

Homily for John L Walsh sm

In 1989 my Uncle Father Jim Murphy a Marist, celebrated his 50 years as a priest. To commemorate this event he prepared a card. On the front he put one of Michelangelo's charcoal drawings of the crucifixions depicting Jesus hanging on the Cross, with Mary and John standing alongside.

On the back of the card he wrote:

“A dreadful picture, did you say? So dark and indistinct...
Well, it was dark when Jesus was slowly dying.
So Michelangelo who was always drawing the crucifixion
after he turned eighty, always made it dark – and dreadful
But when fifty years before he made the Pieta,
He let us see the mother's face, and helped us understand
why we call her cause of our Joy.
It is because she brought that body into the world
and understood and agreed that it would be sacrificed.
She was the mother of our redeemer,
and when we know we were redeemed,
we can know real, true joy.

When news of John's death arrived on Tuesday morning, I recalled this card and the words Jim wrote and thought how appropriate they are to reflect on John's life as a member of the Marist family.

Soon after entering Novitiate in 1955 in Armidale, the Novice master would have introduced John and his fellow novices (14 in number- the largest novitiate band ever) to Marist Spirituality:

He explained:

“So all who are admitted into the Society of Mary, mindful of the family to which they belong, understand they are to emulate the virtues of this loving mother, above all in humility, obedience, self denial, mutual charity and the love of God.”

“Because they bear the name of Mary, Marist desire to be like her, contemplating the mysteries of Nazareth and Pentecost and come to share her zeal for her son's mission and respond with promptness to the most urgent needs of God's people.
Their call is to be truly missionary. They attend especially to the most neglected, the poor, and those who suffer injustice. They are ready to carry out these tasks anywhere and at anytime.

With out fear of challenge it can be said with total assurance that John never forgot these words from our Constitutions and embraced their spirit and practice with extraordinary, determination, generosity and authenticity.

After his ordination John was sent to Bellambi as a member of the first staff of the newly established College of St Paul's. He brought with him those special attributes of dependability, sincerity, intelligence, urbanity, and thoughtfulness; attributes which served him so well in the years ahead, working with the Japanese people and in their culture.

John was appointed to Japan in 1966 and after language school joined Sid Nugent as Assistant Pastor at the main Church in Nara city. From then until 2007 John ministered in all of the eight parishes of the Nara region. Of note were these appointments:

- to Koriyama and Takada where he was both Parish Priest and Encho Sensei;
- his time in Nagoya to accompany Oscar Ichiba who was studying at SVD Nanzan University and a candidate for the Marists.
- and his years as Regional Superior. All very demanding ministries-

Throughout all those years he was devoted to teaching the Scriptures to parishioners- it came from a deep personal appreciation of them and flowed from his faith filled spirituality. He was indeed a man of prayer and fidelity.

He had an insatiable desire for knowledge, constantly improving his Japanese, exploring the history, culture and religions of Japan and of course in later years learning Spanish all the better to give pastoral care to some of the over 300,000 mostly Spanish and Portuguese speaking foreign workers.

Returning to his time in Koriyama. In 1976 I was appointed his assistant- without much experience and no knowledge of the workings of Kindergardens. John as Principal met regularly with the teachers to discuss issues, plan and sort out any problems. At that time he had begun the construction of a new building and the negotiations were quite demanding. One day after a particularly gruelling meeting with the assistant Principal, John returned to the presbytery looking very disconsolate- he explained that he had had a disagreement with Sister Manen the assistant Principal- here was a rather formidable woman, a Japanese, an expert educationalist, with many years experience- foolishly I took John's side asking: "John, who is in charge here anyhow?" Right John said and without any further discussion went back to the Kindergarden, only to return 15 minutes later looking even more disconsolate. "I got done again" he said- "thanks very much for the advice."

There is a sequel to this story- fast forward to last year- on a visit to John with three other Marists we found him gently sleeping on one of those mobile beds- a staff member kindly wheeled him out on to a veranda and we began telling stories hoping to elicit a response. At one point I took his hand and related that story- at the mention of Sr Manen his eyes opened he began to smile and as the story developed, I think I even heard him chuckle- did he comprehend? I don't know, but I would like to think it was as sign that he had forgiven me.

And then there was Takada. Church and Kindergarden in south Nara.

