

NOT FORGOTTEN: PR. JOHN R. COCHRAN (1937-2021)

BY PR. DAN BILES

Prolific Roman Catholic scholar George Weigel has recently published a new book: Not Forgotten. It is a collection of remembrances of what Weigel calls “a diverse set of characters, most of them admirable.” Where I asked to name my choice of a person to remember, I would include Pr. John Robert Cochran: Lutheran minister, certainly admirable, one of the Church’s great inner-city pastors.

Our relationship goes back almost fifty years, to a meeting in August of 1973 of what in those days in our Lutheran Church was called the “Church Vocations Committee.” It guided persons seeking ordination. I was entering my final semester at Texas Lutheran College. Sitting three persons to my right at the table was a pastor in clerics (he rarely wore anything else.) black hair, black-rimmed glasses, with a cigarette in hand. He introduced himself simply as “Pastor John Cochran.” In the course of conversation he mentioned that he was sending a young man from his church to Texas Lutheran College. Talk about culture shock: from the streets of South Philadelphia to rural 1970s Texas. John asked if I would help him with getting oriented to college or studies or anything else that he might need.

The second time we met was a year later: October 1974, my first semester at Gettysburg Seminary. The Vocations Committee came to interview us and had dinner with all the candidates from our synod. John and I wound up sitting together. At one point in the course of dinner he turned to me and said, “We are getting the shit kicked out of us in inner-city ministry.” I thought to myself, “This guy sounds like he knows what he is talking about.” So I asked John: “What should I focus on in my studies here? Pastoral Counseling? Christian Education? Church and Society?”

John answered, “None of those things. Your job here is to become a good student of the Bible. People in the parish will expect that of you. You need to become a good student of Church history. A good student of systematic theology. Focus on making a good foundation in those skills. If you have half a brain, you can figure out the rest in the parish. But if you don’t lay a good foundation here in seminary, it is hard to make that up later. (1)

And so our relationship began. John became one of my mentors in ministry, a role model to emulate. I often sought him out for advice on situations in the parish. He was always gracious with his time. Such as in June of 1978, when I was about to begin ministry at my first parish. The immense responsibility of being the pastor of a parish suddenly seemed daunting to me. So I asked John for advice on getting started in a church. We went on a walk of a half-hour, during which John talked about priorities in ministry, rooting a church in its parish community, making Word and Sacrament the center of a congregation’s life, and more.

John Robert Cochran was born in Altoona, Pennsylvania in 1937. He went to Gettysburg College and then the Lutheran Seminary in Gettysburg. During those years he was practically a one-person liturgical reform movement. Graduating in 1962, John’s first call was to a parish in Gallitzin, PA.

Sometime during those years John began a relationship with St. Augustine House, Oxford, Michigan. St. Augustine House is a monastic community shaped by the Rule of St. Benedict. It is rooted in the Lutheran tradition, understood as a movement within and for the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church, yet committed to ecumenical understanding and cooperation. For John, the community would become a place of refreshment and renewal during the hectic years of parish ministry, and his home in retirement. He made regular retreats every year, bringing with him youth from his parish or other pastors whom he introduced to monastic life.(2)

In 1966 Pr. Robert Neumeyer, then Director of Center City Lutheran Parish, a coalition of congregations in Philadelphia, sought Pr. Cochran to become pastor of Emmanuel Lutheran Church in South Philadelphia. After several conversations, much prayer, and not a little trepidation, John agreed to accept the call. What ensued over the next twenty years was one of the most vibrant, effective inner-city ministries in the Church's history.

Emmanuel Lutheran Church was located at 4th & Carpenter Streets, in the midst of two tall buildings known as "the projects," or derisively as "the vertical ghettos." The area exhibited all the problems of urban decline in the turbulent Sixties: poverty, family dissolution, crime, violence, drugs, and so on. For John, coming from his country-Pennsylvania background and first call, it was intimidating to say the least.(3)

Emmanuel Church was what people called a "White Flight" congregation. The neighborhood had been inhabited by German immigrants for many generations. Now, it was changing. The great migration of southern Blacks to the northern cities in the first half of the 20th Century changed Emmanuel's neighborhood. As the neighborhood became more populated by Blacks, Whites moved out to the suburbs. But, they still came back into the city to their church on Sundays. German-language services were still held, along with English services. But Emmanuel was, like so many churches in the city, declining. Many saw no future for the church, save eventual death and closure.

