
A first-class man – John Burns in Pakistan 1978-1983

John and I were part of the Marist community in Lahore, Pakistan for five years until 1983. I'd never met him before that, and I haven't seen him since; when I think of him, he's in a white cassock or a grey *shalwar kameez*, the loose-fitting shirt and pants that is Pakistani national dress. For the five of us there, our time at St Anthony's High School was special, and I've heard that John spoke of it later with real affection.

We spent our first summer holiday at an old British hill-station called Murree, two thousand metres up in the Himalayan foothills; we were studying Urdu at a language school – and escaping from the 45-degree heat down on the plains. John, against his natural inclinations, was the centre of attention one Sunday when we celebrated his 25th anniversary of ordination and also his 50th birthday. He was the senior member of the group by fifteen years. A good crowd of priests and religious joined us, some in Murree for the same reason as us, and some attached to two schools there. Pakistan was a strict Islamic country, with martial law to enforce religious prohibitions, so we could drink his health only in orange juice.

John had arrived at St Anthony's the previous October, 1978, two months before the Patrician Brothers handed over the school to the Marists. He was immediately made Head of Science and put to work teaching Physics and Maths to the elite Cambridge O levels group; that's what he did in the school till we left.

In fact, though, his official position in the school was Facilitator. Early on, I got a signwriter to make shingles for my door and Roger McCarrick's: Principal and Vice-Principal. John and Pat Devlin had offices too, so I added shingles for them, Facilitator and Coordinator. They tossed a coin, and John got Facilitator.

The science labs were new and well fitted out. John just about lived there. On our last afternoon in Pakistan, during term holidays and just a few hours before we flew out, a visitor came for him. The gate-keeper couldn't find him. 'Try the Physics lab,' I suggested. There he was.

His students loved him. Since most of them wanted to be doctors or engineers, John's subjects were the ones that mattered anyway, but they enjoyed the way he taught them. He was experienced and knew his subjects, always well-prepared and thorough, patient and kind. It suited him that it wasn't necessary to be a disciplinarian – everyone in the Cambridge section was keen, bright and well-behaved. Thirty years later, I think he's the Marist they remember best.

He did a lot to lift the standard of science teaching in the whole school by bringing the senior primary and junior secondary classes into the labs once a week for practical work. Their teachers appreciated this, and also their chance to co-teach with John. Not just our teachers either; he helped improve the teaching of science at the two other Catholic-run schools in Lahore also

The provincial of the time, John Jago, sent a letter to Australian Marists overseas, asking for their desired funeral arrangements if they died there. I think he had in mind the high cost and

procedural problems of flying back a body in a coffin. John spoke of replying that he wanted to be stuffed and put in the Biology lab as a specimen of perfect manhood.

In the Marist community John was bursar and guest-master, duties which went together like fish and chips. He discovered two Woodlawn old boys in the capital Islamabad, Barry Harley working for UNICEF and Greg Brooke in the Australian embassy. Both used their buying rights at the American commissary, and their diplomatic immunity from baggage inspection at domestic airports, to stock us up when they called on us – it was all for the visitors, of course.

Our guests often were priests coming from the countryside for a few days R and R, and some city shopping. They were in holiday mood, wanting late nights of talk and laughter, and sleep-ins. With school underway at 7:30, and community prayers and Mass starting before six, ordinary Marists managed to stay with the guests the first night, but muttered excuses and went off early after that. Not John. He kept up the pace the next night, and the next, and the next, turning off the community-room lights after the last guest went off to bed. And he was on time for everything the next morning. Burnsby in anecdotal mood, elbow on the mantelpiece and glass in hand as tomorrow became today – a Physics teacher could have used him to illustrate the concept of immovable object.

He loved a good talk. Remember Keith Miller, the great Australian cricketer of the 1940s and 50s? Pakistan TV brought him over as comments man when Greg Chappell's team played a series there about 1980. Miller accepted an invitation to talk to a couple of classes at our school, and afterwards he and I had a cup of tea in the community room. John came in for the usual mid-morning cuppa, and sat down with us. I had things to do, and was in a hurry to get our visitor back to his hotel. 'I'm free for a while,' said John. 'I'll drive Keith back.' Off I went. An hour later I came back for something, and the two Australians were still there, deep in conversation.

