

8 April

Fr JOHN BERRELL

12 August 1924 – 8 April 1994



There was one week in 1974 which seems to have marked John Berrell forever. He could not handle the strike at the seminary that year and ‘though he was not bitter, he was deeply hurt’ (Robert Althaan).

He was born and educated in South Africa (St Aidan’s). After a BA at Rhodes he taught at his old school before joining the novitiate in 1947. Ordained in 1956, he did four years of anthropology at Campion Hall, Oxford before going to Rhodesia in 1962. He continued his studies in this subject while at the university (URN then) and at Musami where he set himself up at Maramba.

Tony Watsham tells us he was interested in music at Heythrop and started to learn to play the piano but did not keep it up. ‘This was typical of much that he did.’ Setting out for Maramba, ‘he took a medical kit, needles for suturing wounds, endless tablets and a gun for game – but he did not finish his dissertation.’

Back in town he turned his attention to setting up a language school for new missionaries and the present writers was one who benefitted from it. He had a beautiful clear speaking voice and French Fr Roland Pichon listened to his discourses on the language with headphones, not so much to learn Shona but to learn English. Scholastic Paul Rigby, who later left, deeply appreciated his teaching on the customs and traditions of the Shona people. At Prestage House he liked to entertain and had waiters dress immaculately in white with a mauve fez. Meals were served in subdued lighting such that Watsham could not see what he was eating.

‘He was a lonely man and, in many ways, unfulfilled’. ‘He was serene and unflappable’ (Ralph Eastwell). Bill Broderick remembered ‘the polish, style and culture of John.’ In a novitiate sermon, he quoted Ovid, ‘*video meliora proboque, deteriora sequor*’ rather than St Paul, ‘when I want to do what is good, evil is close at hand.’ ‘John brought cultural elegance to the dour drab world of scholastic philosophy.’ It seems so long ago when ‘option for the poor’ was not on our tongue and Martin Darcy was ‘the pride of the English Province’ furnishing Campion Hall with rare works of art.

Robert Althaan was at the seminary when Berrell was rector and appreciated his hospitality and 'helping us unwind' John was 'a great promoter of the Salisbury Theological Club which helped those in pastoral ministry to reflect theologically on their experience'. He was anxious about the spiritual life of the seminarians and wanted an African priest to be spiritual father. He got Alexio Muchabaiwa. He also fostered links with the university so that seminarians received a diploma from their studies.

The crisis in 1974 was sparked by the dismissal of a deacon for 'studied rudeness' (Althaan) to a member of staff. All the seminarians, except four from Bulawayo or Botswana, refused to attend classes. Attempts to settle the issue that week failed and the seminary was closed. Berrell offered to resign but the bishops insisted he carry on when the seminary reopened. He did so but it was a most difficult task and after a while he was allowed to withdraw and the seminary was handed to the bishops' conference.

Berrell returned to South Africa where he became chaplain to Wits and the Rand universities and later worked in Yeoville parish. In 1990, he had a stroke and died peacefully in Nazareth Nursing home four years later.