

**HOMILY PAYS TRIBUTE TO FR. JOHN THOMAS BROWNE:  
Dec. 21, 1929 – June 7, 2008**

**By Abbot Melvin, O.S.B.**

**June 11, 2008**

**Sisters and Brothers; all here because we loved Father John Browne. I greet you in John's name and in the name of the monks of Newark Abbey and St. Mary's Abbey. Father John was born in Elizabeth, New Jersey December 21, 1929 and I believe he would allow me to say that the next significant date after his baptism was his monastic profession on July 11, 1950 and, after that, his ordination to the priesthood of Jesus Christ on May 26, 1956. Father John loved his Brothers at Newark Abbey and St. Mary's Abbey in Morristown. Father John loved and generously served the people of St. Joseph's Parish in Maplewood. Father John loved you all and indeed intimately and deeply so many of you and your families, all his dear friends. How could we not highlight his work in St. Benedict's Prep from 1956-1969 in music, in the marching band and in the newly established theater program?**

**We know Father John loved the Lord with his entire mind and body and in fact when he writes to Abbot Patrick O'Brien at only 19 years old why he is considering a religious vocation, saying very simply: "It is the best way I can serve God and save my soul," and God knows and each one of us knows that he did both magnificently and with his entire mind, heart, soul and body and perhaps I should emphasize here, his body. I think at this moment of St. Paul's words to the Romans when he says "But you are not in the flesh but you are in the spirit since the spirit of God dwells in you."**

**Over the last 20 years one can say John lived a life that most represents for me and I know for you the life of the Crucified One. We began to take for granted the condition of John's body. I don't believe he ever did. Two images come to me to depict John: the first Jesus standing before Lazarus' tomb and calling him forth to life. This happened for John daily. The second, a musical image, a Broadway tune, *The Impossible Dream*. How can one not think of the martyrs when thinking of John's intense physical and emotional suffering in the face of relentless sickness invariably borne with incredible courage, grace, and a deep sense, I believe, and we spoke about it from time to time, of the uncanny mystery of suffering. Suffering's mystery was most felt when he could not pray or felt he was not able to pray. All the while he was offering these dark moments to the Lord for all of us I believe, and consciously and certainly for vocations to our three monastic communities.**

**John was a man of many gifts, a wonderful and sensitive pastor, a person who loved the men and women who came to him for advice, for marriage help, and simply to be in the presence of this kind of gracious, caring human being. John reveled in the world of electronics, John enjoyed the stage, and John savored a delicious meal with good friends. All of you have had many moments over the past 30 or 40 years in John's welcoming, holy company. John was/is a musician. John's vocation was to be a musician. I'll never forget the time several decades ago I asked John what is your favorite music? Is it Gregorian chant, is it opera, is it classical?" And he quickly said, "Actually Father Abbot, it's jazz."**

And then he went on to remind me that jazz is an American musical art form which originated around the beginning of the 20th century in African-American communities in the south from a combination of African and European musical traditions. I'll never forget his fulsome exposition. I got more than I bargained for and, to be sure, John was good at that but also ever engaging. I had enough good sense, I think if I recollect correctly, not trying to ask a leading second question although I said something about improvisation. Why, I am not sure. He went on to remind me that improvisation especially in jazz requires much study, much practice, quite a bit of talent before the improvising begins. I read this in preparation for my thoughts about Father John, "Your listening experience, your knowledge of music theory and experimentation on your instrument will define the musical contexts in which you are able to express yourself. You should continually strive to expand that context by listening to many different musicians analyzing what you hear, practicing as much as possible. Still the final ingredient, the inspiration, you will have to find on your own." The inspiration. Could we take the musical feat of graceful improvisation as a metaphor for John's life and combine it with the very first thoughts our Holy Father Benedict offers the one desiring to become a monk. John listened. John really listened to life, his life and the lives of others. John listened to music, John listened to people, and John listened in obedience to what the Lord wanted of him. St. Benedict says it this way: "Listen carefully my son to the Master's instructions and attend to them with the ear of your heart. The labor of obedience will bring you back to him from whom you have drifted through the sloth of disobedience. This message of mine is for you then if you are ready to give up your own will once and for all and armed with the strong and noble weapons of obedience to do battle for the true king, Christ the Lord." Throughout John's life and I am looking at the last three decades, his listening to what the Lord wanted of him placed him ever more deeply into the mystery of the passion. You and I will never know the kinds of suffering John endured. He was not one who shared easily his deepest affective life. But when he did, one realized, for a moment, the gigantic challenge it was to live his life day in and day out with great patience, with remarkable joy and always at any time a willingness to do good for another. To do what? Actually to do anything requested of him. I remember in 1977 asking him to return to the monastery. I can still remember the letter he sent back representing very clearly his own personal desires, but wanting me to be certain that whatever my decision was he wished to be able to carry it out. Thank God I did not make a mistake and Father John remained at St. Joseph's Parish.

