

“AN OFFERING OF LIFE”

This is the title of the *Motu Proprio*, a document from the Vatican, called *Maiorem hac dilectionem*, (Greater love than this¹), setting out new procedures for celebrating the life of an outstanding follower of Jesus by honouring them with official recognition.

In what follows I am proposing the life of

John Randal Bradburne

fits the criteria mentioned in that document.

יְהוָה

I first met John towards the end of 1972 on a visit to Mutemwa with Roger Riddell, a Jesuit student at the University of Rhodesia (as it then was). First impressions often stay with us and I remember the openness, warmth, joy and aura of freedom that characterised his conversation. I worked with his great friend John Dove and so met John regularly during the coming years until our final meeting in August 1979 when he came asking for stamps for the many post cards he had just written. They proved to be farewell cards as he was killed two weeks later.

יְהוָה

A full, and sensitive, account of John's life has just been written by Didier Rance² but perhaps a brief synopsis is needed here. John was born in NE England in 1921 and served in the British army in Malaya and Burma during WWII. Rance has researched the details and they are harrowing. But it was not the war alone that turned John's mind to life in the spirit; even as a child he showed a longing and hunger for he knew not what. After the war all his experience converged on a desire to devote himself to God and he sought admission to the Catholic Church at Buckfast Abbey in SW England in 1947.

His enthusiasm blossomed and he next sought admission to the abbey as a monk but his entry was postponed until he had spent some time getting accustomed to his new life as a Catholic. Friends advised him to turn for a while to teaching, working on a fishing trawler and other activities but his compass kept drawing him back to religious life in a community. Buckfast duly welcomed him when the time came but the monks there soon discovered their life would not suit him. Later he was to try the Carthusians, the Benedictines and the Fathers of Sion in Louvain. But on each occasion he became restless and was advised to move on.

Interspersed with these attempts to join established communities John also tried to live as a hermit in an organ loft in Southern Italy and in the country house of the Cardinal Archbishop

¹ Didier Rance, who appears often in these pages, puts the full quotation as part of the title of his chapter 10. See next footnote.

² Didier Rance, *John Bradburne, The Vagabond of God*, Darton, Longman and Todd, 2017

of Westminster and other places. Nowhere could he feel at home and always he found himself moving on.

In 1962 he wrote to his great friend of Indian Army days, John Thurston Dove, at this time a Jesuit priest in Rhodesia, to ask if he had “a cave” where he could make his home. And so he arrived in Africa and, after some again inconclusive moments with the Franciscans³, he came to live at Silveira, the centre Fr Dove was running not far from Salisbury (as Harare then was). But after some years the old restlessness returned and he wondered if he should return to Jerusalem where he had once tried to settle during his wanderings in Europe.

It was at this point that all fell into place in a way he did not, at first, welcome. In 1969, he was invited to be the warden of Mutemwa settlement for people living with leprosy 150 kms NE of Salisbury. He was appalled by what he saw on his first visit but he knew this was where God called him to be and Heather Benoy, who had driven him out there, had great difficulty getting him to go back to Silveira to collect his few possessions. John was intensely happy at Mutemwa but he suffered a great deal from the authorities who judged him too compassionate, too indulgent, with the people under his charge. He was dismissed and lived for some months in a tent on the nearby mountain until such time as friends erected a small builder’s hut for him outside the settlement. As the 1970s dragged on the war of liberation intensified and the whole area around Mutemwa was alive with the army on one side and the guerrillas on the other. John refused to withdraw to a safer place. He felt certain he must stay with those who were now his people. Caught up in the conflicting interests at the time he was killed on 5 September 1979.

יהוה

Let me now attempt some reflections on John’s offering of his life. The points I make are intertwined with one another.

