

OBITUARIES

Abbot Alan Rees

Monastic composer whose work for singing in English stuck closely to the mod-

ABBOT ALAN REES, who has died aged 64, made a major contribution to the music of the Roman Catholic Church when the reforms of the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s led to Latin being replaced by vernacular languages in public worship.

Although he was brought up in Welsh Nonconformism with a love of its hymnody, his compositions were firmly rooted in the Gregorian chant which Rees loved and sang every day as a monk of Belmont Abbey in Herefordshire. He insisted that the new music of the Church should be: "easy to sing, generally tuneful, easy to learn — music that will cause as little preoccupation with the notes as possible and the greatest attention to the texts and resulting prayer." Writing in Gregorian medieval modes rather than modern scales, he claimed that his Nonconformist background might have helped him to write in the first seven modes, but he had difficulty in capturing the grandeur of the eighth.

Rees was a founder-member in 1971 of the Panel of Monastic Musicians, which encourages those communities, both male and female, which sing the choral offices. Its 1996 publication *Hymns for Prayer and Praise*, which he co-edited, is now used in monastic communities throughout the world. When the panel found itself short of a tune for a particular hymn text, Rees would often be sent out to write one; 10 minutes later he would return with a finely crafted composition.

Besides his *Congress Mass*, written for the National Pastoral Congress in Liverpool in 1980, and the *Cardiff Mass*, composed for Pope John Paul II's visit to Britain in 1982, he was prepared to write many simpler settings for anyone who asked him. His *Belmont Psalm Tones and Responses* and his choral and organ music are performed widely in both Anglican and Catholic churches. Although a superb organist and improviser, he much preferred setting words: *Music for Evening Prayer* was an attempt to re-establish the ancient office of Vespers in parish churches.

Alan William Rees was born at Morrision, near Swansea, on February 1 1941. His love of religion and music began when he was taken to the Tabernacle Welsh Baptist Chapel by his father and to St David's Church in Wales by his mother; and he started to learn the organ at a young age. Young Alan became an Anglo-Catholic



Rees: he wrote an admired special Mass for Pope John Paul II's visit to Cardiff in 1982

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while at Dynefor Grammar School, Swansea, and a Catholic in his first year at University College Cardiff, where he gained an honours degree in Music and a diploma in Education; he later became an Associate of both the Royal College of Music and the Royal College of Organists.

Rees visited several monasteries before being accepted for the novitiate at Ampleforth; but a nervous breakdown led him to shelve this plan and go into teaching. From 1963 to 1968 he was organist and choirmaster at St David's Cathedral, Cardiff, when he began composing music for the Liturgy in English.

In 1968 Rees joined the novitiate at Belmont, where he was solemnly professed three years later. From 1970 to 1972 and from 1974 to 1982 he was housemaster of Cantilupe House. Rees also studied at the Benedictine house of Sant' Anselmo in Rome for two years before being ordained priest. He was then assistant novice master for six years and novice master for four years; from 1970 he was choirmaster and organist.

In 1986 Rees was elected the ninth Abbot of Belmont, which was founded in 1859 and raised to be an abbey in 1920. During his abbacy he initiated the annual May procession in honour of Our Lady. But while universally loved for his gentleness, he disliked being in authority and, suffering from depression, resigned his post after seven years.

Rees was appointed Abbot of Tewkesbury, a titular appointment which stretches back to the pre-Reformation Church, and he found ever expanding work as a retreat-giver and confessor, as well as in being vicar for religious in the archdiocese of Cardiff.

He worked with the International Committee for English in the Liturgy from 1985 and was recently involved in setting the new English translation of the Missal to music. Although a prolific retreat-giver, particularly sought after by religious orders, he was the sole author of only one small book, *Prayers from the Cloisters*, based on the age old monastic practice of *Lectio Divina* (Holy Reading), the meditative approach to Scripture.

Several of his own prayers, which appeared in *To Speak in His Presence* (1995), give an insight into the inner turmoil which led to serious breakdowns before his sudden death on October 2, convinced that he had lost the gift of the faith, which had been so dear to him, and that he had been abandoned by God.