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In Memoriam: John Henry (1939-2007)

The life of Professor John Henry, who died on May 8 aged 68, was a shining example of how Christian faith can be the inspiration for an outstanding professional career, following the spirit of Opus Dei.

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Professor Henry was one of the world's leading experts on drugs and brought his expertise to bear in some of the leading poison cases of our time. When doctors in Vienna had

failed to spot the cause of the mysterious illness suffered by the Ukrainian opposition leader Viktor Yushchenko in September 2004, it was Professor Henry who spotted from a photograph that he had been poisoned by dioxin.

He also advised in the more recent case of the former KGB agent Alexander Litvinenko. He campaigned actively against so-called recreational drugs, warning about their harmful effects on young people's lives.

The newspaper obituaries from the British, Irish, Spanish and New Zealand press on the occasion of his death (for a sample, see the links below) testify to his outstanding professional prestige. The articles rightly point to his constant availability to answer media enquiries and his ability to explain complex concepts in a simple way,

making him, as one article put it, “Britain’s best-known toxicologist”. With all this he was extremely modest and self-effacing.

What is harder to capture in writing, however, is the depth of his interior life and the profound effect he had on the lives of other people.

Professor Henry joined Opus Dei at the age of 20 when he was a medical student, committing himself to a celibate vocation as a numerary within the Prelature. Despite his prodigious work-rate, he found time for daily Mass plus various periods of prayer, living out the daily “plan of life” Opus Dei members try to practise: two half-hour periods of mental prayer, spiritual reading, praying the Rosary and evening examination of conscience.

As one obituary article wrote: “It was from this deep spirituality that he derived his drive and dedication to

his work, as well as his infectious cheerfulness”. Professor Henry was enthused and inspired by the teaching of St Josemaría Escrivá, founder of Opus Dei, that we can encounter Christ in our daily work and turn that work into prayer. His effort to work well for the glory of God and the good of souls led him to the height of his profession.

In 1972, the then young John Henry was able to meet St Josemaría. At that time Dr Henry was on dialysis and contemplating a future kidney transplant. The future saint prayed fervently that a suitable kidney could be found. Escrivá died in June 1975 and in May 1976 a kidney was found meeting John Henry’s needs, after he had prayed to the saint for his intercession. This kidney was to give him another 31 years of active life.

John Henry spoke naturally and freely about his faith to professional

colleagues and students and sought to draw them all closer to Christ. One former student described how she and her colleagues saw him as an inspiration and “icon”. He talked of his faith in a very straightforward manner, without in any way seeking to impose it on others. His easy, even casual manner endeared him to all. He was consistently friendly in his treatment of all, and he frequently used the humorous title “Chief” to people of every rank. On first meeting junior staff, he would make an effort to remember their first names and surprise them by using it on their next encounter.

As a numerary member of Opus Dei, Professor Henry was very involved in the formation of the faithful of the Prelature, whom he looked after with care and dedication. He also helped to organise and lead retreats and courses, as well as monthly spiritual talks and evenings of recollection.

From 1967-1970 he was director of Netherhall House, a student residence in Hampstead London promoted by the Prelature, and helped in the early years of another Opus Dei initiative, Kelston boys' club in Wandsworth Common, South London. In the last years of his life he was director of a centre for Opus Dei members in Hampstead.

Professor Henry had many friends: he loved them sincerely and tried to bring them all closer to God in an apostolate based on loyal and open friendship. He would talk to them of prayer, teach them how to bring God into their daily work, explain how they could grow in virtue, and give them numerous practical tips on how husbands could live out their marriage better and love their wives more. John Henry knew what it meant to love through his own relationship with Christ and from the

family spirit which is lived within Opus Dei.

Testimonies of the weeks in hospital before his death recall how supernaturally and generously he bore his final illness. One afternoon when he was in special pain, he was heard repeating frequently “Jesus, this is for you”. When a young, inexperienced doctor needed four attempts to take blood from him, Professor Henry, though very enfeebled, was more concerned to put him at his ease than about the discomfort he himself was suffering.

He was good at word-play and a great punster (which could provoke a variety of reactions in his hearers), and he also put this to use in this in his spiritual life, for his relationship with Christ was as cheerful as the rest of his existence. During his final stay in hospital, hearing that he would need a drug called

“Buscopan”, he turned to the person visiting him, who happened to be Spanish, and said in the language of his friend: “Busco pan del cielo”. The Spanish words “busco pan” mean “I seek bread”, and John Henry’s addition “del cielo”, from heaven, were an allusion to the heavenly bread, the Eucharist, which had been his lifelong inspiration.

Rev Joseph Evans

The author is the current chaplain of Netherhall House, Hampstead

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