

Alibrandi, Gaetano

by Patrick Maume

Alibrandi, Gaetano (1914–2003), papal diplomat, was born 14 January 1914 in Castiglione, Sicily, to an aristocratic family. After secondary education at the diocesan seminary in Acireale, Alibrandi attended the Pontifical Seminary, Rome, and was ordained priest on 1 November 1936; he then trained in the Pontifical Ecclesiastical Academy for the Diplomatic Service of the Holy See, which he joined in 1941. He obtained doctorates in divinity and in civil and canon law from the Pontifical Lateran University, Rome.

From 1941 Alibrandi spent five years in the Vatican secretariat of state (including one year as personal secretary to Archbishop Giovanni Batista Montini, later Pope Paul VI) and was then a staff member in the apostolic nunciatures in Italy and Turkey before coming to Ireland as counsellor at the Apostolic Nunciature (1954–6). Alibrandi later described his first Irish posting as ‘a spiritual bath’, recalling that during his stay an ambassador told him : ‘Go to O’Connell Street and just look into the faces of the people. You can be sure they are in the grace of God’ (*Ir. Times*, 12 July 2003). He congratulated Archbishop John Charles McQuaid (qv) of Dublin on his ‘magnificent and splendid’ protest against the October 1955 soccer match between Ireland and the then communist Yugoslavia. Alibrandi subsequently served in the nunciatures in Mexico and Indonesia. On 5 October 1961 he was appointed apostolic nuncio to Chile and titular archbishop of Binda, receiving episcopal ordination on 8 December 1961. In 1964 he became nuncio to Lebanon, where he served until his appointment as nuncio to Ireland on 19 April 1969. Alibrandi expressed his delight in returning to ‘the most Christian country in the world’ (*ibid.*). Some commentators claimed that his idealisation of Ireland was assisted by limited knowledge of the English language.

Whereas previous nuncios to Ireland were elderly diplomats near the end of their careers, rewarded with what was seen as an undemanding position, Alibrandi played a prominent and often controversial role within the Irish catholic church and in church–state relations. He was charged with reshaping the Irish episcopate in order to produce a more effective response to changes in Irish society and within the Church following the second Vatican council (1962–5). In 1971 he played a major role in the Vatican’s decision to accept the resignation of McQuaid as archbishop of Dublin (to the shock of McQuaid, who expected that he would be allowed to remain for some time after the normal retirement age of 75) and in the choice of Dermot Ryan (qv) as successor rather than McQuaid’s preferred heir, auxiliary Bishop Joseph Carroll. (In later life Alibrandi is alleged to have expressed a private preference for the earlier convention whereby bishops and parish priests remained in office until their deaths.)

By the end of his term as nuncio (1989) Alibrandi had advised on the appointment of thirty-four Irish bishops and archbishops, including the appointments of Ryan and Kevin McNamara (qv) to the archdiocese of Dublin. In advising Rome on an appointment Alibrandi generally conducted informal consultations with clergy in the relevant diocese, though he did not always follow their advice in making his recommendations. (For example, in 1976 he announced the appointment of Kevin McNamara as bishop of Kerry before the consultation of diocesan clergy was complete, leading to a protest delegation of Kerry clerics visiting the nunciature.) Some commentators (usually theological liberals) complained that Alibrandi's idealised view of Irish catholicism led him to underestimate the extent to which it needed to adapt to changing times, that he favoured colourless advocates of orthodoxy over other candidates who were seen as more challenging (or heterodox, depending on one's point of view), and that he attached more importance to academic than pastoral credentials. These criticisms were reinforced by later revelations about the inept handling of clerical sexual abuse cases by some of Alibrandi's episcopal protégés such as Ryan, McNamara and Brendan Comiskey. It should be borne in mind, however, that the tendency to appoint academics as Irish bishops long predated Alibrandi, and that his recommendations reflected the general Vatican approach under John Paul II as much as Alibrandi's own preferences. It has also been alleged that Alibrandi, like other nuncios, encouraged bishops to handle clerical sexual abuse cases without reference to the civil authorities, leading to undue leniency and the abuse of further victims. The extent of the nunciature's involvement in these matters, however, has not been fully investigated because of its diplomatic immunity.

Alibrandi privately claimed that while the final decision in episcopal appointments remained with the pope, his recommendations were always accepted. But this was not always the case; it is believed that Alibrandi wished to have Mgr Micheal Ledwith, president of Maynooth, appointed as archbishop of Dublin in 1988 despite his knowledge that Ledwith had been accused of improper behaviour towards seminarians in 1983–4; instead the Vatican chose another candidate from Alibrandi's three-person short list, Desmond Connell. (The sometime senior dean at Maynooth, Fr Gerard McGinnity, claimed that after he reported his concerns about Ledwith to Alibrandi in connection with an earlier suggestion that Ledwith might become bishop of Ferns, someone breached the confidentiality of the process and made McGinnity's report known to the bishops, leading to McGinnity's demotion.) Ledwith resigned as president of Maynooth in 1994, shortly after allegations were made against him of sexual abuse involving a minor (made public in the Ferns report of 2005); he made a confidential financial settlement with the claimant, without admission of liability. He continued to deny the truth of the accusations and was never charged with any offence; his subsequent involvement with an American-based group which advocated Gnostic beliefs, including mediumship and reincarnation, casts further doubt on Alibrandi's judgement in recommending him for episcopal office.