1. **The humblest of people.** John was the humblest person I have ever known. He would sign his letters, “John Bee (drone, groan!)”. This was playful but it was also real. He never chose to be a wanderer. Amidst all his efforts to find his place in life he was utterly faithful to the leading of the Spirit. And if the Spirit led him “nowhere”, he went nowhere. He never sought what would make him feel satisfied or comfortable. He knew he was viewed by others as eccentric, a rolling stone, useless, “Can’t he make up his mind?” But he never compromised or looked for the approval of others. He just went on searching, often finding respite for a time somewhere others would think impractical. While living in the organ loft in Palma (Italy) he wrote to John Dove: “It has been a fantastic 2 ½ months and, believe me, I have just blundered along in a most unpraiseworthy way. More and more we learn to rely on God entirely, to love only - the life of grace, with utter contempt of our own strength... As for me I am deeply convinced (and this half against my personal

³ John had, I think, become a member of the Third Order of St Francis though I cannot find a reference to when and where.

and poetic inclination), that for a time, maybe for a long time, maybe until the end, my role is here, nowhere else ...”

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2. **Awesomely obedient to the Spirit.** When John had to move on he did it with resolution and utter generosity. He was not obedient to superiors, as clerics and religious are, since he had none, but he was obedient to the Spirit in a way that many, vowed formally to obedience, would consider extreme. I have mentioned his instant decision to stay at Mutemwa when all who were close to him counselled a time to consider and “think about it.” To him it was immediately blindingly clear and yet, on the surface, appallingly unattractive. It had always been his way

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3. **Complete trust in God.** John had complete trust in God. When his great friend, John Dove, chose the title *Strange Vagabond of God* for his memoir he hit on a description John used about himself which fits exactly his way of life. He was a pilgrim, wandering three continents. John was sure of his goal yet unsure of the way to it.

The physical wandering ceased when he arrived at Mutemwa in 1969. The leprosy settlement, so distasteful to many visitors, was the Jerusalem he longed for. He told Kit and Arthur Law, “I’m very happy here; this is my journey’s end.”⁴

Heather Benoy, a great friend of John, says Mutemwa “made” John. Up to the time he arrived there he could be said to have been occupied with his own journey. It is a great simplification to put it this way but, in a sense, he was preoccupied with himself. When he arrived in Mutemwa he was faced with a sea of suffering.

“It was truly horrendous. The wretched creatures they encountered were repulsive, their faces and limbs deformed by a terrible disease. The lepers were covered in filth and untreated running sores ... the sight of curled up dislocated fingernails added to the horror ... surprised by the arrival of the strangers (John and Heather), the lepers retreated to their huts and re-emerged with a sack or a blanket covering their heads ... stupefied John demanded to know what was going on, only to discover that the lepers were forced to cover their faces, because they were too ugly to be seen – as ordered by Chaka, the director of the Centre, a former policeman. Overcome, John’s only words were: ‘My God, My God.’”⁵

⁴ Quoted in Rance p 308

⁵ Rance, p 298

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4. **Prayer filled his life.** It is quite obvious that prayer filled his life. Like a compass pointing to the pole his whole life was oriented towards God.

But mostly, I feel, he loved the freedom to raise his heart to God every moment. He was faithful to the Little Office of Our Lady and would sing aloud when alone. In his busy unpredictable schedule at Mutemwa he would make sure he was “ahead” with this office. I will say no more on this as it is a hopeless task to do it justice. John was absorbed with God, attuned to Him in everything.

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5. **Bringing out the best in people.** John’s prayer overflowed into his contagious happiness and this was another sign of John’s special closeness to God. I have noticed it in other people I have known. Jean Vanier, who incidentally wrote the foreword to Didier’s book, has a way of giving you energy and feeling good about yourself. A close friend of John’s in England, Stephen King, noticed John’s knack of talking to his children in a way that made them feel as important as grown-ups, and he marvelled at John’s talent for always bringing out the best in everybody.

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6. **A restless searching.** “I dream of a restless Church,” said Pope Francis to a Church gathering in Florence in November 2017. The Holy Father was referring to a Church always on the move, always a pilgrim. John, it seems to me, has a message for the Church today in his restless, generous and courageous search for the will of God. He could be entirely rooted at a particular time and in a particular place. But he could equally get up and go somewhere else without a moment’s hesitation. Living in such a tension, it seems to me, is a sign of the Church in our time.

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7. **A love for our common home.** John loved the world and its beauty. He made friends with creatures of every sort and often gave them names: a raven, a cat, an eagle, a dog. And he loved bees and prayed they would linger about him and guard his privacy at Silveira. His visitors kept away! I remember his intense excitement at Mutemwa in discovering the nest of a hammerkop and he would take visitors to see it with the excitement of someone showing you a rare treasure in the British Museum. He loved the hills, the fields, the sea and the stars. All of these spoke to him and widened his horizon of wonder.