Beginning his ministry at Emmanuel, the primary challenge was to re-root the congregation in its neighborhood (parish). Renewing the church meant the congregation had to reflect the population of the parish racially, ethnically, socially. While the services in German continued to be held, the focus in ministry was inviting the residents of the community into life of the Church and fellowship with Jesus. The pastor lived in then neighborhood instead of dropping in on Sundays and other occasions from a comfortable life in suburbia. He was known in the neighborhood and knew the people of the area, much like St. John describes in his Gospel, chapter 10. Increasingly members of the congregation were residents of the parish. (4)

At the center of everything was Word & Sacrament ministry: the invitation to come to Christ in Baptism and the Eucharist, living under God's Word, making Christ known in deeds of love and witness in the daily lives of people in the neighborhood. The ministry of the congregation incarnated the love of God in Christ for the parish. The theologian Paul Tillich characterized Lutheranism as Catholic in substance and Protestant in principle, what today is called "Evangelical Catholic." It is catholic: founded on the tradition of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church as received in Scripture, Creed, and Confession. Its focus was evangelical: the proclamation of the Gospel in Word and Sacrament that guided everything the congregation did.

Progress at first was slow. There was resistance to welcoming strangers from the neighborhood into the church. John would meet people during the week on the streets, get to know them, and invited them to church. When Sunday came and they were not there, John would ask what happened. "We came, but the doors were locked." John learned the ushers had the habit of locking the doors once all the members of the church were in, so strangers would not be able to enter. The next Sunday John excused himself before the opening hymn, went to the church entrance, and unlocked the doors. "We're keeping the doors open," he announced to the congregation. Sure enough, they were never locked at services again.

A year passed. Increasingly John felt he was not the right pastor for the job. Doubts plagued him. The rampant violence of the neighborhood intimidated him. John questioned whether to stay or move.

Then one day a young boy, around age 12, walked into John's office. His name was Isaac – "Ike," as he was known in the neighborhood. "I hear you are thinking of leaving us," he said. "Is it true?"

"Yes," said John. "It is true."

“Well, don’t,” answered Isaac. “Don’t leave. Stay here. Because, if you stay, I can get out of here.” At twelve years old, Ike knew he was in a bad place. He did not want to grow up and become like so many other people he saw in the area: jobless, in jail, addicted, trapped in poverty, or just dead in the streets.

It was an Isaiah 11.6 moment: “And a little child shall lead them.” God was speaking to John through that young boy. John stayed, never looked back, and with his doubts behind him the ministry took off. Emmanuel Lutheran Church became a center of activity in South Philadelphia. The key to the ministry was work with children and youth: since the neighborhood lacked the organizations and resources for people in the suburbs, the church became the place where such events and services took place: after-school programs to help students with their education, youth activities, community aid programs, and more.

A major program every year was “Summer Camp,” a weekday program to engage youth in healthy activities and Christian education and away from the destructive traps of the neighborhood: crime, drugs, gangs, etc. It was a means of evangelism in the neighborhood, inviting people into the community of the Church and the better life Christ offers all who come to Him.

And always at the center of ministry, both a basis and goal, was the congregation gathered for Word and Sacrament, being fed in Christ and inviting others to come to the Table of the Lord. Everything the church did was regulated by this evangelical focus of ministry. It also kept the church from being co-opted by groups whose agenda was not rooted in the Gospel. Once a local chapter of the Black Panthers Party approached John to let them use some space in the church for their programs and offices. John refused. “How many people have you baptized?” was his reply.

In response the Black Panthers sought to discredit John and Emmanuel Church in the neighborhood. They accused them of not caring for the poor, for justice, or food for the needy. John’s response was to up the ante: He and his staff distributed flyers inviting people to come to the entrance of the church on a certain day when, he said, he would have “bread for the world.” People came, if only from curiosity, to see what would happen. At the designated hour, John led an open-air Mass from the front door of the church, inviting people to be baptized and come to the Lord’s Table to be fed with the bread of life Jesus Christ.

As the ministry at Emmanuel’s grew, John partnered with other pastors working in urban settings. He was part of an association of inner-city pastors; it included Richard Neuhaus, then doing his own great ministry at St. John Lutheran Church in Brooklyn. Those meetings often included evening prayer and dinner at Richard’s home, though, knowing how generously the bourbon flowed at such gatherings, John would always come late. (His own drink of choice was a dry martini.)

John also was involved in the liturgical reforms going on in the Church in the 60s and 70s. He was part of a group that drafted the texts for the Occasional Services companion book to the Lutheran Book of Worship. The group included Frank Senn, Leonard Klein, and other leaders in liturgical reform.

