



Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

November 22, 2023

Dear Friends,

“**H**E is a vagabond of God, a beautiful soul who aspires to the life of a perfect Christian... He is not suited to the sedentary religious life; rather he feels himself drawn to imitate the example of a St Benedict Joseph Labre (a homeless pilgrim in the 18th century) or a Père de Foucauld,” the superior of the Fathers of Sion in Louvain (Belgium) once wrote of John Bradburne. Who was this uncommon character who, having led an action-packed life, was to become an admirable servant of the lepers?

John Bradburne was born on June 14, 1921, in the small village of Skirwich in Norfolk in north-east England. His father was the local Anglican minister. His mother, Erica, came from a modest background, but her family was related to Baden-Powell, the founder of the boy scouts, and to the future Prime Minister Winston Churchill. She had spent her early years in India, which was a British colony at the time, and she would tell her five children about the hardships suffered by lepers. John, the third child, always listened intently. Music and song played an important role in the household. As a young child, John, not one to sit still, began climbing trees and enjoyed exploring the local “mountain”.

In 1929, he was sent to a boarding school about 60 miles (100 km) away. It proved to be a disaster: gone was the splendid freedom of his native village! He was bullied by his more urban schoolmates, and he used to cry every night. Five years later, his father sent him to another school where he was even more miserable. He finally ran away in revolt, walking the 25 miles (40 km) that separated him from his father’s rectory.

In 1934, his father was given another benefice and enrolled his son at Gresham, a renowned boarding school in Holt. Here, John was able to adapt and made friends. His humor and his gift for impersonation were appreciated by all. He developed a passion for Shakespeare, joined theatrical activities and learned to play a variety of musical instruments. His favorite pastime was still climbing trees and sitting on a high branch with a good book. Religion classes left him cold, but he did learn to control his impulsive nature. In 1939, he



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John Bradburne
(1921-1979)

successfully passed the entrance exam to the officers’ cadet school. In September, England declared war on Germany, and John was posted to the Asian front as a second lieutenant. In 1941, he was commissioned to command a platoon in a Nepalese regiment of Gurkhas, the indigenous elite troops. He got on very well with his men; his eccentricities made them laugh. He sometimes climbed to the top of a tall tree, where he would spend hours playing the flute: his comrades called him “the crazy Englishman”!

In December of the same year, the Japanese invaded Malaya and the British troops began to retreat. Cut off from the rest of the army, part of John’s regiment scattered into the jungle; he and Captain

Hart trekked haphazardly for a whole month. John was struck down by a severe form of malaria. However, they made it to the coast and on February 15, 1942, reached Sumatra. John was between life and death when he was admitted to hospital. In his delirium, he saw a white lady whom he would later recognize to have been the Blessed Virgin MARY. But the Japanese were closing in, and he must flee again.

He and Hart managed to escape to Ceylon. From there, John moved on to Bombay, India. Having recovered his health, he was sent to the Himalayas, to Dehra Dun, to join a regiment of Gurkhas. It was there that he befriended John Dove, a young Anglo-Irish Catholic. The two young men had a common fondness of music, long talks, drink and women. John later referred to this time as “two years which were idled away in the clubs and the pubs and the profitless play.” In May 1943, however, he wrote to his parents: “My life is dedicated to Christ once and for all.”

In the autumn of that year, he joined the Chindits, a group of assault troops who were to be dropped by giant gliders into Burma to build “fortresses” in the jungle behind the Japanese army. In March 1944, John took part in this major airborne operation. After terrible fighting, the Japanese began to withdraw. John was an efficient and courageous soldier, but he was exhausted. The following year, he was discharged and returned to England, where he refused to talk about his recent experience. Like so many thousands of demobilized soldiers, he could no longer find his place in society. He did fall in love with Anne Hardwicke, however, and asked her to marry him. In June 1946, he found a job as a lumberjack. Working restored his physical and mental health.

