

A Tribute to John Dean
At his Memorial Service in Waterloo, Canada
on
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by Philip C. Galanis

I come from a different place than most of you assembled here today. I live in The Bahamas and more than 40 years ago, the man that we memorialize today, John Dean, was then known to us all as Fr. Bonaventure Dean. I would like to share some reflections of the man, his time in The Bahamas and his accomplishments.

John Dean was born in Nassau on January 15, 1936. One of his siblings, Jerome predeceased him and his sole surviving brother, Anthony Dean, a professional mechanical engineer is here today to remember his brother's life.

John Dean attended St. Augustine's College before studying at Saint John's University in Minnesota and entered the Seminary there. Ordained a Roman Catholic priest in 1963, John Dean adopted the name of his patron saint, St.

Bonaventure and after his ordination, returned to The Bahamas where he entered St. Augustine's Monastery and College.

His meteoric rise at both those institutions is legendary. At first, Fr. Bonaventure was the Disciplinarian at St. Augustine's College, and "woe be unto anyone" who was summoned for any reason whatsoever to see "the Bon" as he was sometimes affectionately called. The journey to his office was to be avoided at all cost because he was an intolerant and uncompromising disciplinarian who did not suffer fools lightly. He became the Headmaster of SAC in 1967 and shortly thereafter he became the Prior of the Monastery -- the first Bahamian to simultaneously assume both positions.

Fr. Bonaventure possessed a towering physique, standing well over six feet. He was articulate, charismatic, disarmingly charming and powerfully intellectual. His commanding baritone voice was uniquely, but unmistakably authoritarian and was perhaps exceeded only by the thoughts and ideas that emanated from one whose brilliance was self-evident.

Fr. Bonaventure could often be seen stridently strutting across the campus in a manner that exuded elegance and personified the confidence of who he was and where he was taking his students -- doggedly determined to challenge each and

every one of us to be the best that we could be, not sometimes or on occasion, but each and every time.

Fr. Bonaventure celebrated excellence and rewarded both scholastic and sporting achievements. He was a visionary educator, who realized how important it was to shape tender, impressionable, fertile minds which could forever be handicapped if they were not properly nurtured during their formative high school years. Consequently, he instituted a program at St. Augustine's for all incoming freshmen to attend summer school to ensure that by the time they began the Fall Semester in September, there would be a remediation program for students in the basic skills of reading comprehension, writing and math. This also enabled St. Augustine's to stream incoming freshmen in an effort, again to get the best out of each one's skills from the very beginning.

Fr. Bonaventure possessed a presence that was striking. Whenever he entered the classroom or the church, you knew that he was there, and sometimes like an apparition, before you would see him, you would sense his presence.

The 1960s was a turbulent decade -- a decade of challenge and conflict, of hope and promise and The Bahamas was not different. That was a time when The Bahamas was marching to the drums of Majority Rule, with the eventual and natural progression to national Independence. Specifically, at St. Augustine's

College ("SAC" for short), the 1960s also saw foundational transformations. The SAC Class of 1971 -- the Class to which I belonged -- started high school in 1966 as an all-boys' school, witnessed its metamorphosis initially to a co-institutional and then ultimately to a co-educational high school so that by graduation night in May, 1971, the graduating class looked very different from the one that started just five years earlier.

During his tenure as Headmaster, Fr. Bonaventure undertook a massive capital projects program, which saw the expansion of campus, the construction of a first class library, a science lab, and a reading lab. St. Augustine's was one of the first high schools in The Bahamas to have a competitive size swimming pool. In order to raise the required funds to facilitate his massive building program, in the late 1960s, Fr. Bonaventure enlisted the services of his friend, academy award winner Sidney Poiter who persuaded his friend, Bill Cosby, to come to The Bahamas to perform at a fund-raising event which was a smashing success.

To ensure that no student was left behind or prevented from developing his or her unique skills, Fr. Bonaventure ensured that SAC taught not only the core subjects as well as Latin, French and Spanish, but also offered courses in bookkeeping, typing, and shorthand.

