

# Bruce Kent obituary

**Leading light of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and charismatic peace activist ordained as a Roman Catholic priest**



Bruce Kent at a CND demonstration in Hyde Park, London, about to present a formal letter to the Russian embassy against nuclear weapons in 1993. Photograph: Mirrorpix/Getty Images

**Peter Stanford** Thu 9 Jun 2022 18.30

Bruce Kent, who has died aged 92, was the most controversial Catholic priest of his generation in Britain. To his detractors, his high-profile involvement with the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament during its renaissance in the 1980s was unsuitable behaviour for an ordained member of a church that accepted the arguments for nuclear deterrence. For his admirers – and there were very many more of them than detractors – he was a prophetic and charismatic figure who almost single-handedly shook English **Catholicism** out of its complacency, studied moderation and instinctive avoidance of all things political.

To see Monsignor Kent exorcising the Polaris nuclear submarine base at Faslane on the west coast of Scotland, or leading protests at **Greenham Common**, Berkshire, against the deployment of US cruise missiles, or allowing bailiffs to seize his few worldly possessions rather than pay with his taxes for the proliferation of nuclear weapons was a potent reminder that the Christian gospel is a social and radical one.

One of the ironies of the ferocious campaign waged against Kent by self-avowedly God-fearing Conservative MPs, MI5 and the Vatican's diplomatic representative in Britain, [Bruno Heim](#) – who in 1983 dubbed him a “useful idiot”, doing the Soviets’ dirty work for them – was that the subject of their fury was such a mild-mannered man. Kent was no firebrand and even when confronted and abused by his detractors was emollient. He followed Christ’s example, often quoted but notoriously hard in practice, of turning the other cheek.



Bruce Kent protesting outside the Ministry of Defence against war in Iraq.  
Photograph: Martin Argles/The Guardian

That did not mean, however, that he was not passionate in his beliefs or effective in putting them across. He was perhaps fortunate with his timing. When he took over as general secretary of CND at the start of 1980, it was virtually moribund, with just 3,000 paid-up members. Within months the government’s announcements of a £5bn programme to replace Polaris with Trident and plans to host Cruise at Greenham revived the organisation. By November he was addressing 80,000 supporters in Trafalgar Square, and the next year 250,000 gathered in Hyde Park.

A gifted speaker, with a natural authority, Kent was equally skilled as an administrator and tactician, successfully countering efforts by Trotskyites to infiltrate CND’s various ruling councils and avoiding the splits that had incapacitated the organisation during its first incarnation in the late 50s.

One of the most telling compliments for Kent came in December 1982 from [Denis Healey](#), the Labour deputy leader and no fan of CND’s policies. He

had, Healey said, “achieved the most impressive victory for single-issue politics in recorded history”.

The Catholic hierarchy watched from the sidelines with growing unease and not a little envy. [Cardinal Basil Hume](#), who had given Kent permission to take on his CND role, allowed him a great deal of rope and defended him against his accusers. But Hume, for all his monkish unworldliness, had a great deal of respect for men in uniform from the Ministry of Defence, and Kent sensed his unease with the situation.

With the approach of the 1987 general election, and the nuclear question once again high on the agenda, Kent felt he had no choice but to leave the priesthood if he was to carry on speaking out on the threat facing the world. Hume made the right noises, but accepted rather too readily for some.

For Kent, 11 February, the day of his retirement – he would never use the word resignation, though it was clear he would not be coming back – was one of the worst in his life. He wept as he broke the news to those in the church who had supported him, and many wept with him. “I knew,” he later wrote, “that I no longer fitted into the priesthood as others saw it.”

Bruce was born in [London](#) into the comfortable world of Hampstead Garden Suburb, the son of Molly (nee Marion) and Kenneth Kent, who ran the UK offshoot of the US manufacturing firm the Armstrong Cork company. At parish dances, Bruce would step out with a young Antonia Pakenham, later Fraser, whose parents belonged to the coterie of Labour politicians living in the area. The Kents were, however, more conservative in their political leanings.

Bruce’s parents were Canadians and for three years during the second world war he, his brother, sister and mother went back to [Canada](#). She was a devout Catholic, and on their return Bruce attended Stonyhurst college, in Lancashire, the Jesuit school that vied with Ampleforth to be the Catholic Eton. “It took me another 20 years at least to realise how effectively I had been processed for English establishment life and values,” he said.