John Dove returned to England in the autumn of 1946, and the two friends were reunited. Despite his personal prejudice against Catholicism, Bradburne was instructed in the Catholic faith and attended the Benedictine monastery at Buckfast. He read Newman’s *Apology*; Newman’s path to Rome served him as a guide. His father sent him to consult a clergyman he considered very reliable, the Reverend Paul Osborne. Osborne informed John that he was himself on the threshold of the Roman Church, and taught him to pray the rosary. After a nightlong discussion, John made up his mind, and on October 26, 1947, on the Sunday of Christ the King, he was received into the Catholic Church and made his First Holy Communion. Osborne became a Catholic seven years later.

Seeking the truth

FOLLOWING in the footsteps of Newman and many other Anglicans, John recognized that the Catholic Church is truly the Church founded by JESUS CHRIST. Indeed, “God Himself has made known to mankind the way in which men are to serve Him, and thus be saved in Christ and come to blessedness. We believe that this one true religion subsists in the Catholic and Apostolic Church, to which the Lord JESUS committed the duty of spreading it abroad among all men. Thus He spoke to the Apostles: ‘Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have enjoined upon you’ (Matt. 28:19-20). On their part, all men are bound to seek the truth, especially in what concerns God and His Church, and to embrace the truth they come to know, and to hold fast to it” (Vatican Council II, Declaration *Dignitatis humanæ*, no. 1).

The question of a monastic vocation soon arose in John’s mind. He and Anne gave up their plans to get married, but their parting of ways went smoothly and they remained friends. However, as a new convert, he first had to wait two years before entering a monastery. In the spring of 1948, John accepted a teaching position in a Catholic school. He began to write poems and discovered St Francis of

Assisi, and was enthralled. Early in 1949, his friend John Dove announced that he was joining the Jesuits. In June, Bradburne left the school and proposed to a colleague, Margaret Smith, who was twelve years his senior; she refused to marry him. Buckfast Abbey no longer wanted him as a postulant. John Dove encouraged him to go on a pilgrimage to Lourdes to heal his “ailing heart”; the experience left a deep impression on him. In February 1950, he was accepted as a porter at the Carthusian monastery of Parkminster, where he stayed for six months. The experience left a lasting impression on him. In September, he embarked on a pilgrimage to Rome, all expenses paid by a Jewish diamond dealer; he saw this as a sign of a missionary vocation to the Jewish people. He travelled on to the Holy Land, where he stayed for seven weeks in Jerusalem, at the Maison Saint-Pierre of the Fathers of Sion (a congregation founded in the 19th century by Fr Theodore Ratisbonne, a Jewish convert, to evangelize the Jews). The superior was convinced that John had a vocation for his Institute, and sent him to the novitiate in Louvain, Belgium. There, John often went to a nearby church to pray by the tomb of Fr Damien de Veuster, the apostle of the lepers. In October 1951, he began studying philosophy, but confided to his superior that he did not see himself as a priest.

“He was not a jester!”

JOHN was determined to return to the Holy Land in the late spring of 1952, but first went to Assisi. Unable to secure a free passage to Israel, he took a job as sacristan in a parish in southern Italy, where the parish priest thought highly of him. In February 1953, John made a private vow of chastity. His father had written to him for Christmas: “It was a great joy for me to get your letter today and to know of your happiness and welfare with your feet safely set upon the way which in my old age I am coming to see more and more clearly is God’s way for you, dear boy.” The following May, his father died, and in September John returned to England to help his mother. At first, he stayed with his family, then settled in a hermit’s hut. The superior of a community of Marist Sisters, to whom he was of some service, said of him: “He played the jester, but he was not a jester at all; it was his way of concealing his profound spiritual life.”

Following John Dove’s advice, he asked to join the Benedictine abbey at Prinknash. Although he was delighted at first, he never adjusted to the monks’ life, which proved too regulated for his tastes. Four months later, he returned to London. In January 1957, he was appointed fifth sacristan at Westminster Catholic Cathedral. A few months later, Archbishop Godfrey, with whom he had many a spiritual conversation, asked him to become the caretaker of his country residence. But in January 1961, having been appointed Cardinal, the Archbishop embarked on renovation works to transform the residence into a retreat house; ultimately, John left. Fr Dove, who had become a missionary in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), offered him a job in the

Franciscan missions in the bush. On August 6, 1962, John's friend came to meet him at Salisbury airport. The apparent calm of the colony, where 5 % of Europeans owned half the land and held all the power, was deceptive. Rhodesia was gearing up for independence from Great Britain under its apartheid regime dominated by whites. The Franciscan missions were oases of social harmony. One of their primary tasks was to help the Africans take their country's destiny into their own hands, in a Christian spirit and without any view to revenge.

