

Brother John Southworth fsc (1936 - 2007)

Eulogy by [Bro Alban McCourt](#)

John was the seventh and youngest child of Edmund Campion Southworth and his wife Mary Elizabeth. He was baptised John Fisher Southworth in St Joseph's church in Preston. His brothers and sisters were: Edmund Campion (R.I.P) Theresa, Gerard, Maureen (R.I.P.) Adrian, Agnes Cornelia and we offer them the sympathy and prayers of all the brothers and in particular those of Clayton Court.

The baptismal names of John's father, elder brother and John himself show the family's devotion to the English Martyrs and the whole family has the distinction of sharing the name of the Lancashire martyr Saint John Southworth.

His death came as a shock to all of us. He had been making such good progress after his spell in hospital. This week is for me mid term and I had already planned to spend this break in Clayton Court particularly to see John. I did not imagine that instead I would be delivering his Eulogy.

John pursued his secondary school education in the Preston Catholic College. In this prestigious college that was run by the Jesuits, John was obviously an outstanding student. The proof of this was that at the age of sixteen he was directed to study the Classics, as happened to all the top students in the various Jesuit colleges in the country. Two of his contemporaries at Preston Catholic College were Patrick Kelly, formerly Bishop of Salford and now Archbishop of Liverpool, and Brian Noble, now Bishop of Shrewsbury, with whom he shared a desk. Having been directed to the Classics, John continued with Classics for his degree at Manchester University. He then took his Post Graduate Certificate of Education, no doubt intending a career in teaching. His teaching practice was at St Bede's College, Manchester, where the head, Father Burke, was also to become a Bishop, the Auxiliary Bishop of Salford.

The year John completed his studies there was a large Vocations Exhibition in Manchester

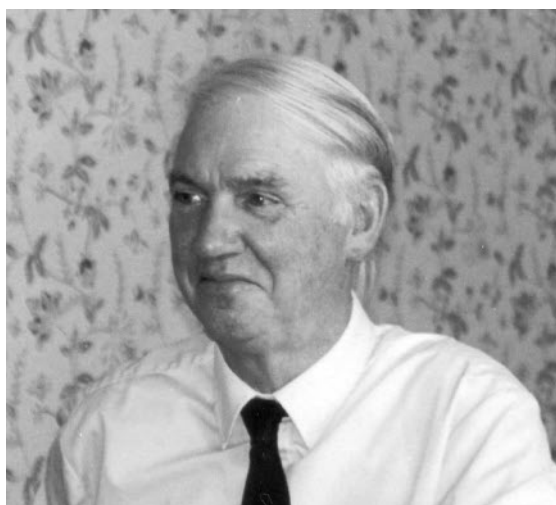
involving many religious orders and that was probably where he met the Brothers of Our Lady of Mercy and decided to change from teaching as a career to teaching as a vocation with the Brothers of Mercy.

His first teaching post after his novitiate was in the Brothers of Mercy Prep School in Highgate, North London. The Mercy Brothers also ran a

small private school, St Egbert's College, Chingford, as well as the prestigious St Aloysius College in Highgate. Both were due to feature in John's career. With his obvious success as a teacher in the Prep school he was appointed at an early age to be headmaster of St Egbert's College and ran it very successfully. When the Brothers of Mercy decided that the school was no longer a viable proposition and

decided to close it, Brother John, as the headmaster, was faced with the first trial of his skills in negotiation: what to do about the futures of both staff and pupils as the school was run down. I have no record of what happened then, but he would meet a similar problem again later in his life. John then returned to teach at the prep school.

The Brothers of Mercy were having serious internal problems, resulting in a decline in numbers that cast a shadow regarding their future in this country. St Aloysius College had just recently changed from being a private fee paying school and had become a Voluntary Aided school in the Archdiocese of Westminster. It too was affected by these internal problems, and in addition, the school suffered many problems arising from the change from a private fee paying school to a Voluntary Aided school. The Brothers of Mercy head was a priest who did not have teaching qualifications and was seriously ill. Although at this time there were five Brothers teaching in the College none had the qualifications to take over as headmaster (John had the qualifications but would have been too young and far too inexperi-



enced). An inspection by HMIs found the school to be in difficulties and appointed a lay headmaster to oversee the running of the school. There was some resentment from the old staff from fee paying days who had a great regard for the Brothers and considered this an intrusion.