To guarantee that all students received a holistic education, every student had to participate in some kind of sporting activity. Fr. Bonaventure insisted that if a competitive sporting activity was held at SAC with another visiting school, no one could leave the campus until the game was finished. He inculcated a depth of school spirit in the students which I am sure accounted for SAC's enormous sporting successes.

Fr. Bonaventure ensured that SAC continued to be a bridge to the future by encouraging Saint John's University to award scholarships to deserving Bahamian students. This resulted in a closer collaboration between the two institutions which still persists today, and has resulted in hundreds of Bahamian students, myself included, obtaining a college education, many of whom have excelled in their respective fields of endeavor.

These changes at SAC all took place on Fr. Bonaventure's watch as Headmaster of the high school. He was central to them all.

Because of his brilliance, Fr. Bonaventure's counsel was sought out by many, including the then Prime Minister of the Commonwealth of the Bahamas.

While all these changes were taking place at St. Augustine's College, fundamental metamorphoses were also taking place within the Roman Catholic Church in general and in St. Augustine's Monastery in particular. Some of those changes, which in part arguably emanated from the expectations of Vatican Council II, were life-altering and directly affected the high school.

Over the past few weeks during John's illness and his eventual passing, there has been a tidal flow of support and expressions of fond memories of a long bygone era by very many former students of Fr. Bonaventure. I would like to share just one with you. It is an email from Sean McWeeney who graduated from SAC in 1969 and went onto become the nation's Attorney General and is presently a Queens Counsel in The Bahamas. He wrote these words to Margaret:

"Philip relayed the sad news to me this morning. Please accept my deepest condolences. As you know, John was an important part of my life. Apart from my own father, he was the most important male figure in the formative years of my life. I am eternally grateful for that, and for all that he did for me, and for hundreds of others like me.

It was a long time ago of which I speak - more than 40 years, in fact. But I feel Bonaventure Dean's commanding presence, and hear that authoritarian baritone of his, and see that great, big toothy smile of his, as clearly today - on the day of his transition to a new and better life - as I did 40 years ago when he

had not yet even reached his prime.

He possessed such an abundance of charisma and wisdom. And he was self-confidence personified! He was a leader of men and an inspiration and example-setter for us all. He was one-of-a-kind. There will never be another like him.

When Bonaventure Dean (for that is the name I best remember him) went into exile in Canada, it was an enormous loss for our country. I often wonder how the course of The Bahamas might have been different had he stayed here and risen to the heights of public influence for which his many gifts had seemingly pre-destined him. But it was not to be. Like many great men before him (St. Paul perhaps being the seminal archetype), Bonaventure Dean re-incarnated himself on another continent whose vastness perhaps made it a more fitting locus for his talents to find expression. There, in Canada, he remained faithful, I am sure, to the core values of his innermost self and to his vocation as a teacher but no longer was he priest, monk and Prior or the spokesman for radical ideological and social causes in this tiny part of world he left behind."

That is but one of so many similar emails that have been received since hearing of his departure from us.

In the Fall of 1971, Fr. Bonaventure left the priesthood, St. Augustine's College, the Monastery and The Bahamas. He was 35 years old. In the following 18

months, many of the priests who resided at St. Augustine's Monastery followed suit. Most stayed in The Bahamas, married and started families of their own.

I would like to end this tribute with a homily that was delivered by Fr. Bonaventure Dean, Prior of St. Augustine's Monastery and Headmaster of the high school which bears its name, during the school's annual Thanksgiving Mass in November, 1969, forty-two years ago. On that occasion, Fr. Bonaventure's homily comprised the following three imperative sentences: "Look around. Think about what you see. Give thanks." That homily was indelibly ingrained on my consciousness, and, I am sure, in the minds of my schoolmates, as much for its brevity, as for its profundity.

On behalf of the thousands of lives that were positively impacted by this giant of a man who we called Fr. Bonaventure, and especially the students of St. Augustine's College and more particularly the Class of 1971, I would like to publically give thanks for the time that John Dean spent with us and the gifts he bestowed upon us. Those gifts will live on for very many years to come in the persons whom he touched.

May his soul rest in eternal peace.