So many of us are here today, this morning, precisely because of the services, the kindnesses, the assistance, we received from Father John. This in itself is a great gift since too very often as Father John would have noted a musician rightly and understandably enters so completely into the music that other people and other needs and other considerations may disappear. John seemed to be able to do both, to make beautiful music and to listen and at the same time to be very much connected to the lives of hundreds of men and women.

I have a confession to make. On and off since John's departure to the Lord on Saturday some time between one and two o'clock in the afternoon, I've been humming one particular tune, *To Dream the Impossible Dream*, to fight the unbeatable foe, to bear with unbearable sorrow, to run where the brave dare not go, to right the unrightable wrong, to love pure and chaste from afar, to try when your arms are too weary, to reach the unreachable star, this is my quest to follow that star no matter how hopeless no matter how far. Father John

for all of his brothers in the monastery posed the question about suffering and dying-daily- that prompted from each of us a highly personal response. It did not take long once John returned to the monastery eight years ago for us to realize/recognize that this man of suffering, this joyful man, this music man who welcomed others into his life was indeed living a life of heroic sanctity. John would probably say to me, Well, Father Abbot, who would believe that. Do you really think that's correct Father Abbot? And would want to know what I thought, even though John was the one living the life of heroic sanctity! It's easy for me then to understand why several monks found John such a good confessor and spiritual advisor and of course it is easy for me to understand why so many of you here this morning have relied so utterly and personally on John for decades for your spiritual nourishment and your human needs for compassionate understanding and caring Christ-like love. I know Father John would want it said this morning that he received so much from each of you. Monasteries and rectories are unique places in so many ways and that should be obvious. What the monk and the parish priest needs is often what you good folks provide. Not only edification, but the kind of care and love that help the monk and the priest grow in his own special way, personal ways that hopefully by God's grace will then enhance and strengthen his specific rather rare vocation within the church. John was fortunate. He had so many of you as dear close friends and confidants and I know he would want that said: thank you very much. Very often in the church we reserve the word vocation to the priesthood and the religious life and nowadays surely to the life of family, husband and wife. I would like to extend that word vocation this morning for your reflection. John had another vocation. We've spoken about his suffering, and now the vocation to create music. The musical art introduces the musician and the listener into a realm of spiritual realities. Could it be that precisely because Father John was a musician and embraced music as yet another vocation that he was so attentive interiorly to what the Holy Spirit was saying to him in all of his daily suffering? Lazarus, come forth! I believe so. I think then that music and listening and if I may say it, *as* John reacted and responded in music as a pianist or an organist and he was a wonderful one, enabled John to live the life of the spirit. Music helped John live with his broken body and with so much pain. During these last 15 weeks Father John lived just down the street in St. Michael's Hospital and so it was very easy to visit him after prayers in the morning. He and I would often begin by saying the Hail Mary or an Our Father, and I would invariably ask if he has been able to pray and he said only with great difficulty Father Abbot. It was at this time almost impertinently that I would remind him about praying for vocations and would mention two particular persons. Sometimes I would speak about my own selfishness in desiring vocations and he would correct me and say that the good Lord wants us to ask for whatever is good and leave the rest in His hands. It was my turn then to remind him, "John, certainly you are always praying by your very life and we thank you".

Could I return to the song, *The Impossible Dream*? Perhaps we could change that lyric and say a very possible dream in fact not a dream at all, the human person's spiritual quest. John's great faith sustained by the Lord Jesus and by the power of the spirit who resided in him allowed him never to be hopeless, always to be joyful and always to desire to accomplish the Lord's will, especially when he could not understand it. And so when we think of that tune, *The Impossible Dream*, we could be saying, "And I know if I'll only be true to this glorious quest that my heart will lie peaceful and calm when I am laid to my rest and the world will be better for this that one man covered with scars still strove with his last ounce of courage to reach the unreachable star," the day spring star on high, Jesus

**Christ risen from the dead. Jesus is victor over sin and death and one who became so very like him in this life gloriously stands – without crutch – victorious with his Lord Jesus, Father John Browne. Amen.**