To do the demanding work of parish ministry at Emmanuel, John discerned that he was called to a life of celibacy.⁽⁵⁾ He never married. The children of his parish became his kids. He watched out for them, guided them, helped them grow into responsible adults. Many of them he sent off to college. At least three of the children he baptized grew up to play in the NBA. It is accurate to say his ministry saved many a young man or woman, enabling them to wear business clothes instead of orange jump suits.

(And Ike? Well, he did grow up and leave the neighborhood. John helped him get into college. It was me whom John asked to help Ike get through his first semester at Texas Lutheran College. He graduated and began a career that led to managing an insurance agency in a suburb of West Philadelphia.)

After twenty-one years serving in Philadelphia, John discerned a call to move to Trinity Lutheran Church on Pittsburgh's North Side. It was located within walking distance of the stadiums where the Pirates and Steelers play. The church itself was a congregation in decline, averaging only fifteen people at Sunday worship. But John saw the neighborhood, a mix of Whites, Hispanics, and Blacks, fertile ground for ministry.

John came to Trinity Church in November of 1987. Moving some of his belongings into the church, a young boy passing by asked who he was. "I'm Pastor Cochran. I am the new pastor of this church. Do you know what a pastor is?" The boy answered no, and so the conversation began, a conversation which inevitably led to talking about Jesus and the life of the Church gathered in His name. The boy became one of the first members of Trinity Church during John's ministry.

John brought the same principles and activity to Pittsburgh that he had done in Philadelphia: A robust worship life centered in Word and Sacrament, active in caring for people in the parish. And soon the ministry at Trinity grew. Program and groups used the church to serve people's needs and gather for education and fellowship. John once estimated that every week up to a thousand people walked through the doors of Trinity Church for one reason or another.

As always, there was resistance. Not everyone welcomed the ministry at Trinity Church or its pastor with open arms. "Pastor, get off the street and go back to your church, where you belong," John was told off one day, by two people. One was a drug pusher. The other was a cop. John, of course, ignored them both and kept moving on with the ministry to that parish.

John's pastoral work was multi-faceted, far more than can be recounted in a short essay such as this. But one strong emphasis was his work with men, especially teens and young adults, helping them to find a better life than the destructive paths of the city streets.

Once John and I got into a discussion on family life in his parish. He told me a story. A youth from his church came to John and asked him for a ride. "I need to go see my father about something. Can you help me?" John agreed. They drove to another part of town, to a bar the youth knew where his father would be. They parked. The teenager went in to see his father. Sure enough, he was there.

A few minutes later the youth came out and got in the car. Quietly he said, "Let's go." They drove off in silence. After a few minutes, John asked, "Did your visit with your father go well?" The young man said, "I hate him. Just I hate him. When he lived with us, he beat up on my mom. Then he dumped us. Now he just hangs out in that bar."

That, John told me, is an all-too-often occurrence in his parish. And in too many places in our country. It is the erosion of marriage and family, especially fathers disengaged from the life of their children.

My daughter and son both worked in John's summer program for children. I went to see my son after he had been there a few weeks. We talked about what he was experiencing, what he was seeing. At one point he said to me, "You know, no one here has a father. There are moms with three or four kids by different men, but no one has a father in the home."

In my lifetime, in many parts of this country, the calling and place of fathers in the home has simply disappeared. We've just destroyed it. The causes are many: Racism – personal and institutional – that isolates races and ethnic groups from participation in the wider society. Misguided government programs that, whatever their intentions, fostered dependency and destroyed the family structure. Bad choices by individuals (What John called "stinkin' thinkin'). A secular philosophy of relativism that promotes "do your own thing," "different

strokes for different folks.” That is a comfortable outlook for upper-class liberal elites. But it is devastating on the poor. As it is said, “The sexual revolution is a luxury of the wealthy, paid for by the poor.”

The causes, as I said, are many. (I saw the same situation of disengaged fathers when I was teaching in Russia, but for entirely different causes. So, it is not a matter unique to a race or ethnic group.) And what is the effect of this? Absent the presence of a father and other older men to guide teens into adulthood, to teach them how to be men, how to channel the natural male aggressiveness into socially productive ends – marriage, family, work, community service – the young men try to prove their manhood by turning violent on other men and predatory on women. The gang becomes the substitute for a genuine father. And so they grow into adulthood, but deprived of all that makes life meaningful and healthy for men: Meaningful work, the love of a wife, and the respect of one’s children. The end of the road for many is death in the streets. Or wearing an orange jumpsuit for long stretches of their life.(6) (7)

In this context John ministered to help boys and men find the way of life that offers a better life than the ways of the world: Christ. For many John became their father-figure. In his teaching – both in his church and his classes in local prisons – John sought to turn them from the “stinkin’ thinkin’” they’d learned out in the streets to healthy ends. It is not enough to become a Christian; one must learn to think with the mind of Christ (Philippians 2.5).

