland requested that the body of Father Albert, together with the remains of his faithful friend, Father Dominic, be brought home to rest in the soil of the country they loved. With the blessing of the ecclesiastical authorities, and the permission of the superiors of the Order of Capuchins, their repatriation was organised and financed by Old I.R.A. veterans in the United States and in Ireland.

On June 13, 1958, a day of brilliant sunshine, a plane bearing the remains of both Father Albert and Father Dominic landed at Shannon Airport. Through the city of Limerick, on to Buttevant and Mallow, and from there to Cork City, the funeral moved through streets thronged with prayerful crowds. At the outskirts of Cork City, the Lord Mayor of Cork and the Corporation dressed in ceremonial robes, were joined by the Lord Mayor of Dublin, and the Mayors of Kilkenny and Limerick, accorded the remains a civic reception.

After Mass in Cork the funeral made its short journey to Rochestown. The friary of Rochestown is on the side of a steep, narrow glen. On the surrounding rise the people gathered to pay their last respects. The remains were gently lowered into the welcoming Irish soil. The people began to disperse, but they halted again. Across the sloping hill came the sombre notes of a bugle, as if from nowhere, sounding the last post across the partially covered graves. As it changed from sadness to the *réveillé*, a thrush in a big sycamore burst forth in song as if to say “*Fáilte romhaibh abhaile, Albert agus Dominic*”

