

# Brother John Francis Colbert

29 September 1926 - 8 September 2011

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## Eulogy by Brother James Devine



On September 4, 1964 I left the home of my youth in the Highbridge Section of the Bronx and traveled on the subway with my parents to Grand Central Station to board a Boston bound New Haven train with the instructions to get off at Route 128. After a tearful goodbye, I began the journey. As the train made its way up the coast line an acute sense of homesickness overtook me. Since my Dad and I were very close, I began to wonder what life would be like without his presence.

My wondering thoughts were put to rest when I stepped off the train at Route 128. The man walking toward me had the same body structure as my Dad, as well as the same smile and gait. He put his hand out (he had the same handshake as my father) and said, "Welcome, James, to the Novitiate. My name is Brother John Francis". A very special friendship that lasted 47 years was given birth at that moment and it has been a beautiful ride. In the years since that first meeting I have come to know his brothers and sisters and their respective children and grandchildren. Yes, a beautiful ride indeed.

In the Novitiate, John introduced me and countless others over his seven years of Ministry on the staff in Tyngsboro, Massachusetts to Marist Spirit, the importance of being able to express oneself in the essay form of writing and the importance

of Literature in ones life. Years later when I lived with John in community and I was teaching literature, John told me on more than one occasion what William Faulkner said in his acceptance speech for the Noble Prize for Literature in 1950. The role of the poet and the novelist and any writer is to create out of the agony and sweat of the human spirit something which did not exist before and that it is the privilege of the writer "to help mankind endure by lifting the reader 's heart". I cannot even begin to imagine how many hearts John lifted in his 84 years here on earth, 67 of them as a Marist Brother.

John was the quintessential Marist: he was excited about not only what was happening here in America among the brothers, but what was happening in other parts of the Marist world. At the same time he was a beacon of welcome to any Marist Brother who ran the front doorbell of the house where John was residing.

I quote William Wordsworth from his *Ode on Immortality* and take poetic license to fit this occasion.

*What though the radiance that was once ours so bright,  
our beloved John Francis Xavier Colbert, now forever  
taken from sight. Though nothing can bring back the  
hour of splendor in the grass, glory in the flower we will  
grieve not but find strength in what remains behind. In  
the primal sympathy which having been must always be.  
In the soothing thoughts that spring from human  
suffering.*

*Thanks to the faith that sees through death. Thanks to  
the human heart by which we live. Thanks to its  
tenderness, its joys and its pains.*

*Find strength in what remains behind.* John leaves us a tapestry of warm and wonderful memories that we will re-live each time we gather and his name surfaces. He always had us laughing and often times he had us laughing at himself. I could recall

thousands of events I shared with him that could cause you to laugh, but in the interest of time, limit it to one that occurred in Australia.

It was the summer of 1987 and John and I were visiting the monks DOWNUNDER. They were very gracious to us and our families were very good to us as well with spending money, so with some of the cash John purchased two tickets in the *Bedroom Car* on the overnight train from Sydney to Brisbane. John loved to travel by train. When we arrived in our suite we discovered it was equipped with a shower. Since John had never taken a shower on a train; he wanted to seize the opportunity. So, as I read my novel, John entered the shower and as he showered sang parts of Ode to Joy by Beethoven. When finished he opened the curtain and said to me, "James, my towel please. I am completely refreshed". I handed him the towel and returned to my seat. Just at that moment, the engineer applied the brakes because we were approaching the station. John loses his balance and comes flying across the room, naked and wet, and lands on me. With one hand pinned under John, my novel in the air, I use my free hand to try to close the blinds behind me because now the train is in the station whose platform is peppered with awaiting passengers. I told him if the porter opened the door he was history.

*Now you are sad but WE will see you again and on that day your hearts will be filled with complete joy and that joy no one will ever again take away from you.— John 16:22*

Now I ask you to bear with me for one more minute, as my final words have to be addressed to my brother directly.

John, in the words of the late Bob Hope, thanks for the memories. Thanks for the laughs and all the jokes you shared with us including the three clean ones. Thanks for being a father figure to me when I really needed one. John, I do not know what pure spirits look like and I cannot even imagine their

world. I know we call it Heaven and all I have are the words of Saint Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians.