John’s home was also a part of the ministry. At any time up to a half-dozen men or women resided in his house. Some were on parole from prison, or escaping a bad situation in their own homes, temporarily unemployed, or other reasons. In John’s house they learned a healthy way of life. John insisted they gather for a common meal every day. He told me, “These guys come from homes where the family never gathers for a meal. Everyone just does their own thing. I want to change that. I want them to see the importance of eating together. There is for Christians a connection between the table at which the family gathers during the week and the Table of the Lord at which the Church gathers each Lord’s Day.”

We saw each other frequently over the years, even though we worked hundreds of miles apart. For some twenty-plus years John preached at one of our mid-week services in Lent. He always brought some kids from his church with him, so they could see what life outside of the city is like. Coming from row-home neighborhoods, they were surprised by suburban housing developments with their big yards and homes separated by such distances. Said one youth once, “What’s the matter with those people? Don’t they like each other?” And in a turn-around, I would do trips with my parish youth to John’s parish, so they could see what inner-city life was like.

John retired from Trinity Church in the first decade of this century to permanent residence at St. Augustine House. But not from ministry. He was very active in expanding St. Augustine House’s ministry, eventually becoming the Prior of the community. The House became a retreat center for many groups. Every October it held a “homecoming” weekend of worship, education, and fellowship. An ambitious effort to expand the physical facilities was successful accomplished.

In December, 2019 John was diagnosed with cancer. Treatment in the first half of 2020 put the cancer in remission. But in 2021 tests revealed the cancer had not only returned, but spread. In March his doctors advised that his options for treatment were few and probably would be ineffective. John returned to St. Augustine House under hospice care, where he died on Friday, 26 March. His body was interred in the monastery cemetery.

We had one last phone conversation, about two weeks before his death. He described his situation, concluding, “It is all in God’s hands. As it always has been.” And so John, in last words of Jesus, commended his spirit to God.

In the spirit of I Corinthians 15.58, John's life "abounded in the works of the Lord." And surely he has God's promise in the same verse: they have not been done in vain. Revelation 14.13: Blessed indeed are those who die in the Lord and now rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them, even as John has faced our last enemy on the path to life eternal, now a member of that "great cloud of witnesses" whose faith and witness is an encouragement to us in our journey of faith. (Hebrews 12).

-----FOOTNOTES-----

- (1) Sadly, the failure to follow John's wisdom is no small reason for the confusions in mission that afflict the Church today. I once asked the registrar of a Lutheran seminary how long she had been at the seminary. She replied, "25 years." I suggested she write an article on her observations on seminary life over the quarter-century of her service. "Not a chance," she replied. "They don't want to hear what I have to say."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Students don't want to be students," was her quick reply. "They want to be social workers, community change activists, social justice advocates. But they don't want to do the serious work of theology, biblical study, and Church history. I can tell by the courses they register for."
- (2) See www.staugustineshouse.org for more information about the life of this monastic community, including a video about the monastery narrated by John.
- (3) Eventually, when John became Director of CCLP, he would seek out pastors from a rural background. "They have less biases and are more open to learning in an urban context than people who have lived in the city all their lives. The city is all new to them. Or, as he liked to say, "When I go looking for a pastor to come to the city, I look for cowshit on their boots."
- (4) The principles of parish ministry were published as an article, *The Parish as Place*, by the LCA's Division for Ministry in North America in 1987. John participated in its development and publication.
- (5) John was continually disappointed that the Lutheran Church, in all its discussions about ministry, never considered the importance of the calling to celibacy as an option for some pastors.
- (6) John always took a dim view of efforts of "inclusive language" to abolish masculine pronouns or "Father" in the name of God. Not only were such efforts contrived and a departure from orthodox language for God (and necessary for Trinitarian theology). It was also irrelevant to the daily lives of people in the parish. What people in his parish needed most of all was to know God is their true Father, Who does not abuse or abandon His children, but shows His love for them in the sacrificial love of His Son, Jesus.
- (7) See Charles Murray's [Coming Apart](#), [Falling Behind](#), and Robert Putnam's [Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis](#) for more extensive discussion of these trends in our society.

