

BROTHER JOHN JOHNSTON: AN APPRECIATION

In the introduction to his homily at Brother John's funeral Mass in Memphis Cathedral Brother Vincent Malham said:

"...Inasmuch as a significant part of my reflections uses John's own words to describe the image of the cup, a symbol of profound importance to him, I have presumed to have John speak for himself in this homily. I concluded that it would be more practical to ask forgiveness afterwards rather than to seek permission in advance.

I, John

And so we begin. Dear Friends, the readings from Scripture and the musical selections that I, John, requested for this Eucharistic Celebration of Resurrection have been carefully chosen, for they reveal key beliefs, convictions and inspirations of my life. They give insight into how I tried to live my life and the manner in which I prepared to die. Because my deeply-felt reflections on "Am I not to drink this cup?" are integral to my spiritual journey, I have asked that they also be shared....".

Vincent went on to develop the *key beliefs, convictions and inspirations* using John's writings.

(John had a ceramic cup or chalice in a prominent place in his bedroom into which he put pertinent scriptural texts referring to it).

I offer this personal appreciation of John; I had the privilege of living and working with him in Rome for seven years. I was struck by his use of the chalice as the inspiration for the final stage of his earthly pilgrimage. I don't imagine that the symbolism of the chalice was a late discovery for him – he had his share of setbacks, frustrations, disappointments, criticism, faultfinding when in office, as well as successes and rewards. He was a private person, but it was obvious that his own spiritual life was a priority. However busy with administrative affairs they did not dislodge time set aside for prayer. He was faithful to personal prayer time, often in the small Council oratory when he was in Rome. He took his turn at preparing the Community prayer and Liturgy of the General Council. This was a priority, not a tiresome rota chore to be taken hastily or lightly. The Scriptures, the Founder and spiritual writers figured very much in his preparations and presentations. He lived what the Founder wrote: make no distinction between the work of your

salvation and, in his case, the work of administration and all its demands.

He was an able and hard-working administrator. Important and varied administrative tasks faced him daily as Superior General; he kept abreast of so many matters. I was often surprised and amazed at his grasp of detail in any topic he dealt with. He was in close touch with the life and world-wide mission of the Institute. Sectors caught up in violence, war or natural disasters would be contacted immediately and where needed and possible, financial help provided. He took a keen unbiased interest in the politics, power play and social systems of the different countries – particularly as these affected the lives of our Brothers and the poor. He briefed himself very well before meetings. He asked from each Sector a photograph of each Brother with name attached. By repeated viewing of them he came to know pretty well every Brother by sight and name when he visited a sector. Quite an achievement, given that our numbers world-wide twenty years ago were much greater than now. In particular he made a point of knowing very well those in positions of responsibility – Visitors, members of District Councils, etc. The appointment of Visitors or leaders from the short list of three sent by Sectors was never a brief AOB item. He had a sincere regard and respect for the local Institute and its legitimate autonomy: the culture, history, traditions, educational system and so on. Nevertheless, appointment to a responsible position was a serious matter for himself and the Council; it was never just automatic approval. The Councillor for the sector and other relevant people would be consulted. It didn't happen often, but it did happen from time to time, that results of elections were returned to Sectors for reconsideration or clarification; occasionally Brothers from the sector were invited to Rome for further discussions. He had confidence to follow through on these things because he knew the local scene and those involved very well. Sessions for new Visitors were held every two to three years at which information and policies and procedures were discussed. They provided John further opportunity to get to know people and situations better.

As I have said, he was respectful of local legitimate autonomy – subsidiarity as it came to be known - and he even 'enforced' it. Some decisions should be made locally and not handed on to Rome for solution because of disagreements locally. On the other hand it was not for him and the Council to reverse decisions that had been seriously and prayerfully discerned by

local administration. Communities were being closed and schools handed over to lay administration. From time to time the withdrawal of a Community from a particular place would result in sacks of letters from parents, students (what adult letters seven year olds could write!!), clergy, civil authorities, even the local Community, requesting the Superior General to reverse the decision. But John would have none of it. He had seen the reasons and the conclusions of the Sector administration and was satisfied that the decision was correct. It had to be followed through and he would give full support to the local administration in doing so. History, long and venerable tradition of the Brothers' presence there were not in themselves reasons for staying. He could face and make the 'hard' decisions. The Founder had to make similar painful decisions in his time.

He was impatient of dithering, confusion or muddle and this would sometimes show in his body language. But he could sustain uncertainty with calmness and patience when further information was needed before reaching important decisions. At times it was difficult to see any satisfactory outcome, and he could live with that too. After wrestling with a problem for an hour or more in a Council Meeting and no conclusion being in sight, he would say something like: "We'll leave this for now and come back to it later after prayer and further reflection. We mustn't force a hasty decision". One had a feeling of genuine discernment taking place. However, where the resolution of a less weighty matter was evident, he could cut short repetitious and redundant discussion very quickly, sometimes to the surprise of his listeners.

John would use travelling time as opportunity to deepen further his knowledge of the sector he was about to visit and polish up talks and presentations. And to perfect his knowledge of languages: French, Italian and Spanish. He would have a dictionary or phrase book to hand and dip into them at free moments; not just when travelling but regularly, daily even. He worked very hard at these throughout all his years in Rome. He considered it a duty to be fluent in the languages in use in the Institute, to be able to speak to the Brothers in their own tongue.

He was highly regarded among Superior Generals, male and female, in Rome. He was vice-president of the men's section; at the time the presidency was reserved to clerics. It has to be said that many of the

other Superiors were not happy with this. John would have had a handsome majority vote from clerics and non-clerics alike, for president. But it was never an issue with him personally, although at all times and in all places he was immensely proud of his vocation of 'Brother'; that was not to be compromised for any advancement or privilege. He made no secret of that. The relentless overall decline in numbers of Brothers did not demoralise or unnerve him. Numbers were not the priority; the value and significance of the vocation is not in doubt. He was proud of the Institute and its place in the Church and society. He shunned pomp and was uncomfortable with exaggerated marks of esteem, whether riding in specially chosen limousines or facing extravagant reception parties. Serious and appropriate solemnity, yes. Liturgy, school and community functions, jubilees, festivals and the like merited careful preparation and dignified performance.

Although they were thought of by most simply as "the Superior and Council" John saw this group first and foremost as a Community. It was to model Community Living. There had to be a balance between the elements of Community Life: times for administration, for mission (travel, giving retreats and the like), for prayer and days or weekends of recollection together, for the annual Retreat together, for periods of relaxation, for informal get-togethers, for contacts with the home District,... Probably most thought of him as a man of action, always on top of his work and not given to small talk or idling away the time, but he enjoyed relaxing with the Community away from his desk. He liked walking too, and regularly took long walks.

No doubt a full biography will appear in due course. The above are a few hastily put together reflections on his time as Superior General. It would be difficult to pick out one of the above items as a distinguishing gift or strength in John's administration; but I did appreciate very much the Community Spirit and Life that we enjoyed during those seven years. John was the principal player in building the Community. I will not forget either the deliberate detour he made thirteen years later in 2006 to visit me after I had surgery. It was typical of his caring, appreciative friendship. He seemed in good health then, but a few weeks later he himself was diagnosed with terminal illness.

May he rest in Peace with the Lord he loved and served so well.