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SPIRITANS FOR TODAY: THE JOURNEY OF A NON-HERO'S HERO? JOHN DOYLE, C.S.SP.



Brian McLaughlin, C.S.Sp.

Brian McLaughlin, C.S.Sp. was ordained priest in 1967 in Dublin and has the STL from San Anselmo University, Rome, 1969. Other specializations include a 2 year post-graduate Diploma in Psychology, University College, Dublin (1970-72), Certificate in Counselling, Westminster Pastoral Institute, London 1985, and Diploma in Spiritual Direction, Milltown Institute of Spirituality, Dublin, 2007. Missionary in Brazil for nine years, Brian researched a new initiative in South-East Asia on behalf of the general council and was in the first Group to go to the Philippines in 1997. He was provincial of Brazil (1977-80), Ireland (1988-1994), and major superior in Philippines (1997-2005). Brian currently ministers part-time in counselling, spiritual direction and voluntary work with an NGO.

On 30th April 2014, John Baptist Doyle (henceforth, J.B.), a Spiritan confrere and friend I loved and admired, died from pancreatic cancer. On his desk was a framed motto: “life is like a cup of tea, it’s how you make it.” In the view of most who knew him he made a great cup of tea of his life.

John was born in Dublin in 1937 and joined the Spiritans in 1956. He was ordained in 1964, having graduated in science from University College, Dublin and theology from the University of Fribourg, Switzerland. His first overseas mission appointment was to Nigeria, where he was involved initially in seminary education and part-time parish work. This was followed, during the Nigerian Civil War, as Field Liaison Officer for German and French Relief Agencies. He was later assigned to Brazil, then to Rostock in former East Germany. He also accepted appointments in Ireland (after Nigeria) as Director of theology students, during which time he was also a member of the provincial council; post-Germany, as a community leader and, again, member of council. Put that way, “the cup of tea” is cold and captures little of a wonderful Spiritan whose person and life inspired all of those who knew him. I have been asked to try and share something of this with you.

Perhaps the thing that marked his missionary life most significantly was the experience in Biafra during the Nigerian Civil war. Three examples underline the sort of stress there.

Coordinating relief work. Apart from the almost unbearable human suffering he witnessed, he had to make decisions no one should be asked to make. With food and medicine in very short supply he had to decide which children would get these because they had a better chance of survival, and which would not, who would live and who would die.

Living in a situation where one did not know who was who. Who was on the federal side, who was a “Biafran.” He shared a story about this. Waiting, under house-arrest, in

a hotel in Lagos before deportation a ranking army officer came to him. The conversation was like this: “Fr. Doyle, are you comfortable?” “Yes.” “And the Sisters, where are they (the Sisters in question had worked with him and were also awaiting deportation)?” “They are in such and such a place.” “Not good enough – I will order them be brought here.” John, bemused, stared at him. Suddenly the officer crouched forward, stretched out his hand and emitted a pain-filled wail. “The beggar!” said John. The man, under the guise of a beggar, had been a constant (spying) presence in the compound where John lived and worked – and, clearly, secretly admired him!

Finally, towards the end of the war an incident of “shock and noise treatment.” Suddenly stopped by the Nigerian troops, he and his Spiritan confrere were dazzled by blinding lights and stunned by a very loud noise. This had effects on his body and emotions from which he never fully recovered.

On his return to Ireland, he was asked to take over responsibility for the senior students in the Seminary. Consistent with one of his core traits of openness to what the Congregation asked of him, he accepted the appointment. The students remember him as someone who was “a real human being,” who communicated an interest in each one, treating each as an adult and with responsibility. However, his razor sharp mind quickly cut through any phoniness and challenged when necessary. As one of them said he “was a role model.”

At this time he was also a member of the provincial council. There was much change, countrywide, in the style of seminary formation. For many older Irish Spiritans, this was difficult and “what are the students up to now?” was a frequent topic of conversation. J.B. was director of students on the one hand, but also member of the council which these others expected to “sort out the students!”

As in Biafra, though on a much smaller scale, he was “caught” in very stressful decision-making – torn in different directions. This was not easy for someone with a scientific mind who liked clarity. Soon, people noticed he would suddenly glaze over and seem “lost” for a minute or two. It was the sound of an aeroplane – heard by him before anybody else, and needing him to rationalise: “that is a passenger plane, not a fighter. I am in Ireland and not in Biafra.” Quickly, the damage and the after-effects of the

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Brian McLaughlin, C.S.Sp. war came home to roost and he had a nervous breakdown forcing him to resign from both posts in March, 1972.

