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John Byrne, gentle cattle farmer

John Byrne, a hard-working farmer all his life, who learned from St Josemaría how to find God in his everyday tasks, died recently. A memorial Mass for the repose of his soul will be celebrated on Saturday 12 December.

12/10/2020

On the morning of 30 October last, just before he died, John Byrne said to his family members who were accompanying him, more mouthed

than spoken, “Rosary, Rosary...”. So they said the Rosary out loud beside him. He passed away shortly after that Rosary, with the words of the Hail Mary still sounding in his ears. John was an associate member of Opus Dei who had committed himself from a young age to strive to bring Christ into the midst of today’s society, following the teachings of St Josemaría Escrivá. A memorial Mass will be celebrated for the repose of his soul in the parish church of Our Lady Queen of Peace, Merrion Road, Dublin on Saturday 12 December at noon and will be live streamed ([link here](#)) as attendance is limited to 100. The Mass always played a key part in John’s daily life, as did time spent in personal prayer.

John was a hard-working farmer all his life, with exquisite manners in dealing with all whom he met, whatever their station in life or age. “A great gentleman” was the

spontaneous description of many who knew him. He was quiet, unassuming and shy, or appeared to be shy. But he was not shy, if shyness is a kind of timidity. He could not be described as persuasive, if persuasiveness is something that has to be accompanied by words and arguments. But he had a capacity to get people to do things which they might otherwise never have thought of doing. That capacity flowed directly out of his transparent goodness, his sincerity and a truly noble innocence which was evident to all who met him.

It was his cousin Liam Searson, a married member of Opus Dei, who introduced John to the writings of St Josemaría at the Harrow Study Centre, a club for young men in the Ranelagh district of Dublin. John was then 25 years of age. He died two months short of his 80th birthday.

Educated at Belvedere College, he was a faithful alumnus and, every year up until his last illness, attended the annual reunion of his class. Last year, he contacted the organisers to apologise for not being able to attend. They were greatly distressed to hear of the serious incurable and degenerative condition with which he had been diagnosed, as everyone was very fond of him.

When he finished secondary school, although well qualified academically, John did not go to university, which would have been normal for boys from his school, but instead decided to go to work in the livestock farming business which his father had built up after moving from Northern Ireland to County Dublin near the village of Finglas. It was hard, demanding work, travelling to cattle fairs in the West of Ireland, buying new stock, settling them on new pastures, caring for them through

good weather and bad, and then selling them on through the cattle marts for processing in the country's thriving international meat industry. This meant hard work, with early mornings and long days.

This was the highly demanding and competitive world in which John sought to live his contemplative life and be an apostle in the spirit he had learned from St. Josemaría. With his quiet personality, he found it difficult at first to engage with people on topics of faith and the practice of that faith. But he soon overcame those difficulties and, at the end of his life, had made friends with many, many people all over the country, all of whom held him in the highest regard and had enormous affection for this gentle cattle farmer.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the work of Opus Dei in Ireland was expanding rapidly, requiring new houses to

provide Christian formation to increasing numbers of people. John became one of the stalwarts in fund-raising activities. One of the main projects to which he dedicated time and effort was the development of Lismullin Conference Centre, beside the Hill of Tara in County Meath.

When this state-of-the-art conference facility opened at the turn of the millennium, the Lismullin Institute sought “champions” for the different categories of activities which could take place there. John initiated and spearheaded a project which became a landmark annual event, namely the Lismullin Farmers’ Seminar, which would study and debate multiple social and work-related themes touching on the lives of all working in the farming community.

Farmers from all over Ireland attended these seminars, and a visit to the Lismullin website provides an

idea of just how comprehensive and inclusive they were. For the past 20 years, each seminar consisted of several lectures on the chosen topic, with contributions from working farmers, farming journalists, and academics. The former vice-president of the European Parliament and now Ireland's EU Commissioner, Mairead McGuinness, used to joke that when John asked you for something, you could not refuse. She was a regular contributor to these seminars, despite her very busy schedule.

John's gentleness attracted everyone who knew him. Members and cooperators of the Work always witnessed how he embodied the spirit of Opus Dei perfectly in his work environment, on the farms in Finglas and Oldcastle, and in his personal apostolate with his colleagues. In the last year, John was appointed Honorary President of the

local branch of the Irish Farmers' Association, in recognition of his work on behalf of farmers.

In the last year and a half of his life, conscious of his failing health, John intensified his contact with his friends. He wrote to many of them by hand to say goodbye, as well as constantly using his small, Nokia cell phone until the day before he died, with one-minute calls often coming to the point, with that kindness that characterized him.

Working until a few months before he died, John was faithful to his vocation to the end, completing a life replete with good works. He made no complaints, was available for whatever was asked of him, with a gentle smile on his face. As is said in Ireland on the passing of a soul to eternity, *Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam* – may his soul be by God's side.

Michael Kirke

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