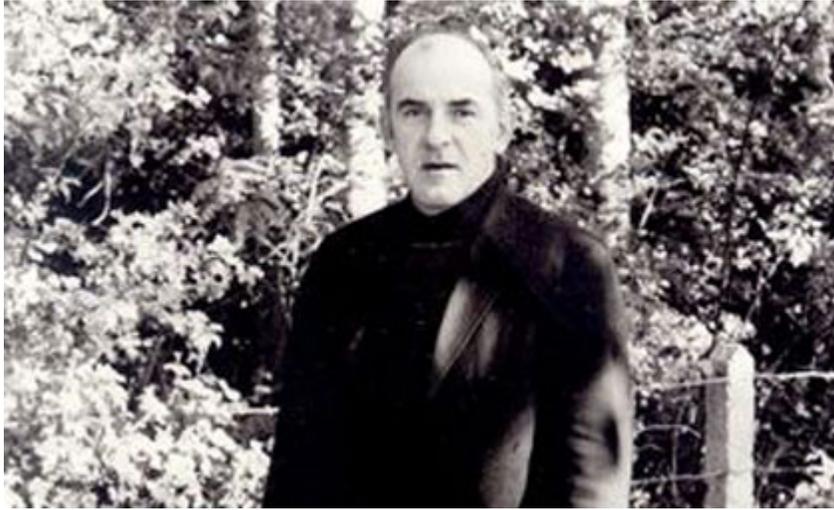


Father John

Michael Young, June 25, 2010



Father John Donohue is leaving Beirut after 40 years. (Courtesy of Lebanese without Frontiers)

Sometimes, not enough times, the big stories give way to little ones more meaningful. So unfortunate in its headlines, Lebanon has on occasion been fortunate between the lines. This brings us to the final departure this Sunday of John Donohue, who is returning to the United States.

For those who know John or dealt with him between the lines at St. Joseph University, where the Jesuit priest worked, his exit represents rather more than a routine recycling of personnel. Perhaps that's because he lived in Lebanon for over 40 years – arriving after the Jesuits were expelled by the Baath regime from Iraq in 1969. Perhaps, too, it's because he taught several generations of Lebanese, always in that quiet, erudite, worker-bee way that those from his order frequently exhibit – his terseness and self-deprecation never drifting into false modesty.

I first met John when, as a boy, I was taken to church every Saturday evening at the Capuchins in Hamra. He said mass in English, and I still recall how the ceremony was, to our relief, always swiftly dispatched and to the point. Long afterward, when Lebanon had entered and completed its cycle of wars, I came back to join the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies, and noticed that one of the publications I edited had a John Donohue on its board (his name was misspelled). We met, picked up the thread again, and thanks to John I later taught a course at St. Joseph.

You could be forgiven for not knowing that behind the self-effacing façade was a scholar with profound knowledge of Arab and Muslim history and culture. Fluent in Arabic, John wrote his doctoral thesis at Harvard on the Buyids, the Shia dynasty that ruled over most of modern-day Iraq and Iran during the 10th to 11th centuries. During the war years and

after, he prepared a socio-cultural chronology of the Arab Middle East for the Faculty of Letters at St. Joseph, and headed the CEMAM, the Centre d'Etudes pour le Monde Arabe Moderne.

John also taught in the department of translation and languages. He doubtless did a great deal else that I missed, but his last role was to head the Observatory of CIEL, the Centre Interculturel Euro-Libanais, where he regularly invited outside speakers. When I asked why he insisted on abandoning Beirut, he replied with a pun: "When the funding for CIEL wasn't renewed, I saw it as a sign from heaven that it was time to go."

I'm still not sure why John chose to leave; he was happy here, and his final days were a prolonged effort not to think too much about leaving. Old age is indeed a shipwreck, as Charles de Gaulle once put it, and John offered up something like that as an excuse to head back to his native New England, where he could benefit from better care, and in that way avoid becoming a burden to his brethren in Beirut. But the last time I looked, the sails were still taut and the backwind strong.

Spirituality is overrated, but it is still difficult to stomach the noisy genuflections of our homegrown clergymen, for whom the cassock is a checkbook and its black a profit margin. In all the years of conversation with John, he never bored me, or anyone else I'm absolutely certain, with mystical bromides. His religion was as religion should be: inwardly felt, tranquil and respectful of the non-belief of others. This surely confused those people used to taking their priests as they would an aged cheese – malodorous, liquefying, fermented.

Last year, John kindly jotted down two reminiscences for a website hosted by my wife that seeks to put together a collective Lebanese memory through personal accounts. The first was of his visit to Bcharre in the spring of 1970 to visit the Gibran Museum and get a better sense of the strange country he had moved to a few months earlier:

"The bus ride along the coast northwards was a joy. The sea with its shades of blue and green, then the olive groves of the Kura. It seemed all nature. Getting away from civilization, snaking around the mountain, looking down on the terra cotta roofs of isolated villages, soaking in the sun and the clear air. It was a delight to be away from city noises and fumes. Back to nature. Then as we wound down one slope into the valley, I could see we were approaching a flat one story edifice and I anxiously tried to read the sign mounted on the roof as we approached: 'The Mississippi Café'. What a let down. Gone was the image of pristine nature. Then I realized this is Lebanon. You are everywhere at once."

Now, 40 years later, that parentheses is about to close, for our misfortune. John cannot be everywhere at once. To merely issue a thank you really wouldn't do the trick. If Lebanon

is the sum of its parts (and not a few of us, alas, add nothing to the sum), then St. Joseph University, John's students and friends, and many others, will soon have a large void to fill, a void that none of us, I suspect, has any appetite to fill.