On August 11, 1962, John was sent to a mission run by Irish Franciscans in Wedza, 100 miles (160 km) south of the capital, Salisbury. On October 4, Fr Gilda took him to found a new mission area deep in the bush. John proved to be an excellent assistant, winning over both Blacks and Whites with his good humor. Early in 1963, he accompanied another missionary, Fr Pascal Slevin, who was also opening a new mission. Despite his impractical nature, he helped build the house and the first chapel. However, the situation in the country deteriorated; the white settlers unilaterally declared the country's independence, while strengthening their domination, and a Black anti-apartheid front, armed by the international revolution, emerged. Attacks and government reprisals ensued.

A friendly intermediary

IN 1964, the Jesuits offered John a job as a caretaker in a large house at M'bebi, north of Salisbury, which they wanted to turn into a novitiate. He lived there as a hermit. From July 1964 to February 1965, he hosted monthly television programs on biblical subjects. Fr Dove organized vocational training workshops for Blacks at Silveira House, near Salisbury. John joined him in December 1964, and was well liked as a friendly intermediary between the Jesuits and the natives. It was there that he met Luisa Guidotti, a lay missionary and doctor. In 1967, a parish in Salisbury decided to stage a play on the Passion of Christ for Easter: *The Man Born to be King*. John played the role of JESUS, and the play was a huge success.

It was in December 1968 that Bradburne first heard of a leper colony experiencing management difficulties. The leprosarium was located in Mutemwa, 100 miles (160 km) east of Salisbury, at the foot of the Chigona mountain. It had been founded in 1937 and had housed up to two thousand lepers; most of them had been sent back to their families. John went there in March 1969. The head of the "Committee of the Friends of Mutemwa", the association that sponsored the leprosarium, offered him the post of director, which he refused, not feeling up to the job. To win him over, they explained that if he didn't take charge of the colony, no one else would. So, in August 1969, he took up residence among the lepers: "I'm an outcast and they are outcasts; we'll understand each other", he wrote to Fr John Dove. His first impression, however, was one of dread on

seeing some eighty people with distorted faces and limbs, untreated wounds, living in squalid, filthy huts, suffering from malnutrition and, for the most part, afflicted by other diseases. As a result of much abuse, the lepers had become distrustful. John's kindness and good humor soon won them over, however. He accompanied the dying, and this touched all hearts. Medical care was provided by three Italian consecrated virgins from the "All Souls" mission, who came every week, leaving medicines and instructions for John. But John proved to be somewhat whimsical, and from December 1969 onwards, Dr Luisa Guidotti set about training him. United by their faith in JESUS CHRIST and their love of lepers, the two became good friends. If the chaplain was unable to come on Sundays, John would lead the church service for an hour and a half, using the authorization he had received to distribute Holy Communion. In his spare time, he climbed to the top of the mountain to pray and write poetry. Fr Dove, his regular confessor, often came to visit him.

An unfortunate conflict

HOWEVER, as early as 1970, a conflict began with the local livestock farmers, who allowed their cattle to destroy the leprosarium's vegetable garden. In 1971, the Committee of the Friends of Mutemwa became the Rhodesian Leprosy Association, and a woman doctor visited the center. Impressed by John's results, she nevertheless demanded that he keep rigorous accounts; to her surprise, he complied and sent her well-kept records. She also disagreed with him on another point: believing that lepers should not have children, she demanded that women be systematically given the contraceptive pill. John refused.

