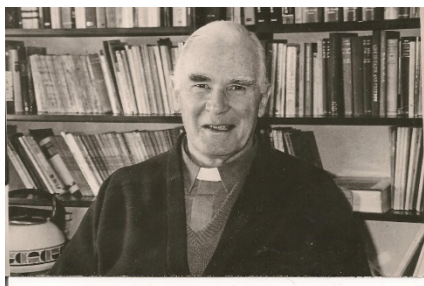


June 20

Fr JOHN DOVE

22 July 1922 - 20 June 2014



Why was John Dove mentioned on the national news for several days after his death and why did President Mugabe come to his funeral? Fr Dove did many things in his 91 years but the one that everyone remembers was the founding of Silveira House as a Development Education Centre in 1964. It was a quiet event. There was no plan, no money, no furniture and no staff. It was basically just

him, a spacious building and two dogs. Since his arrival in the country three years before he had observed with growing anger the way African people were treated in their own country. He came from England and from the very class of people who had set up and were now running the colony of Southern Rhodesia in their own interest. It did not take him long to realise the injustice of the situation and the ‘wounded dignity’ (his phrase) of the people. He became involved in discussion groups in the urban areas and with the active support of the Jesuit superior, Terence Corrigan, moved on to organise residential seminars in which the issues could at least be discussed. These led to training courses in ‘leadership’ in a variety of areas: civics (a euphemism for politics), trade unions, agricultural cooperatives, youth clubs, nutrition awareness, crafts and others. Corrigan made the imaginative decision to hand over a newly built custom-made novitiate to John to start a completely new work which had no precedent, except perhaps Plater Hall in the UK. It was trust writ large.

Silveira House discovered its mission over time. The Jesuit gathering in Rome for the worldwide society which lay down ‘the promotion of justice as an integral part of the service of faith’ was ten years in the future when he started. At the 50th anniversary celebrations in 2014 just after John’s death, one of the pioneers, Chris Kabasa, gave an account of the blundering way things sometimes happened. ‘Chris’, Fr Dove said, ‘the people at Rota want a farming cooperative. Can you go and help them start one?’ ‘But I know nothing of farming and even less about cooperatives!’ ‘I am sure you will manage’, said John. And so a highly successful agriculture scheme started. This writer worked with John Dove for twelve years and, among Jesuits, would probably be considered one who knew him well. But the strange thing is I never really knew him. He was a private person and though he was charming, engaging and encouraging to those who worked with him, he never revealed much of what was turning over inside him. He did not appear to have doubts and when he made up his mind about something he could be obstinate.

He was born in Burma but grew up in England. He went to a ‘public school’, Shrewsbury, which meant that from an early age he was imbued with the idea that he was part of a ‘ruling class’ entitled to lead. ‘Leadership’ means many things and in his case his army training meant that he could size up a situation and work out a response. While he may have had no plan when he first came to Silveira he knew that it would not be long before he had one. The Rhodesian authorities who saw what he was doing might have been irritated but they left him

alone. Maybe they felt he would be a little hot to handle. Certainly some Jesuit superiors found him so! But all now recognise that he was a true 'original,' as one wrote at the time of his death, who initiated a unique work that made a significant mark in the country.

Any account of John Dove has to include the friendship of forty years between him and John Bradburne, the poet 'mystic' and servant of the people with leprosy at Mutemwa, Mutoko. Two more opposite characters it is hard to imagine but they journeyed together on different paths, encouraging and guiding one another.