And his life thereafter was initially conformist. He did two years in the army and then went to Brasenose College, Oxford, gaining a law degree in 1956. He had, however, long harboured an interest in the priesthood, and having overcome his non-Catholic father’s opposition was ordained in 1958. There again, he was no rocker of the boat, and after a few years in parish work became in 1963 principal secretary to Cardinal John Heenan, Hume’s predecessor as Catholic leader.

His tasks were many and varied, hand-delivering rosary beads to a housemaid at 10 Downing Street, attending Winston Churchill’s state

funeral with his boss, and coping with the violent mood swings of the unpredictable and egotistical Heenan. Though after two years their relationship became strained, in particular over Kent's growing radicalism, sparked by the Vatican's intransigence on the question of artificial birth control, Heenan still had sufficient faith in his assistant, now titled monsignor, to name him Catholic chaplain at the University of London.

In his time in the post (1966-74), Kent came of age. In no particular order he discovered ecumenism, abandoned all ideas of the priest being in charge and the laity following meekly in his wake, was forced by students' questions to query the church's traditional antipathy to sex, and became ever more deeply involved in the struggle for a better world.

This had begun soon after his ordination when he agreed to be chaplain to Pax Christi, the small British branch of the international Catholic peace movement, but it blossomed during his period at the University of London. He became involved with CND, the Campaign Against Arms Trade, and War on Want.

He travelled to Biafra and India and saw at first hand the damage done by wars and western weapons there. And he began to criticise his own church for its head-in-the-sand attitudes. His letter to the Times in October 1967, attacking the Catholic naval chaplain for blessing the launch of Polaris, was the start of his national reputation – and the controversy that followed him thereafter.

Heenan was horrified by the change in Kent, and the two clashed repeatedly. Other more establishment figures, senior civil servants who had been at Stonyhurst or Oxford with him, saw him as a traitor. However, the cardinal's death in 1975 and his replacement by the less confrontational Hume effected something of a reconciliation between Westminster archdiocese and its turbulent priest.

It was above all the remarkable [Victor Guazzelli](#), one of Hume's auxiliary (or assistant) bishops, who did most to keep Kent within the fold, appointing him as parish priest of [St Aloysius, Euston](#), in 1977 but allowing him enough space to pursue his work in the peace movement. Like Kent, Guazzelli took his lead from the 1971 Synod of Bishops in Rome, which taught that the gospel "has a power to set us free, not just from sin, but from what sin has done to our society".

When Kent took on the role of general secretary of CND in 1980, pressure of work meant that he had to give up his parish, though he still lived and said mass at St John's in Islington. They were heady years. His face was rarely off the television screens, forever challenging the assumption of the cold war.



Bruce Kent, centre, with Jonathon Porritt, left, and Jeremy Corbyn at a Walk for the Earth rally outside the US embassy in London in 1992. Photograph: Fiona Hanson/PA

He argued that the Warsaw Pact countries posed little or no threat to the west, that the Soviet Union was in internal meltdown and therefore unlikely to attack, and that deterrence could never work because it implied the willingness to strike first.

History, since the collapse of the [Berlin Wall](#) in 1989, has proved him right: only with the Russian invasion of Ukraine has much further thought been given to nuclear conflict. But at the time, Kent was howled down by anyone from the Conservative cabinet minister Michael Heseltine to the fanatic who sent him a (thankfully intercepted) incendiary bomb.

Once Kent had left the priesthood, he continued to work in the peace movement. He had a brief Indian summer as a commentator during the Gulf war in 1990, but his profile decreased as the nuclear argument faded from the top of the political agenda. He stood as a Labour candidate at Oxford West and Abingdon in 1992, but already he was considered too left wing by many of the Labour hierarchy.

Professionally, it was a sin that his formidable energy and intellect were never later called on by a Catholic church stubbornly unwilling to put the past behind it. Yet if his later years were quieter than before, they were also much happier. In 1988, 14 months after he retired as a priest, he married Valerie Flessati.

Through her work with Pax Christi, they had known each other for several years, but both were at pains to point out that she had nothing to do with him turning his back on holy orders. Indeed, she did not even know that he was actively contemplating such a move. Because he continued to regard himself as a priest, and never applied to Rome to be laicised, the couple were unable to marry in church, but theirs was nonetheless a very blessed union, built on a shared commitment to peace and justice, a gospel-based Christianity, and an unadulterated delight in having been lucky enough to find each other.

She and his sister Rosemary survive him.