

Climb every mountain

*(A tribute to Fr John [Johnno] O’Ryan SM
from his long-time friend, Fr Michael Mifsud)*

John O’Ryan has now walked on into history and into the fullness of Life; he always desired and anticipated in this life here on Earth. I write from the perspective of a friend and about a person, I consider as a mentor. It is hard to do justice to such a man’s life.

I found John to be a man of utter integrity and an exemplary expression of the Marist tradition of service, prayer and hospitality in which he was formed and loved so much.

I met Johnno in 1977 in my first appointment as curate in Albion next door to West Sunshine Parish. We became good friends almost at once, both delighting in bushwalking, bush tucker ,animated conversation and the sharing of prayer and the spiritual journey in its many varied facets.

It was hard not to notice Johnno in a group. He was in some senses: larger than life”. When he was energized and excited the undoubted brilliance of his mind shone out. I found wherever we went on our many excursions he was universally liked and warmly welcomed: in the home of parishioners, on the track, amongst fellow walkers be the priests or laity and in my own family circle.

John was what I consider a wise and holy person. So many sayings he spoke live on in my mind and heart as expressions of a profound practical wisdom gleaned from the experiences of everyday life, searching reflection and prayer. He always wanted to share all he had. I still hear the wisdom of his latter years in expressions such as “I have learnt to live with equanimity in ambiguity”, or “I would rather be judged for being too merciful than to strict. “May he find the mercy he so freely offered to others.

Johnno could be the fun of the party at gatherings esp. of bushwalkers and friends and fellow priests. He had a good sense of humour and was a fund of yarns and stories and songs.

John was a loyal member of a priests' we were part of from its inception in 1977 until he retired to Hunters Hill in recent years. His faithful embracing of the Marian dimension of spirituality over the years visibly soften his somewhat “sergeant- majorish” disposition of character. I experienced John as learning genuine humility, sensitivity to others and practical compassion as coming from a humble acceptance of his frailties and limitations arising from his “Bi -polar” type of symptoms which at times were quite pronounced and difficult for him and those who were with him.

I have been edified not only by Johnno's life but also by his conscious, simple faith-filled approach to dying-his passing over into the Great mystery. Recently in hospital, he said, "this is a whole new experience for me; I wish I had the time to tell you all about it". He gave me his last twenty dollars from his wallet and three concession train tickets -a gesture that spoke of "letting Go" and accepting his "one way " ticket to the further Shore.

I believe he now stands there with Jesus and the many friends he made on the way there living in the hearts of all who knew him .I am sure he will be offering a helping hand to anyone who asks as he always did while he lived .Above all he will be Just Listening as he also said quite recently as even in hospital he was taking calls from his beloved parishioners in West Sunshine.

Johnno will not be resting from his labours as he will be busy" having Fun "an ingredient he said was essential to life and sadly lacking today. He will be boiling the Billy, and grilling chops on his favourite "fire-Bucket", offering them as Jesus did the fish to his friends on the shores of Galilee.

With lasting and fond memories, Fr Michael Mifsud, Friend and Companion.