He was also responsible for the servants – that's what they were called – who looked after the classrooms and grounds, and our house and us. They lived on the school property, twelve families spanning four generations. One of the teachers did the direct, day-to-day organisation; John liaised with her and attended to the broader issues. For instance, there were several girls in their late teens who just sat around home filling in their time till they were married. John arranged part-time work for them cleaning the classrooms; their earnings went straight into a special bank account where their fathers couldn't drink it away. When they were married, then, they had some money to start with.

John was the community handyman. Plumbing and electricals and locks were a constant problem in our big house when we arrived, and we relied on him to get things gradually in order. There was a motor-bike in the garage that he spent a lot of time on; he got it going but sold it after looking at the local traffic. His most ambitious project was a new pumping system and pipeline carrying water from our artesian well to the tanks on the school roof; he spent the last summer holiday designing and building it, and it wouldn't surprise me if it's still running.

Outside the school and community, one group John quietly helped was a diocesan congregation of religious women called the Nazareth Sisters; they did work like teaching in kindergartens. They were neglected by the bigger orders – not even invited to the national meetings of congregational leaders – and the bishop patronised them; they had little ongoing formation. John became a real friend to them. For example, he arranged for teachers from our school to give English classes to the younger Sisters.

He didn't go out much. Once I remember he came to the Friday night film at the nearby American Centre. It was *Kramer versus Kramer*, and some guests had recommended it. 'I didn't realise they still made films like that,' he said, as we walked home.

John had ear problems – tinnitus and hearing loss. He went back to Australia to consult doctors and returned with a hearing aid, but the ceiling fans in summer made this impractical. He just accepted it then, and never mentioned it again. He was the only one of us to have surgery in Pakistan - some artery problem. He could have gone to Australia for it, but after asking around, he found a surgeon and a hospital in Lahore he thought could do the job, and everything went perfectly.

He recuperated at home. Three Mothers – not Sisters – from the Jesus and Mary Convent came to visit him. Not finding anyone on the ground floor, they came upstairs to knock on John's door. It was wide open but there wasn't any one in the room. 'Let's go in and write him a note,' said one. They were doing that when suddenly the door of the ensuite bathroom opened, and in came John, not having heard anything and towelling himself after a shower.

I mentioned those Urdu classes we had. John continued to study privately after our group lessons stopped, especially learning to read the Arabic-type script. Each day in the chapel, before morning prayer, there he was with an English New Testament and an Urdu one, slowly working out a couple of verses to get him going.

John and I, just the two of us, were there for the last two months before the Marist involvement in the school finished. A lay administration was in place except for the principal; all the discussion and planning and disappointments and sore feelings were over, and it was a time of real peace. We kept the community routine going, even walking back and forth behind the school saying the rosary every evening. We also did a lot of talking around supper; I enjoyed John's tales of his farm upbringing, and his formation days.

Late that last night we flew to Karachi for our international flights at dawn, John heading east and myself west. At check-in time we found that our travel agent had messed up, and John's name wasn't on the Philippine Airlines flight manifest; the local staff said sorry, the plane's full, nothing can be done. I found a Filipino official in a room behind the check-in counter. He turned out to be a proud and grateful old boy of a Marist Brothers school. 'We're Marists,' I said, it clearly being a time for the Marist family to pull together. 'Really?' he said. 'Let me see if I can do anything.'

He came back a few minutes later. 'We've found a seat,' he said, 'but there's a problem.'

Would Brother Burns mind going first-class?’

I put it to John. ‘It’s against all my principles,’ he said, ‘but just this once.’

My last glimpse of him was striding out to the exclusive minibus, there to convey the rich and famous from the terminal to the front of the plane: John Burns, economy class personified in appearance, but finally recognised for what he really was, a first-class man.

Michael Donnelly

Beijing

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