New Blackfriars

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In Memoriam: John Orme Mills OP[1]

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John's gospel gives a dramatic account of the Resurrection. It is not the clinical resuscitation of a corpse. It is Christ's spectacular victory over death and hatred. He bursts through the locked doors of the room where the disciples are hiding in fear. He is *Christus Victor* who batters down the doors of hell, who crushes evil and sets us free.

Today we pray that our much beloved brother John may share in that great triumph. John himself was not averse to a bit of drama, and this was surely one reason for his attraction to the faith. His own life had its dramas. During the war, when he was a child in Surbiton, he survived two bombs dropping on his home. Perhaps the greatest drama of his life was his time in Oxford. He came up to Balliol in 1951 having won the prestigious Brackenbury Scholarship. His tutors, Richard Southern and Christopher Hill, had the highest expectations of him. He was expected to gain a brilliant first and have a distinguished career as an historian. Then he was laid low by his first attack of epilepsy, which led to a nervous breakdown. His hopes were crushed.

For the next decade John was a man looking for a life. He free-lanced as a journalist; he hated to be reminded that he even wrote for *Titbits*. He had an editorial job with the Building Equipment News. But when he heard a colleague, who was the secretary of the National Secular Society, laying into Catholicism, he became interested. John was always drawn to the underdog. On a visit to the Abbey of Solesmes, he was touched by the tender gesture of one old monk carefully pouring a glass for another. He began to be fascinated by the most exciting drama of them all, the story that makes sense of everything, Christ's victory over sin and death, which we pray he now shares.

Of course, John's life continued to be marked with moments of excitement. Life with him was never dull! In February 1994, the *Daily Express* reported a typical incident. He was travelling by

[1] John Orme Mills OP died in Cambridge on 6 December 2010: as well as editing this journal 1983–91, he edited *Sociology and Theology: Alliance and Conflict*, with David Martin and W.S.F. Pickering (1980, reprinted 2003); and *Justice, Peace and Dominicans 1216–2001* (2001).

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train to Oxford for a funeral, and the train stopped, as usual, a few hundred yards from the station. Patience was never John's strongest suit, and so he stormed out of the train, proclaiming that he had a very important engagement and began walking up the track to the station. Then a workman ordered him to get into the driver's cabin, in which he arrived rather sheepishly. He was almost prosecuted by the police but, the *Daily Express* reported, they forgave him, as everyone always did. The occasional dramas of John's life brought anxiety and amusement to his brethren, but in the end he always laughed too, because John knew, deep down, that the only true drama is Christ's victory in the Resurrection.

'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven.' John was an immensely compassionate person, deeply touched by other people's sufferings and failures, full of mercy. He claimed to have learned this from his mother, who wept when she heard of the bombing of Nagasaki.

John was compassionate, one might say, almost to the point of folly. If there was a beggar at the door, he would give away everything that he had, and even things that he didn't have. Sometimes he had to be protected from exploitation by the merciless. Perhaps his happiest time was when he was a much loved Prior in Newcastle (1998–2001) in daily touch with the sufferings of the poor. Maybe even his folly was Christlike, the extravagant, holy folly of Christ who did not 'not count equality with God a thing to be grasped but took the form of a servant.' (Phil. 2.6)

Once John had been bowled over by the true drama of every human life, Christ's Easter victory, then of course he simply *had* to communicate it to others. And so it wasn't surprising that he applied to join the Order of Preachers in 1970, aged forty. There was some hesitation in accepting him. Some people thought that he was too old to begin a completely new way of life. But John was always young of heart.

He passionately wished to share the good news of Christ's triumph by any means. He was the first person to be appointed the Order's Promoter of the Means of Social Communication. In 1978, he moved to Rome and tried to help the Order preach through the new technologies. Typically, he did not even have his own private telephone, and we had several surreal conversations as he shouted down from a phone in a corridor of S Sabina, competing with other conversations on a shared line. He founded the Dominican Centre for the Media, and was president of Multimedia International.

He was brought back to England in 1983 to edit *New Blackfriars*. He brought to it his passion for clarity. The Word of God must be communicated through precise, lively words. He was very demanding with his authors, over three hundred of them in his time as editor, vigorously pruning and rewriting their articles, which did not always

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please them. Typically, his final edition of *NB* in March 1991, was on the topic 'How does God speak to us?' This was his abiding concern, how does God speak to us now? How can we share God's life giving word? Being John, his time as editor was not always free of excitement. When I was chair of the Board, he used to storm into my room almost every month and hurl down a letter of resignation, until I suggested the name of a possible successor.

'Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord.' Through all John's ups and downs, the joy always shone through in the end. The Resurrection is the victory of God's joy. Maybe it was this joy that led him to love Meister Eckhart. Eckhart described God's joy as being like the exuberance of a horse galloping around a field and kicking its heels for joy. John was named President of the Eckhart Society in 2000, and his last project was a book on his beloved master.

God enjoys us, and in God's grace we enjoy each other. John enjoyed his friends as we enjoyed him, which is why he had so many. I received an email last night from one of his close friends, our Dominican brother Christoph, the Cardinal Archbishop of Vienna. He wrote: 'Yes, he was – and is and remains – a very good friend. At a certain time in my life he played an important role through the wise advice he gave me and through the support I received from him in difficult years. Now I hope he is helping from "the other side", being at home with the Lord.'

Let us pray that John now be caught up fully into Christ's victory over sin and death, and that he enters the joy of his God where we hope one day to join him.

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