He first received treatment in Dublin before moving to a sanatorium in Badenwiler, Germany, through the good offices of Mgr Staufer, who had been head of Caritas Internationalis during the war in Nigeria and coordinating the medical and food relief. J.B. served as interpreter, both in French and English. Later, when Staufer knew about his health problems, he arranged for him to be treated in Germany. Following his stay there, J.B. spent almost a year in light pastoral ministry in the U.S.

From now on he would be a “wounded healer.”

The Nigerian experience was hugely traumatic for him, changing him and his way of being. As he himself put it, “I have been to the edge and am not going there again.” From now on he would be a “wounded healer.” In his book of this name, Henri Nouwen speaks of the minister of religion who must look after his/her own wounds, but at the same time, be prepared to heal the wounds of others. Further, he/she must make their own wounds into a major source of their healing power. This does not call for a “sharing of superficial personal pains, but for a constant willingness to see one’s own pain and suffering as rising from the depth of the human conditions which all people share.”¹ One colleague, who knew him very well summarised it later on: “I believe that his immense humanity was what nearly crushed him after the Biafran war. To his great credit he was able to use these very wounds and humanness as healing for others.” As we shall see, this was evidenced through the rest of his life by those who met him, who felt so at ease with him, so understood and accepted by him, particularly in their pain and suffering.

He came across with a calmness and serenity that was contagious.

The caring for his own wounds showed itself in a number of ways. There would be his inner, damaged core that he would protect. It was a reserve out of which he functioned. Decisions about what he did and where he went would be taken very much on the basis that this core was “safe” and would not be invaded or ravished again. He came across with a calmness and serenity that was contagious. In part, this was a strategy which hid an always sensitive and vulnerable human being. His core was both protected and nurtured by taking time for himself daily, normally in his room. This was sacred in all senses of the word and those who lived with him knew it – door open, J.B. available, door closed, “don’t even dare knock”! It was

time to be in the presence of his God and his own inner truths as these developed. In this he found journaling and yoga helped his focus and growth in “the inner man.” In his own words after a yoga session captured on a video taken of him in his ministry in the Amazon region of Brazil (cf. below): “I find sanctuary in this because there is a lot of noise around here, it is very warm, you’re driving on bad roads and shaken up. Then when you arrive at a community, many people want to talk with you. One is pulled and dragged about. If I am to do this with grace and calmness, I need to be fairly well together.”

While, as the homilist at his first anniversary Mass put it, “J.B. did not do ‘pious,” he lived a faith-filled life grounded in the conviction that “God is all” and it was this which sustained him in the challenges. In hospital shortly before he died, he asked a friend to look up a reference in St. Luke’s Gospel, “the one about when you enter a house say: ‘Peace to this house... heal the sick who are there and tell them, the Kingdom of God is close at hand.’” As the friend put it “he admitted that all his ministry was influenced by that advice. J.B. did not see the Church merely as an institution caring for itself and its own religion. He saw it, and himself, as one sent by Jesus to think of the welfare of others, to present Good News to people who are vulnerable and oppressed in one way or another.”

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Reading was another way he nourished his inner core. One of his colleagues remarked: “Reading a book after him was very difficult – so much red underlining, posing the question, will I just stay with what is underlined or should I read everything?” For John, his greatest fear was of going blind, as this would mean he could not read.

While he tended to his own woundedness, it was this very thing, which as the “Wounded Healer” made him so sensitive, attentive and caring to the woundedness of others. As he developed into mid-life he continued to grow emotionally, particularly through his friendships with lay men and women as he moved through the next stage of his journey in Brazil in 1974. Initially, he worked for 6 years in a parish in a satellite city of Sao Paulo. He was still very “brittle,” as shown in a medical check-up on his vacation home in 1976. But he settled well, being very drawn to the pastoral set-up there - Liberation Theology, Basic Christian Communities, and “Popular Movements” – or protest groups seeking civil, economic and labor

Brian McLaughlin, C.S.Sp. rights. He put his energy into quality rather than quantity, preferring to help deepen the faith and commitment of core groups destined to be leaven in the mass. His sense of humor endeared him to all.