Cardinal Griffin, Archbishop of Westminster, had at this time an agreement with the De La Salle Provincialate to open a school in the East End of London but now requested that the De La Salle Brothers should take over the running of St Aloysius College in place of the East End project. In 1960 Brother Hilary came to St Aloysius from Hopwood as headmaster with myself as his deputy. Four more De La Salle Brothers arrived the following September. This was John's first contact with the De La Salle Brothers. It became more than a contact when John, as Brother Edmund, still a Brother of Mercy, was later recruited to the staff of Saint Aloysius. He was recognised as a very good teacher, a well organised House Master with a pleasant relationship with staff and pupils. He coached a football team and refereed inter school games on Saturdays. It was while teaching at Saint Aloysius as Brother Edmund that he decided in 1973 to withdraw from the Brothers of Mercy. He offered to resign and seek another school but he was regarded as a valued member of staff and was urged by Brother Claude, then the headmaster, to remain on the staff.

John returned to the school after the holidays as Mr. Southworth and moved into a flat high up on Hornsey Lane. I remember him telling me that one of the things that attracted him to the De La Salle Brothers, apart from teaching in a school that they were running, was watching from his flat each morning, while shaving, the line of Brothers heading in all weathers for the 7.00 o'clock Mass at St Joseph's, the Passionists' Church on Highgate Hill.

He joined the De La Salle Novitiate in 1976. After completing the first year of his Novitiate at Eccles in Salford he then spent his the second year, 1977, in Dublin, where the novices attended outside lectures in various places of spirituality. John was appointed in 1978 to De La Grammar School Liverpool where he became an excellent Head of Religious Education. In 1983 every teacher and headmaster in the forty-two Catholic Grammar and Secondary Modern schools in Liverpool suffered the trauma of being compelled to resign their jobs and apply for a post in one of the fifteen new Comprehensive schools. There was no problem in his re-appointment as Head of R.E. in the new De La Salle

Comprehensive School though there were now many problem pupils and redundant staff. In the same year, 1983, while still full time Head of RE John became Director of the Community, a responsibility, as we will see later, that he would hold, in various Communities until his death. In 1986 Brother John was given a break as teacher and Director and was sent to Rome for a three months course in CIL, the Lasallian International Centre, based in the De La Salle Mother House.

In 1987 after completing the three-month course Brother John was appointed as Director to the community serving De La Salle Sixth Form College in Pendleton. He was not appointed to the staff of the College but he, nevertheless, taught groups for A Level R.E. and other R.E. groups. He also taught computer studies to a lower ability group. This part time teaching timetable enabled him to finish studies for a further degree that had been interrupted when he was sent to Rome. He completed his thesis on St Johns Gospel and duly obtained his Master of Education degree from Liverpool University. Any further time left from his part time teaching was soon taken up when he became Clerk to the Governors of the Sixth Form College and later a Governor. He also became a Governor of Pope John Paul the Second school, a small eleven to sixteen Comprehensive School in Salford, and of De La Salle School in Liverpool.

His negotiating skills were called upon and tested to the full when in 1993 the Government Education Bill took away the control of the Sixth Form colleges from the Local Authorities and placed them under a Further Education Funding Council thus ending the Voluntary Aided status of the College, which was now to be funded by the Further Education Funding Council under the name of a Designated College. John was by now Chairman of Governors and he was deeply involved in drawing up the new Instrument and Articles of Government for the new status of the College. Also as Chairman he had the worry of the effect of poor funding due to the small numbers in the college. It was no surprise when the College failed an inspection three years later.

This was a really traumatic time for him as the Chairman of Governors, faced with the need to provide for the future welfare of the students and the possible financial burden to the De La Salle Brothers if there were redundancies. John's personality and negotiating skills contributed greatly to the complex but happy solution of the problem: the amalgamation of De La Salle Sixth Form College and Pendleton Sixth Form College Salford. This solution provided for the

future of the De La Salle College students and staff and gave Pendleton College additional buildings in the form of their De La Salle Wing and a substantial increase in pupil numbers.

In addition to the College and Governor responsibilities listed above John was also, in the 90s, a member of the District Council and also of the Preparatory Commission preparing for the 1992 District Chapter at Ipswich.

It must have seemed a blessing when in 1997 he was able to leave these burdens behind when he was changed from Pendleton to be Director of the Community in Half Moon Lane in London. But that was to prove to be a problem also. He was not happy to find that he was Director of a very run down property that was in need of complete refurbishment. He did make tentative steps to begin the process but providence decided that he would be in Half Moon Lane for only a year. Others who followed him would do the good work of transformation. In 1998 he moved to Southsea.

Before proceeding to an account of Brother John's last Directorship in Southsea I will digress to look at the way he found relaxation. He never forgot his boyhood passion for Preston North End Football Club and was not infrequently heard speaking of the skills of the legendary Tom Finney. During the ups and downs of the club in recent years he kept a close eye on its results and affairs. However, he was more widely known throughout the District for his passion for cricket. Wherever he was based you will find copies of Wisden's Almanac, the bible of cricket.