Alibrandi held strongly republican views on Northern Ireland. In 2002 newly released state papers revealed that in 1971 he advised the government of Jack Lynch (qv) that unity was inevitable and that they should concentrate on seeking reforms that, by giving Northern Catholics greater political power, would preclude anti-Catholic discrimination (since discrimination, by encouraging Catholic emigration, had offset the impact of the higher Catholic birth rate). He also described official British policy towards Northern Ireland as perfidious and cynical. He was often criticised by Irish government ministers as excessively sympathetic towards the Provisional IRA; Garret FitzGerald complained in his memoirs, which first made these tensions public, that 'he appeared to some of us at times to confuse Catholicism with extreme republicanism' (FitzGerald, *All in a life*, 189). It has been claimed that at one point he was shadowed by the Garda special branch because of his republican contacts, and that he regretted the removal of the nunciature from the Phoenix Park to Cabra because it made it harder for him to engage in such contacts. In April 1977 the Fine Gael-Labour government considered asking for Alibrandi's withdrawal after a 'frosty' exchange of correspondence over Vatican intervention on conditions for IRA prisoners in Portlaoise prison; the government implied that Alibrandi had misled the Holy See by taking at face value 'propaganda statements by convicted criminals engaged in a campaign to discredit the Government', and in his memoirs FitzGerald (minister for foreign affairs 1973-7) implicitly suggested that the Vatican was at fault in keeping Alibrandi in Ireland 'despite clear indications by the Irish government of its unhappiness with his interventions in affairs of this kind' (ibid.). Alibrandi, was praised, however, by some Northern Catholics, including Fr Denis Faul (qv) (1932-2006), for his advocacy of improved conditions for interned or imprisoned republicans, his strong interest in the cases of the Guildford Four and Birmingham Six (imprisoned for terrorist offences after being pressurised into making false confessions; subsequently exonerated and released), and his role in negotiations leading to the end of the 1981 hunger strike. He claimed to have persuaded Pope John Paul II to go ahead with his planned visit to Ireland in September 1979, which some curial figures apparently thought should be postponed or abandoned after the IRA assassinated Earl Mountbatten of Burma at Mullaghmore, Co. Sligo, and killed 18 British soldiers in an ambush at Warrenpoint, Co. Down, on the same day, 27 August 1979.

Alibrandi described as 'total rubbish' journalistic claims that he sometimes held formal negotiations in the nunciature with IRA leaders, though he did admit that some republicans visited him there to discuss the Northern situation. One of his prized possessions was a wooden cross made by prisoners in Long Kesh. In his farewell speech Alibrandi said that his heart had often been torn by the conflict in the North.

Alibrandi was blamed by Garret FitzGerald for opposing his efforts as foreign minister to persuade the Vatican to agree to a relaxation of church regulations on such issues as mixed marriages and the removal of Catholic-influenced legislation from the statute book in the interests of North-South reconciliation. According to

FitzGerald, he was told by the Vatican that Alibrandi had advised Rome that such changes would not bring about unity and were unnecessary without it. Alibrandi was on particularly bad terms with the Fine Gael–Labour coalition governments led by FitzGerald in 1981–2 and 1982–7; he vigorously opposed the ‘constitutional crusade’ in which FitzGerald sought to rewrite those aspects of the Irish constitution and legislation influenced by catholicism (notably the ban on divorce) in order to create a more pluralist society capable of accommodating Ulster protestants within a united Ireland. He was also at odds with the FitzGerald government over the proposal to add an amendment outlawing abortion to the constitution. (The government originally supported a draft amendment declaring a positive right to life of the unborn, then sought to substitute a narrower wording which stated that the constitution could not be interpreted as granting a right to abortion but did not preclude its legislation by the oireachtas. When the original wording was reinstated by a collaboration between Fianna Fáil deputies and dissident government backbenchers, FitzGerald’s government called, unsuccessfully, for a No vote in the referendum on the grounds that the wording was unclear.) Gemma Hussey, one of FitzGerald’s ministers, described in her published diaries being ‘frozen out’ by Alibrandi whenever she tried to argue with him about this at official dinners. Alibrandi’s relations with Fianna Fáil governments were more cordial.

Before entering the seminary Alibrandi had considered a musical career; he liked to play country and western tunes on the organ at the nunciature and to sing Irish airs, and in retirement in Sicily he greeted Irish visitors by playing the theme from the film *The Godfather*. He was also fond of exotic plants, which he grew in the nunciature conservatory. In 1986 he arranged the twinning of Killarney with his native town, Castiglione di Sicilia. He was strongly attached to Castiglione’s local shrine of the Madonna della Catena.

Alibrandi retired on 15 January 1989, having reached the episcopal retirement age of 75; at the time he was the longest-serving papal nuncio to any one country. In a farewell statement he expressed concern that ‘a growing materialism and secularism are having an effect on Christian values, on family life and on the natural generosity of the Irish people’ (*Ir. Times*, 12 July 2003). His last years were spent in Castiglione, where he died 3 July 2003.

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Gemma Hussey, *At the cutting edge: cabinet diaries 1982–1987* (1990); Garret FitzGerald, *All in a life: an autobiography* (1991); Louis Power, *Kevin: a portrait of Archbishop Kevin McNamara* (1993); John Cooney, *John Charles McQuaid: ruler of catholic Ireland* (1999); *Sunday Tribune*, 6 Jan. 2002; *Ir. Times*, 8 May, 27 July 2002; 13, 14, Jan., 5, 10, 12 July 2003; 26, 27 Oct. 2005; *Ir. Independent*, 5 July 2003, 15 Oct. 2005; *Sunday Independent*, 6 July 2003; *Irish Catholic*, 10 July 2003; *Sunday*

*Business Post*, 28 Dec. 2007; Leon Podles, *Sacrilege: sexual abuse in the catholic church* (2008)

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