After a number of years there their admiration of and confidence in J.B. saw his colleagues elect him as the Group Superior. After his election we, like a crowd of school-boys, chaired him around the patio. This was one of the happiest moments in my life. I had seen him at his lowest, when, in my room in Dublin, at 2.00 a.m. on a March morning 8 years previously, he signed the resignation letter he had just asked me to type. Now, it seemed he was really moving forward again. Despite the scars, he was coping well, his personal gifts were beginning to flourish and develop in new ways and these were now recognised and affirmed by the rest of us.

A word here on his style of leadership within the Spiritans, on occasions in Ireland, also in Brazil and Germany, and in pastoral situations. In decision-making, whether on his own or with others, given his very sharp mind, he had the capacity to get very quickly to the core – see what was important and what was not, what was possible and what was really not on. Having assessed the evidence he looked for practical, “doable” decisions by those expected to implement them. Also, as when he worked with students, he was not afraid to challenge.

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In practice, most decisions, one way or another involve people and it was his sensitivity here which will be most remembered of his time in leadership. He had the capacity to see the broader picture, to avoid either/or positions, to let seeming opposites co-exist, and very slow to judge people who were in conflict, whether within themselves or with others. He would try to involve people as much as possible in the resolution process so that they could both own and act on the decision when made. A young priest, who had got himself in a bit of a heap wondering how to go about his new apostolate, shared how J.B. told him: “young man, go out there, make your mistakes, come back and we can talk about them.” He says this was “a huge boost for me... and gave me the courage and the audacity to open up to the world out there, to the people and mission.”

After this time in leadership in Sao Paulo he branched into something totally new, going to the State of Rondonia

in the Amazon basin bordering Bolivia. It was a huge step into the unknown for him. He had been reared in Dublin, went to school there, did higher studies in cities and had lived in a city since coming to Brazil. True, he had spent time in rural areas, particularly during the war in Nigeria – but that reality was very different from this one. He was to spend eleven years in Rondonia and, afterwards, shared with a colleague that of all his time in Brazil this represented for him our real missionary role.

In 1978, the Brazilian Government decided to open up Rondonia. Its aim was to ease the pressure on the more densely populated parts of the country, particularly in the south-east. Financed by the World Bank, a new road was built to cover 1,500 km heading due north, with the idea of opening up the whole hinterland. People were offered a square kilometre of land of pristine Amazon forest. They were allowed cut down half and use it to develop sustainable agriculture for their families. There was a huge response and, between 1982 and 1986, half a million people entered the forest full of dreams. Unfortunately, these turned to nightmares. The cut-down forest was productive for the first three years, but, because of the acid in the soil, turned out to be then totally unsuitable for agriculture. Further, the immigrants were very unprepared for the heat, malaria and general conditions. Many died of sickness. Ranching speculators were quickly ready to buy their cleared lots and turn them into basic grazing areas. Few of the settlers had capital to buy cattle and, so, continued on their bit of land eking out an existence, or moved off to the next “Promised Land.”

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A group of Spiritans arrived there in July 1980, basing themselves in Rolim de Moura, a vast area of some 300 square kilometres, which eventually developed into a parish with 106 scattered communities. Shortly, almost two-thirds of the population of the parish were involved in church activities – way above the national average of 5-8%. John joined them in 1986. After six years, at the Bishop’s strong request, no doubt, in part, to have his experience and wisdom closer at hand, he moved to the central parish of Ji-parana. In both places his pastoral approach was characterised by training and encouraging “pastoral agents,” or part-time local, lay leaders.

In April 1993, the Religious Department of Independent Television in Birmingham, United Kingdom, produced a documentary “Two Hands Hanging.” The

Brian McLaughlin, C.S.Sp. title is a short-cut to describe the migrants as they arrived, almost empty-handed, in Rondonia. The program is focused on J.B's person and mission there – including an interview with him in his underpants post yoga exercises! Describing his approach to mission:

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I never had this idea of saving the world...no, no, not that. Mission is to go where the need is greatest. I look at it this way. We are born, have a few years on the planet and we die. While we are on the planet there are clearly two sides – those who give out the jobs and those who look for the jobs. I have to use my two ounces of whatever I have – intelligence or goodwill or whatever - on one side or the other. I like to put it on the side that could do with a bit of help.