*Eye has not seen, ear heard nor has it even dawned on man what God has planned for those who love Him.*

— 1 Corinthians 2:9

My faith tells me to believe them and I do. However, if it is appropriate in that Heavenly Kingdom when your soul meets the soul of my father, would you please give him a big hug for me? Thanks.

I end with Shakespeare. His character Horatio, speaking at the death of his beloved Prince Hamlet:

*Now smacks your noble heart. So goodnight sweet Prince and may flights of angels sing thee to thy rest. —Act 5.*

Scene 2

John, thank you, thank you, thank you.

Brother James Devine

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29 September 1926	born Lawrence MA to Elizabeth (Siddle) and Francis Colbert
1940-1941	Catholic Central HS, Lawrence MA (Student)
1941-1942	St. Ann Hermitage, Poughkeepsie NY (Junior)
1942-1943	Marist Juniorate, Esopus NY (Junior)
1943-1945	Marist Novitiate, Poughkeepsie NY
1944	Received Marist Habit, Poughkeepsie, NY
1945	Professed first vows, Poughkeepsie NY

1945-1948	Marian College, Poughkeepsie NY (Scholastic)
1948-1949	
1950	Professed perpetual vows, Tyngsboro MA
1949-1952	Central Catholic HS, Wheeling WV (teacher)
1952-1959	St. Joseph Novitiate, Tyngsboro MA (teacher)
1959-1960	Second Novitiate, St. Paul Trois Chateaux, France
1960	Professed vow of stability, Tyngsboro MA
1960-1968	Marist Hall, Cold Spring NY (teacher)
1968-1976	Bishop Dubois HS, NYC (teacher)
1976-1978	Cardinal Hayes HS, Bronx (secretary)
1978-1981	Bishops office, Eugene OR (secretary to the bishop)
1981-1986	St Agnes Boys HS, NYC (secretary to the principal)
1986-1993	Mount St Michael HS, Bronx NY (secretary to the principal)
1993-2001	Champagnat Hall, Bronx NY (retired)
2001 - 2008	St. Patrick Home, Bronx NY (retired)
2008 - 2011	Champagnat Hall, Bronx NY (retired)
9 August 2011	died Champagnat Hall, Bronx NY

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*From Richard Foy:* I would like to share some of my fond memories of John with you. He was two years ahead of me, and among the first Juniors to adventure to the new Esopus Juniorate in August 1942. Brother Edmund Alphonse was the organist and choir director. The only others who could play the piano and/or organ were Juniors John Colbert and Stan

Galligan. Brother Edmund was absent for Saint Patrick's Day of 1943, and John replaced him as organist. To our shock and delight, he played a couple of Irish tunes before and during Mass. I think he had Brother Master's OK, and we enjoyed it immensely.

When we taught at Saint Ann's Academy, we would sometimes slip out of an evening to a bar on Third Avenue, a street which was not so toney as today, with the 3rd Avenue El still running noisily. The bar had a piano and John would play for an hour or so. We would all pay for our first beer, and the owner would treat us to several others.

I divulge this without shame since I later learned that Saint Champagnat was almost kicked out of the seminary for slipping out with some of his comrades to a neighborhood wine bar. Little did I realize that I was following in Champagnat's footsteps!

John was a simple, loveable person who did not hesitate to tell us of his gaffs. Once he told us that he was in Macy's and asked the sales clerk directions to a special department. When she did not answer him, he discovered she was a mannequin...

May he rest in peace. He gave so much peace and contentment to his other Brothers. from Rich Foy

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*From Today's Marist Brother, Advent 2011*

Br. John Colbert, a Marist Brother for 67 years, died on August 9, 2001, after living with the disabilities of a stroke since 2001. He was 85 years old.

Br. John, born in Lawrence MA, was professed as a Marist Brother in 1944. After completing his religious and academic studies at Marist College, Poughkeepsie NY, he served at Marist

 John Colbert

Hall in Cold Spring, taught at Bishop Dubois High School, Cardinal Hayes High School, St. Agnes Boys High School, all in New York City, Central Catholic High School in Wheeling WV and as a teacher in the Brothers' Novitiate in Tyngsboro MA. He ended his school ministry in 1993 at Mount St Michael Academy in the Bronx NY.

Br. John taught his students the importance of literature and expressing oneself through essays. His love of music and singing was inspiring! May he rest in peace.

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