

IN MEMORIAM

JOHN LEARY

February 22, 1958–August 31, 1982

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A Magna Cum Laude Harvard Graduate

A Summa Cum Laude Catholic Worker

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A Nonviolent Follower

of the

Nonviolent Walker of Waves of Waves



A Twenty-Four Year Old Icon

Visible reality is but a speck of reality. Most of what is most important in life takes place on the invisible side of existence. Each life is an icon, a visible image of invisible realities. The clenched fist or the open hand does not exist in history without something unseen, but very real, within the person causing the hand to either close in hostility or to open in hospitality. So also it is with the tongue and the feet and with every conscious act of every human person at every second. I would like therefore to speak today of the invisible side of John Leary—the infinity behind the face of this *Magna Cum Laude* Harvard graduate and *Summa Cum Laude* Catholic Worker. Because of some mysterious dynamic, John recognized early in life that outside God's will there was no genuine or lasting life, hope, love, peace or revolution. He realized that if the cacophony of evil and death were to be silenced and an ultimate harmony restored to human existence, then God would have to orchestrate it and John Leary would have to be God's willing instrument. Nothing was clearer to the "invisible John" than the fact that all attempts by an instrument to lead the band were doomed to continue the cacophony. To substitute one's own ideas on how to conquer evil and death for God's revealed Way on how to conquer evil and death was in the strictest sense of the word absurd. With a maturity beyond his twenty-four years he knew the meaning of "Our peace is in Your Will." To this end, each day, for what was to be the last two years of his life, John tried to say with his whole heart the following prayer:

Father, I abandon myself into your hands.

Do with me as you will.

Whatever you may do, I thank you.

I am ready for all. I accept all.

Let only your will be done in me

And in all your creatures.

I wish no more than this, O Lord.

Into your hands I commend my soul.

*I offer it to you with all the love of my heart,
For I love you, Lord, and so need to give myself,
To surrender myself into your hands.
Without reserve and with boundless confidence
For you are my Father. Amen.*

For John, the actual content of God's Will was revealed ultimately and definitively by Jesus Christ, the Incarnation of a God who is love (1 Jn 16). John took with maximal seriousness Jesus' declarations that "The Father and I are one" (Jn 10:30) and "Whoever sees me sees the Father" (Jn 14:9). Jesus and His teaching were for John the Way and Will of God to which the Christian was called to be trustfully obedient. Jesus' New Commandment to "love one another as I have loved you" (Jn 13:34) was for John Leary not a spiritual platitude to be set aside when adherence to it became difficult. It was a moral imperative for any person who believed Jesus to be who the Gospel said He was, namely, the Messiah of Israel, the Savior of the world, the Word made flesh.

What was equally important for John was that, since Jesus' Way was the Will of God and not just another piece of human speculation about the will of God, failure to choose according to it was de facto a choice for something other than God. This choice required explicit repentance. John repented much in the years I knew him, because he intuited that spiritual disintegration would follow, if he obstinately persisted in what he knew to be unChrist-like thoughts, words or deeds. He was aware that the refusal to acknowledge that an evil had been done would eventually result in calling evil good. He knew that an unnamed sin perpetuated itself indefinitely. We often joked about the fact, that the difference between cultural nurturing and Christ's revelation of the Will of God, was so stark, that the Christian life often seemed like a life of repentance. Yet, the only choices available were to follow the way of God revealed by Jesus, and repent if one did not, or to waste one's life plodding on the treadmill of moral deception, where evil is chosen to conquer evil. For John, what appeared good was not good—even if he "benefited" from it—if it was not in conformity with God's will as revealed by Jesus Christ. The John Leary who actually existed and whom people rightly remember for his goodness was not "the boy innocent" within a corrupt and corrupting world. This very good person rightly remembered was a human being of choice and repentance, of commitment and recommitment.

All his spiritual efforts, and there were many, were not however primarily focused on himself, on his own righteousness, on his own salvation, etc. His life was intensely ordered toward others. The prayers, the choices, the daily Masses and Communions, the repentance, the study, the retreats, etc., had one aim, namely, to make possible the deeds of Christ-like love, mercy, service and kindness here and now, in the particular concrete moment. John believed he could not genuinely serve people except by serving them in the way God revealed they should be served in the person of Jesus. But, in the world in which we actually live, such Christ-like love can only be given at the price of a voluntary, invisible martyrdom. Yet for

John—and everyone who knew John knows this to be true—a cup of tea given in the spirit of Christ-like love was everything, but a banquet without that spirit was just passing time at the trough (1 Cor 13). Whatever John did in terms of service for the imprisoned, for the hungry, for the homeless, for the unborn, for the illiterate, for the unloved, for the deceived; whatever he did to oppose without exception homicide and enmity in all their forms, from abortion to nuclear weapons, from capital punishment to military training, was the fruit of an effort to en flesh, to embody, to obey the Will of God as revealed by Jesus. For him this was the Right Way to serve people, as well as, the Right Way to love God (1 Jn 20-21).

Now that John is dead, some may smugly ask, “What difference did it make in the end? Who cares today whether this guy tried to love as Christ loves? Who even remembers him beyond a few friends for whom he is an occasional thought?” “Face the facts,” smirks the self-proclaimed realist, “common sense and simple observation verify that John Leary’s daily and often painful struggle to choose to live in the Spirit of Christ-like Love has proved to be utterly irrelevant, utopian and devoid of any notable visible consequences. The self-reverential realist then points out those people who are “making a difference in this world” and who are not allowing the Will of God as revealed by Jesus to interfere with the successful implementation of their projects, programs and agendas.

John was of course aware of this perception of existence, this criticism of the Gospel. He rejected it as being without intellectual merit, spiritual meaning or hope. It was the shallow, self-absolving voice of the sin of success, where success is procured by giving it a priority over fidelity to the Will of God. For John, success outside the Will of God as revealed by Jesus was failure and failure within the Will of God was success. Good Friday and Easter Sunday were the great witnesses to this truth, as well as, the great warning to those who were not going to allow their agendas to get bogged down by the un-realisms of God’s Will. John did not choose the Way of Christ because he did not know of any other options, nor did he chose it in ignorance of the objections raised against it. He chose it because there is only one Source of reality and one reality. Therefore, what is God’s Will can never be unrealistic, impractical or without temporally and eternally significant good consequences—and Jesus revealed that Will.

“Icon” is the Greek word for image. A Christ-like icon is God’s power and love in history because it invites people to a Christ-like life, which is God’s power and love in history. When therefore one looks at John Timothy Leary, a twenty-four year old icon of the invisible Spirit of Jesus Christ, one sees the Truth of the Gospel proclaimed to others with love and the choice of the Gospel offered to others with supreme kindness. Through Jesus, John knew the Heart of God, the human heart and the heart of what matters:

Time is short. Eternity is long.
Love as Christ loves,
all else is dust in time and in eternity,
for the true God is love.

Funeral Liturgy for John Timothy Leary, September 4, 1982
Homilist: Rev. Emmanuel Charles McCarthy

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