The De La Salle Brothers became aware of this passion when he joined the staff of St Aloysius, Highgate, and it was there that he was to find a soulmate with the same passion for cricket. It came in the unlikely guise of a Scotsman who was also mad keen on cricket when Brother Gerald Fogarty joined the community. This friendship was to last the rest of John's lifetime. Together the two of them paid homage in many grounds throughout the country. For John THE place was Lancashire's Old Trafford ground whose fortunes he followed as closely as he did those of Preston North End. For both John and Gerald the ideal day out was to spend it, preferably together, at Old Trafford or Lords or Headingley or Chelmsford or some other county ground. In the last nine years John's nearest county ground was Hove, the home of Sussex and, when he could, Gerald joined him there. As Director, John always kept Saturday as his free day and just disappeared for the whole day. In summer we knew that we would find him in a cricket

ground. Apart from sport John also had a great love of music and was a voracious reader of contemporary biography and books on modern spirituality with the occasional dip into the classics.

To return to John's duties as Director. I mentioned above that John was not happy when he arrived at Half Moon Lane. He was certainly not happy when he arrived at Southsea in 1998. Wherever the Brothers ran boarding schools, community and school affairs seem to become inextricably linked. This was very much the case at St Johns College, Southsea. When he arrived John was amazed to find that the Brothers dining room was in the school and not in the Community house and that the elderly Brothers with the rest of the Community had to commute each day to the school for their meals. The school billed the community for the use of the dining room and for the meals. During the school holidays the Community still went to the school for meals as there were no real facilities for providing meals in the community house. The community paid to keep the kitchen staff on site. This state of affairs seemed quite normal and acceptable to a Community where there were elderly retired Brothers who had taught for years in St John's or other boarding schools. It was what they were used to. But to John, a stranger to boarding school conditions, it was totally unacceptable. He decided that his first task would be to provide a dining room for the Community in the community house. This was done by building an extension and using existing community accommodation to provide a modern kitchen with up to date cooking facilities. This enabled the Community to have all meals in the Community dining room. John himself did an excellent job cooking the mid-day meal and when guests were present an evening snack. For the first years of the new set up the wash-up was in the capable hands of Brother James Walworth until he retired to Clayton Court. Recently it has been in the equally capable hands of Brother Allen Geppert.

A corollary to this was that the Community now had to shop for all provisions for the house. Brother Gerard, the community bursar, did the driving when both he and John set out on this chore. Brother Gerard deserves a medal for this. John had been involved in two quite serious car accidents as a passenger. He was afraid of cars and afraid of being a passenger, always turning down offers to take him to destinations, preferring to use public transport. Gerard was the only one that he seemed to trust to take him by car on these regular shopping expeditions and often too

Saturday evening Mass as well. At the same time as he was dealing with the dining facilities John was using his patience and tact to gradually unravel the school and community accounts that were also very much intertwined in things like heating and lighting and local authority taxes. There were early tensions while he achieved this, in spite of his always calm, gentle and logical approach. But those days are past and at present the relations between the school and community are excellent. As in Pendleton, Brother John made a valuable contribution to St John's as Clerk to the Governors of the College.

One situation that Brother John was really happy about on his arrival in Southsea was that the community traditionally welcomed the Chairman of Governors George Warren and his wife Maureen for Sunday lunch. Presumably in the early days this was in the Brothers dining room in the school. I am only aware of the occasions during my visits to Southsea when the meal was in the Community dining room. For John this became the highlight of his week. Amid any problems that might occur during the week this was the one thing that he looked forward to. The pattern was that John partly cooked the main meal. Maureen provided something at home and

brought it with her and on their arrival George took over the preparation while everyone else had a leisurely cocktail. After the meal there was an equally leisurely post-prandial which in the summer, weather permitting, would take place in sight of Brother David's well-kept lawn and garden. As Director, John was very pleased to build on this friendship that was already in place when he arrived at Nelson Road.

Brother John served the De La Salle Brothers for thirty-one years including his novitiate. That in twenty-three of these years he held responsibility as Director of various Communities, some in trying situations, is an indication of the regard his superiors had for his spirituality and ability.

I will end by quoting from two written notes sent to me and commenting on his qualities as Director. The first: "Brother John was quiet and reserved and often kept his thoughts to himself. He knew what it was to be a teaching Brother and Director in these times of change. He took special care of the health of the retired Brothers". And the other: "When he was appointed as Director he proved to be a lovely man . . . He was kind, reasonable and, above all, he had a large dose of common sense."

May he Rest in Peace.

Note: Fr Vincent's opening words at the Mass will be printed next month.