

Photograph by Jacinta O'Driscoll OP

Fergus Kerr OP
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Appreciation

Essays to honour scholars on their seventieth birthday may have an air of valediction about them, a hint of being an obituary of a once-creative mind that now rests on its laurels. This is far from being the case as we honour Fr Fergus Kerr OP. If anything, the constant stream of his lectures and published writings has swelled and much more can be expected. Fr Kerr is the kind of person who rarely stops thinking or reading and who tends to calculate train journeys not by their chronological duration but by the length of the novel he can read while he travels.

His seventieth year—he was born in Banff on 16 July 1931—finds him dividing his time between Edinburgh and Oxford, where he also lectures and tutors in philosophy and theology, editing *New Blackfriars*, completing a book on Thomism, and much engaged as a university examiner and internationally as lecturer and writer. The many years spent in England, the completion of his intellectual formation as a Dominican in France and Germany, the frequent travel have not diminished his attachment to his native Scotland or the Scottish cadence of his voice. Regular readers of his editorial comments will have noted the recurrence of references to his native land.

We have not found it possible to keep the essays in his honour within the bounds of even one large special issue of this journal. There will therefore be two issues in his honour. Here we present contributions from his Dominican brethren and the November issue will carry articles written by other colleagues and friends. Plans are well advanced to include all these essays, with additional material, in book form.

The articles as a whole not only reflect Fr Kerr's deep attachment to the Dominican Order but also his involvement with and impact on a wider intellectual and pastoral world. Our introduction to the November issue will attempt a brief intellectual portrait; here we present the most salient biographical details. The list of his published writings since 1970 (appended to this issue) straddles our two introductions in the sense that consulting it reveals the unfolding of interests and reactions, the shifts and reconsiderations of one philosopher-theologian immersed in the conventual life of his Order in different academic settings as the twentieth century progressed and this millennium started.

Fr Kerr earned a First Class Honours degree in English Language and Literature at Aberdeen University. Later, the quality of his publications would earn him the D.D. degree from the same university. He likes to recall Donald MacKinnon's statement to his Aberdeen students that,'minds are what we are' (An example, incidentally, of Fr Kerr's amazing memory for events and people). After national service in the RAF and entry into the Catholic Church, Fr Kerr joined the Dominicans in 1956 and was ordained priest in 1962. He has had occasion to remark on the high and, to some, unexpectedly sophisticated standards he found when studying for ordination at Hawkesyard and Oxford in the days before the post-conciliar renewal. His studies abroad, including five years at Le Saulchoir in Paris

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where he received a Licence in Sacred Theology and a year in Munich working as an assistant to Karl Rahner, completed his formation and prepared him for what was to be a lifetime's teaching. The years abroad made him a voracious reader in three modern languages. Much of his teaching and writing is based on a thorough knowledge and close reading of the relevant literature, making him ideally suited to survey, chronicle and comment.

It would be fair to say that a rounded account of Fr Kerr's life and work should pay as much attention to him as a Dominican friar as to him as a thinker and writer—but then he has never neglected the link between life and thought. By this, we also mean that Fr Kerr has devoted much time and energy to living and sustaining conventual life. The period after Vatican II had not been the most favourable for religious life or its inherited traditions and expectations. In the mid-sixties, he came to think that such was the epochal dislocation that fraternity in depth was very difficult in both religious life and in the Church at large. The Godforsaken landscape struck him as requiring living among ruins.

Fr Kerr's serene self-composure, quiet sense of humour, dedication to communal activities, fidelity to his vowed life and its regular habits are moral achievements as much as traits of personality: circumstances and a virtually unbroken succession of demanding offices in the Order might have made him otherwise. Of the need to put on hold his (never completed) Oxford D.Phil on Catholic and Lutheran themes in the work of Martin Heidegger, he has written with his usual laconic style, 'happily abandoned for non-academic and pastoral responsibilities about 1967'. He was prior for three consecutive terms (1969–1978) at Oxford, the province's largest community by far and the place of formation for young friars in a period not lacking in unrest and polemic. Then came office as novice master and again as prior, this time in Edinburgh (1992–8). Delegate to a General Chapter, he has been elected many times to the Provincial Council and is now both Regent of Studies for the English Dominican Province and head of Blackfriars Hall, Oxford.

Fr Kerr has never had a narrow conception of the theologian's task, being far too responsive to the claims of philosophy and literature. The influence of Fr Cornelius Ernst OP was crucial in shaping the cast of his own style of thinking. Although fully aware of the unavoidable complexities of modernity and post-modernity, sharpened by teaching in non-confessional universities, his believer's attachment to the truth of the Catholic faith is evident. His achievements in the doctrinal tradition of our Order were publicly recognised when (in 1993) he was incorporated among the Masters of Sacred Theology of the Order of Preachers. Firmly but not uncritically a Dominican theologian, Fr Kerr is as much at home in the pulpit as at the lectern. In both settings he speaks with confidence, a commanding presence and a careful, conscious use of tone and pitch which can on occasions be incantatory. He aims to persuade.

Robert Ombres OP
Mark Edney OP
Guest Editors

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