I see the tragedy, but also the indomitable human spirit. It is extraordinary how resilient human beings are. I have no pretence at explaining, why things happen, nor the way they happen, but there is no doubt the human being has some spark of the divine. In all people of goodwill there is a sort of germ looking for whatever... you know, the seeking of the transcendent, the quest for whatever it is, wherever it is, He, She or It. The thing to do – any religion – is to build on that, honor that, value that.

When asked did he not miss having a wife and family he answered, “Of course, I do! But when I train another – e.g. a lay leader – and let them off to be fulfilled, there is a sense of being creative, like paternity.”

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Asked was he going to stay, “What I feel I’m faced with is this: I came here because I admired these people – their spirit. Suddenly, the wind has changed. I am not going to drop out because the wind has changed. I still admire these people. My choice is: to stay here because I admire these people, or get out? I don’t see that as a choice. I happen to represent the Catholic Church – it could be any Church, but ANY element of stability, a fixed point, is of great help to them. When they hear of someone else leaving they say, ‘is he going too, another nail in our coffin?’ And I don’t want to be part of that process.” In practice, he was also very pro-active – challenging authorities, speaking on behalf of the people, despite, at times, death-threats.

“They aren’t asking for much – just asking you to stay – to be in reasonably good humor and to smile. And when they are down and moaning, you say “Ah, sure I know, what the hell” – and smile. There’s another ear – someone to listen.” Perhaps, his own wonderful pastoral approach might also be summarised as “Two hands hanging” – as in being present to others – “with a smile!”

Unfortunately, his own woundedness took over again. He eventually could no longer survive in the heat of the jungle. His body lost the capacity to feel and regulate its temperature. When it was warm, his system was totally disorganised, and when it was cold, he never felt the cold as others normally would. So, very reluctantly, he left.

Where to next on his journey? Somewhere cold. Spiritan mission in Canada or a place called Rostock, a port city on the Baltic Ocean? This latter was the eventual decision. As a Spiritan there described it:

This is a city in the post-communist society of East Germany, where God, Church and religion played a minor and subordinate role in the lives of the majority of the people. Christians lived in a situation of diaspora, in the minority...barely 4% Catholic and 9% Protestant... During his ministry, he met and was involved with people marked by their experience of communism and of State-driven dictatorship... What mattered to J.B. was not one’s office or title as priest or missionary. The most important thing was to be human and to reach out to people, even to those who might not share one’s worldview. This entailed being present and involved wherever people’s humanity was at stake...to be a missionary is to encounter and meet each person on an equal footing, first of all as a human being.

The most important thing was to be human and to reach out to people, even to those who might not share one’s worldview.

The “Wounded Healer” back to work again! Consistent with this were the ministries he became involved in: assigned by the archdiocese of Hamburg to pastoral care in the hospital of Rostock and the prison in Rostock-Waldeck; at the request of Caritas-Rostock to a rehabilitation clinic for sick mothers and children nearby as well as to the pastoral outreach to the deaf in the town. Typical of the man he learned sign-language to accompany these last. Here is how he described his work in the hospital to *Kontinente*, the German Mission Magazine:

The priest has to be open to all: to the patients, to the staff in the hospital and to the relatives of the patients. A great idea! But, how to do it? I got wonderful support from the Catholic layman who had been visiting from outside and was now approaching retirement age. Also, the Protestant pastor helps a lot. We do not care just about Christian denominations. Our common aim is to bring the Gospel to all: to Christians and to Non-Christians. My motto is: *‘Be open to all and listen to all.’*²

...“listening was his biggest quality.”

After five years he could hand over to a local priest. His successor remarked that “listening was his biggest quality.” Clearly, it was not just any old listening – but a presence that communicated humanity, interest, openness, and, again, non-judgemental acceptance – qualities consistent with his very way of being at this stage of his life.

These attitudes were, again, those which made him popular with the prisoners. Originally, his ministry consisted in saying a Mass now and then, and a weekly cell meeting with anyone who wanted to talk to him. After a while he spoke with the chief of the prison to be allowed to circulate among the prisoners during their periods of recreation. Finally, after a lot of discussion, he, very exceptionally, was granted this and gained the confidence of many of the inmates. In one edition of the prison’s monthly journal there is an interview with “this man who is Father Doyle.” Asked why he was visiting the prison he answered: “I want to help persons who have lost the way. That can happen to every one of us, even to me. The question is not: ‘What happened?’ – rather, ‘Where is the way out?’” A phrase of one of the prisoners, having spoken with John, became quite famous: “people who don’t believe in God should talk with an atheistic priest – it does one good”!