Pope John Paul II has confirmed the soundness of the position John Bradburne had taken on contraception: "The Church condemns as a grave offense against human dignity and justice all those activities of governments or other public authorities which attempt to limit in any way the freedom of couples in deciding about children... Any violence applied by such authorities in favor of contraception or, still worse, of sterilization and procured abortion, must be altogether condemned and forcefully rejected." The Pope explained: "When couples, by means of recourse to contraception, separate these two meanings that God the Creator has inscribed in the being of man and woman and in the dynamism of their sexual communion... they 'manipulate' and degrade human sexuality. When, instead... the couple respect the inseparable connection between the unitive and procreative meanings of human sexuality, they are acting as 'ministers' of God's plan... the difference, both anthropological and moral, between contraception and recourse to the rhythm of the cycle... is a difference which is much wider and deeper than is usually thought." It "involves... two irreconcilable concepts of the human person and of human sexuality" (John Paul II, Exhortation *Familiaris consortio*, November 22, 1981, nos. 30, 32).

In 1972, William Ellis, a Catholic who had left the Church, joined the Rhodesian Leprosy Association; his feelings were hostile to John's work. John's dedication did not falter, however, and he was even seen carrying a leper on his back to the dispensary several miles away. He had the gift of making the patients feel valued by getting them to play, sing and help out with the establishment's chores.

He was equally at ease in reprimanding them when necessary, especially when it came to alcoholism and promiscuity. However, his love and respect for each leper endeared him to them more than anything else; he saw them as a gift from God. Well aware that "the Church does not know of any means other than Baptism that assures entry into eternal beatitude" (CCC, no. 1257), John offered it with gentleness to non-Christians, never forcing them. The lepers realized that they, and their eternal destiny, mattered to this white man who had come to live with them, both a hermit and a servant of the poorest.

An indignant refusal

MANY of Mutemwa's visitors were deeply impressed and also spiritually transformed through their encounters with John and the lepers. Yet Ellis asked him to scale down food rations and to put an identification tag around each leper's neck. John refused indignantly: lepers are not cattle. The committee then decided to expel him. On May 1, 1973, John moved out and settled on the summit of Chigona, where he stayed for six months. Every morning, he would come down to give Communion to the lepers. When one of them was dying, he slipped in during the night among the huts and would spend hours assisting the dying patient. The disorderly conduct of the new director led to the withdrawal of the Italian nursing sisters, and then of Dr Luisa Guidotti. Medical care was suspended, as were shipments of medicines from Italy. At the same time, the civil war was escalating. The

police, who valued John highly, allowed him at this point to live in a hut situated a hundred yards from the leprosy.

On June 28, 1976, Dr Luisa Guidotti was arrested for allegedly failing to denounce rebels. She was later acquitted. But several missionaries who were helping the indigenous population were slaughtered. In August 1978, John was stricken with acute encephalitis, and saved by Dr Luisa Guidotti. She died on July 6, 1979, when she was hit by a burst of machine-gun fire at a police checkpoint (her process of beatification has been launched). In 1979, fighting continued in spite of peace negotiations between the two sides. On the night between September 2 and 3, John was seized by a dozen armed men and handed over to young rebels, who hurled abuse at him. On the evening of September 4, the commander of the Communist rebels in the area declared John innocent and suggested that he be deported to Mozambique. John retorted that he could not abandon his lepers. On the morning of September 5, he set off with a group of peasants who were returning to their villages. Two young guerillas accompanied the group. When they reached a stream crossing, they forced John down on the bank and one of the guerillas emptied a whole AK magazine into John's back. John fell over, dead. Fr David Gibbs, a missionary, found the body next day. The local newspaper reported: "The friend of the lepers was murdered... He was a complete man of God. He was totally good. The lepers depended on him, and, I believe, loved him very much. He gave up his total life for the lepers and he was also a good poet." On September 10, people flocked to Salisbury Cathedral for his funeral, but no lepers from Mutemwa were able to attend. Two years earlier, the Franciscan provincial had sent John his own habit because, he said, "he is more Franciscan than the whole lot of us put together". As a tertiary of the Order, John Bradburne was buried wearing this habit which was very dear to him.

"I have no money, but I love God, in Him I rejoice", John Bradburne would make the people sing. On April 30, 2019, the Zimbabwean bishops' conference decided to open the cause for his beatification. "May his love of Christ and of Mary His Mother, together with his selfless service to those considered least in the world, be a model for us to follow!", asks the prayer for his beatification.

*+ Fr Jean-Bernard, Abbot,
and all the monks of the Abbey*

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