It was early Spring, the time for kinder graduations- a very important event in the life of Japanese child. The mothers arrive in their beautiful silk embroidered kimonos, hair

swept up in extravagant styles, mincing their way into hall with pride and excitement. John was busy making sure the preparations were completed.

All are seated, the ceremony has started, But it was unseasonably hot and humid- John noticed their discomfort and thoughtful as always, moved quickly to the electrical room behind the stage and switched on all the ceiling fans to high. When John returned to the hall there was polite chaos – the room and the mothers were covered in a dense cloud of dust. What John had forgotten was that during winter, the ceiling fans are wrapped in plastic to keep the dust out- the plastic had not been removed so six months of dust together with chopped particles of plastic were now swirling around the hall and settling on the assembled mothers, on their their gorgeous kimonos and expensive bouffants.

The third appointment of special note was to Nagoya - to accompany Oscar Ichiba- I wrote to him yesterday, he is our sole surviving Marist working in the Diocese of Kyoto. Here is his reply:

“John was a genuine Marist. He was always among people, especially poor people, abandoned people. At late stage of his mission in Japan, he worked with migrant people, especially Spanish or Portuguese speaking people, who had many difficulties because of indifference, misunderstanding among Japanese people. John studied their languages and cultures. John was very kind to homeless people too. At the very last stage of his life in Japan, he suffered from dementia. His case was so evangelical! He lost the way to reject people; he didn't know how to say no. He kept on giving everything he had. Food, money, time...everything !! with gratitude and affection, Oscar.”

I also wrote to Paddy O'Hare a Marist from Ireland who worked in Nara for 41 years and is now in Toulon France. He wrote

“Thank you for sending the news of John W's death. Sad, and at the same time it is with a sense of relief that we recognize the peaceful ending of a gentle, always dignified life.

I am grateful for the opportunity to reflect a little on John's life.

During the tender years after my arrival in Japan John was always the friendly one, easy to approach, never in the slightest bit aggressive, eager to enjoy company, often coming in to Nara on a Sunday evening for a chat or to watch a movie.

John was the first to offer to accompany Ichiba san for three years of minimal community life in Nagoya while he began studies at Nanzan, and he carried out the task so eagerly, diligently, prayers together, conférences on Marist spirituality etc. John's friendliness with the MSC community helped immensely too.

“He was chosen by the bishop in 2000 to team up with a diocesan priest for a year to help heal the divisions in a Mie ken parish caused by the dismissal of the previous PP. A delicate task, but who better than John to do it, and he made many friends in that parish.

“His generosity became even more evident when he began learning Spanish at age 63 in order to help in the ministry to migrant workers from Latin America.

However he could be Ferocious (in a friendly way) when at the net playing tennis, his arms seemed to reach from one side of the court to the other.

“He will be dearly remembered among the Christians of Nara for his devoted service to them.

With fond memories and gratitude

Paddy

Finally John returned to Australia with, as Oscar noted, signs of incipient dementia. As the dementia progressed John, was cared for by Gary Reynolds and his confreres at Maryvale/Montbel. He moved to Minamurra Aged Care facility while still mobile but in need of special care as he was given to wandering far afield. Always astute he managed a few times to slip the security. Characteristically he continued to be helpful and concerned for fellow patients- one day he was found assisting a nun out her window as she tried to go a wandering.

Finally he was moved to Asburn House Galdesville where he lived for the past 3 years. A representative is with us here today. Please convey to all the staff the deep and abiding gratitude of us all, family, friends and Marists for the tender and devoted care you gave him and indeed give to all the residents of Asburn House, in what is one of the most demanding and at times not fully appreciated professions in society today.

John, I think of those words Jim Murphy wrote of the dark drawing of Jesus dying slowing on the cross- drawn when he was over 80. You too were over eighty when you entered the nether world of dementia. You too died slowly. Three years. Was it dark and dreadful? Or was it filled with the joy of the face of Mary Mother of our Joy. We will never know, such is the mystery of the illness. It is a mystery, not the mystery St Paul was referring to in the first reading but the mystery that challenges our understanding, one of the mysteries of the human condition.

However one thing is certain your perishable nature has put on imperishability and your mortal nature has put on immortality. Your death is swallowed up in victory.

The Lord has called you to that place you believed in with resolute faith, that place he has prepared for you. There, to join your parents Dulcie and Lou, all your family members, confreres and friends who have gone before you, in the joy of eternal life.

Rest in peace good and faithful Marist.

Jim Carty sm

11th February 2016