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- 8. Compassion for those who suffer.** Didier Rance mentions many examples of John's feeling for people in India and in his wandering years in England and Italy and especially years later his compassion found its full scope in caring for the people at Mutemwa .

During his rounds John would change bandages, dress wounds wherever necessary and distribute medication to those in need. He washed those unable to care for themselves, with a smile, a pleasantry, a kind word. ... Fr John Gough wrote, 'He was just as unwilling as the rest of us. It was not a nice disease and yet John totally gave himself to these people. I stayed at the side of a bath while he was washing an old man. I don't think you would like that sort of thing but it has to be done, and John had to do it.' Neither could Fr Dove hide his revulsion the first time he discovered Mai Francisca drenched in a bed that she had been soiling for two days. But he too got used to it."⁶

Dr Luisa Guidotti, who was shot and killed two months before John, used to visit Mutemwa regularly. She wrote:

At first these poor people appear disgusting with their sores, their stumps, their deformed faces. Later on, one enters into God's light, achieving real friendship with them. They become loving people and one notices their patient resignation. No longer do you love them for God's sake, nor because they help one to give in charity, but because they become one's own dear friends. I hope you can understand what I mean. It is a wonderful experience.⁷

- 77 -

- 9. Unwavering in adversity.** John's first years in Mutemwa were happy. He had found the solitude and the community he had always wanted. But from 1973 until his death six years later John faced great trials. He was accused by the Rhodesian Leprosy Committee, which had responsibility for the settlement, of "being careless with supplies and not keeping proper books." John was sacked and, as mentioned earlier, was drawn to a tent on the nearby hill for several months. His friends were furious but there was nothing they could do. The rations were reduced and the new warden was a man without a heart for the people. John lived on his mountain and prayed and waited. He could not run away now. Besides, the Archbishop had appointed him chaplain so he still had the right to enter the settlement. He interpreted his brief widely and would visit the sick, accompany the dying and bury the dead. But he felt the rejection.

At the same time the war for freedom, which started in earnest in 1972, reached the district and created tension, suspicion and danger on all sides. With the gradual collapse of

⁶ Rance, p 318

⁷ Rance, p 350

order in the area covetous eyes were cast on the fields and gardens of the people with leprosy who had now lost their defender. Didier Rance has given, to my knowledge, the first full description of John's last days and hours. In early September he was abducted from his hut, led away for "trial", acquitted Pilate-like but condemned anyway and shot on the road between Mutoko and Nyamapanda on the 5th. It all happened suddenly in the end. Something within us expected it but it was still a terrible shock.

A packed Cathedral received his remains on 10 September, the day the peace talks to end the war - which were ultimately successful - opened in London. After Holy Communion I, and several others, saw drops of blood fall from his coffin. The undertaker was aghast but on opening the casket found everything in order. It was the first of many posthumous signs of John's closeness to Jesus.

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10. Verdict of the people. After the death of John a spontaneous devotion to him sprung up, starting in Harare and rapidly spreading to other parts of Zimbabwe, South Africa, the UK and elsewhere. People were fascinated by his way of life, his generosity, his obvious closeness to God and his love for the people. They came in – literally – their thousands and began to use the mountain overlooking Mutemwa as a site for all night prayer. This was particularly evident on the 5th September each year but smaller "pilgrimages" continued throughout the year. Mutemwa became a place of spiritual nourishment and rest for those who "labour and are burdened."

Gradually a call was heard for some form of official recognition of John by the Church. Support for this grew but those who tried to channel this call found it hard to discover an effective method of making headway. Despite the enthusiasm of many in the country and the support of the local bishop no one seems to know how to move the process forward.

Next year it will be forty years since John died and promoters of John's cause, together with thousands in the country and abroad, long for some kind of breakthrough for his cause after these years "of wandering in the desert." John, careless of his own well-being while he was alive, also wanted this recognition, not for his own sake but to help many others. "Pray for my sanctification," he wrote from Italy to a friend in 1952, "because it would encourage so many souls if such a wreckage might come to canonisation."⁸

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Lusaka, 28 January 2018

⁸ Rance, p 173

