

OBITUARY

JOHN CURNOW

- Murray Horton
Manila

Father John Curnow died of a heart attack in July, aged 71. He was, of course, a CAFCA member and "Watchdog" subscriber. We extend our condolences to his family, colleagues, and his innumerable friends in Christchurch, throughout the country, and all around the world. But ours was only one of a huge number of groups, both national and international, that John enriched with his presence.

He was a driving force in the progressive wing of the Catholic Church, his most prominent position being executive secretary of the Commission for Evangelisation, Justice and Development. He was a leading figure in the Christchurch-based CCJD. Despite his manifold talents, his charisma and his towering intellect, he never sought to ascend into the Church hierarchy himself. For example, he was a good personal friend of one cardinal - but he never tried to exploit that, and indeed remained a simple priest all his life. His deliberate choice was to remain at the grassroots, to stay among the people, to be at one with the poor in both NZ and abroad.

As a high profile progressive priest he earned the undying enmity of the reactionaries in the Catholic Church, and was regularly attacked in the "Tablet." The attacks were always synchronised with conservative politicians, and usually concentrated on his ceaseless solidarity work for the Philippines. The charges usually included tired old libels that he was channelling the money of NZ Catholics to Filipino Communists.

John was involved in a whole range of progressive groups. He was one of the founders of Ploughshares, the Christchurch group of Catholic clergy and laity that has borne non-violent witness against the US base at Harewood, against NZ military spending, and against our involvement in the Gulf War. Ploughshares has worked closely with our affiliate, CDH, now ABC. Most recently it joined the July 4 Independence from America Day picket of the USIS.

John was involved in all the big issues. Through his Church connections, he networked with the Maori nationalist movement. He fought the good fight against apartheid, as did so many other progressive Catholics. It was good to see him at the 10th anniversary party of the Springbok Tour. He ensured that Church people were regularly exposed to progressive leaders, eg he was instrumental in getting both Owen Wilkes and David Robie to address a high-powered regional conference of religious. Both were inspired by the occasion.

He was never afraid to associate with radicals. When the PYM reunion was held in Christchurch in 1989, he attended and played a full part in the open forum that analysed the youth movement of the 60s and 70s. Last Easter he attended the world premiere of "Rebels in Retrospect", the documentary shot at that reunion.

But John's influence extended far beyond his homeland. He personified internationalism, travelling and working on every continent. In fact he died just after getting home from the Marshall Islands. It was Asia in general, and the Philippines specifically, that was his greatest love. He first came here in 1971 and saw for himself the shocking exploitation of the sugarworkers on the island of Negros. I will quote from the Filipino obituary for him, headed "Fr. John Curnow, A Friend of the Filipino People."

"A tireless solidarity worker, Fr. John became involved in Philippine matters through his many ecumenical involvements. As Executive Secretary of the New Zealand Catholic Commission for Evangelisation, Justice and Development, he became associated with NASSA, Task Force Detainees and a host of other Christian grassroots initiatives.

He was a founder of ACFOD (Asian Cultural Forum for Development) and the Asia Workers Links through which he established long-lasting friendships with Philippine development NGOs, people's organisations and workers' movements.

Fr. John's involvement in Philippine issues led to his participation in the Resource Centre for Philippine Concerns (RCPC), a communication and networking centre for Asia-Pacific. He pioneered in building Philippine support groups in New Zealand. He helped plan the Asian Regional Conference on Human Rights in the Philippines held in Tokyo in 1979. He was a founding member of the RCPC Advisory Board in 1981. He was also on the Planning and Steering Committee of the International Ecumenical Conference on the Philippines held in Stony Point, New York in 1983.

Fr. John's commitment to the Philippine cause was to culminate in the New Zealand Solidarity Conference on the Philippines, which he helped organise in Wellington in 1984. The conference was the first of its kind and served as a model for many national solidarity conferences on the Philippines in Europe, Asia and North America."

Essentially, he founded the Philippine Solidarity Network of Aotearoa. Current coordinator, Keith Locke, described John as his friend, inspiration and mentor. John continued to work with the Christchurch committee until his death.

Before I first came to the Philippines, in 1987, I went to see John, for his unparalleled expertise and knowledge of that country. Nor was his support merely of the moral variety - he was instrumental in securing funding for one of my trips here; and for the ABC's 1990 Touching the Bases Tour, which included Filipinos among the international delegates.

I am not a Catholic, churchgoer or believer of any stripe. Priests tend to get a hard time among our circle (ask my old friend, Dennis O'Connor). But John gave as good as he got, and we had a lot of fun together. He never missed a chance to have me on, and was singularly delighted when I told him that I was marrying a Filipino. "Ah, Murray, we'll make a Catholic out of you, yet" (it's very sad that he and Becky will now never meet).

It was appropriate that I should be in Manila, on the first day of my current sojourn, when I was told of his death. And the weather was appropriate, too; 80% of the city was under water in a monsoonal flood.

Being here meant that I had the unique privilege of being the only New Zealander among the 100 people who attended a memorial mass in his honour. Those attending represented a wide range of groups, and the major sectors of Filipino society - peasants, workers, religious, the poor. Very, very many were John's personal friends, and spoke of him in absolutely glowing terms. Tears flowed freely. I was invited to speak, and concluded with the following: "John, I will miss your wisdom, your sense of humour, and your much valued friendship. It is my ultimate mark of respect for you that your death has achieved the previously unthinkable - it has got me into a church. And you were the principal reason that I can stand here in the Philippines and say that I am proud to be a New Zealander."

The last time I saw John alive was when he came to my house for lunch, at the end of June. Ever the man of practical humility, he brought the food - soup made from tomatoes he had grown in the Presbytery garden where he lived. He was going away to the Marshalls and wouldn't get back until I was en route for Manila. Maybe we both sensed that this would be our last meeting. We talked at great length of the Philippines, the country we both love, and which has had such a marked influence on both our lives. It was the best possible way to conclude our friendship.

I finish with two quotes. From the Philippine Solidarity obituary, "He died with his boots on." And from the Manila memorial mass, "May we stand together to pursue the dreams of Fr. John in bringing about the society where true freedom, democracy and love prevail."