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J.B. also became a sort of “*cause celebre*” on the front page of the local daily newspaper as he joined a local mixed swimming club, the “Rostocher Sehunde” (Sea Seals) and bathed regularly with them in the freezing Baltic. While he openly said, or at least did not try to hide, that he was a priest, he obviously did not fit the image his companions had of one. On a few occasions some swam underwater to get to him and surreptitiously asked him: “do you mean you are really a priest?” He said “yes” and they disappeared just as they had come. Their experience

of the German Democratic Republic, where spying was part of everyday life, made them suspicious and wary of others. But, strangely, this also turned into a “ministry” as some asked him, when there were losses in the family, “to do that thing that a priest does when somebody dies, so that our loved-one may be in good hands.” As a colleague of his in Germany said:

He refused to be closed in on the image his interlocutors had of a priest. He wanted to enjoy his swimming and do something for his health, but at the same time widen the horizons of people he met... He told me that he learned a lot about the hidden and gentle action of God among the many non-Christians he met...God does the work of the missionary.

In a talk at a Spiritan community in Ireland, John summarised his pastoral approach in Rostock:

Someone has said that if you want to talk to people today about God you need a previous exchange on the level of humanity. Not, I would suggest, an exchange of ideas, but an exchange in a relationship - what I might call a ‘whether or not’ relationship. A friendly, open, personal way of relating to people that says in effect, ‘I accept you whether or not I admire your lifestyle. I’m interested in you whether or not you believe in God. I’ve time for you whether or not you go to church. I listen to you, whether or not I believe what you say.’²³

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At the time of his funeral another confrere remarked: “I think J.B. has left us a legacy to be explored, a missionary method for a world that is rapidly changing.”

He developed a serious blood disease, from which he nearly died. However he survived, but his final journey was imminent. Despite petitions from the diocese that he remain on because of the importance of his very presence to the community and the Rostock project, he returned to Ireland in early 2009.

As ever, he was open to accept two appointments the Congregation proposed to him. After one of these, knowing his medical situation, I asked him why he did this. He simply answered “I could not think of a good reason not to”! It seemed that all had now become quite

Brian McLaughlin, C.S.Sp. relative, including life itself, and he would give what he could while he could – superior of a local community and member of the Provincial Leadership Team. However, almost inevitably, he had to retire quite soon from both of these. Without any trace of anxiety or worry, he died in the Spiritan Nursing Home, in Kimmage, Dublin, 30 April 2014. Let us leave the last words to two close friends, who knew him intimately.

He learned to recognize and live within his limitations, to be true to himself even when conventional values, including those of Church and Congregation, dictated otherwise...

The J.B. we knew at the end and who drew so many to himself was the fruit of fidelity to his inner journey, especially open to incorporating what he learned from women and children, lived out and rooted in his family, culture and C.S.Sp. He learned to recognize and live within his limitations, to be true to himself even when conventional values, including those of Church and Congregation, dictated otherwise, and to allow himself to become whole, incorporating the feminine values of compassion, gentleness and reconciliation, the child's capacity for wonder at the new and enjoyment of the moment, while not losing his manly focus and ever maintaining his sense of humor.

We would meet in a restaurant and there spend hours exploring themes of a more philosophical and psychological nature, (with a bit of gossip thrown in to keep it sane!) and their relevance to our concrete, human existence, which, with all its strivings, meanderings and broken dreams, is the hero's 'non-heroic' journey, on which our world depends for its peace, its hope and its utopian solidarity. In essence, that was J.B.'s journey too. The journey of a 'non-heroic' hero, whose quiet way did not make waves but did open up new frontiers. And who, despite, and because of, his own broken dreams, touched the hearts of many, including mine, along the way. And, like a great teacher, touched them forever.

Sincere thanks to all the people who responded to my invitation to share their memories of J.B., with apologies

if I have not done justice to their contribution. I also make apologies to many more who might have liked to have been consulted.

*Brian McLaughlin, C.S.Sp.
Kimmage Manor, Dublin*

Endnotes

¹*The Wounded Healer. Ministry in Contemporary Society* (London: Darton Longman & Todd, 2014), 88.

²Number 6 (Nov/Dec 2005), 14.

³St. Michaels, Dublin, February 2nd, 2000.