

William Miles Bellasis

1935-2023

By his brother John

William liked the simple life. He did not like fuss or frills. He had a passive way of showing that he disagreed; he shut down, gave a sideways look, a wry smile.

William achieved much in this life which we trust will be judged as good. Many tributes were received from around the world; messages of support for which the family are truly grateful. Some would mark William up as outstanding, an accolade to which many teachers aspire; for that is what he was, a teacher, a prolific communicator, a proficient calligrapher. Miles was a pastor, counsellor, consoler; a manager, fundraiser and librarian. As a young man he was debonair. He played his part in The London Season for debutantes; attended the Queen Charlottes Ball amongst others. One who knew him well at school said, "He looked like being a man about town". One alumnus of Priory describes Miles as "charismatic, dynamic, witty and gifted" and remained friends with him long after he left the USA. He exuded confidence and reassurance. He brought joy and a love of life to many people. Another who was christened by Fr Miles wrote: "What a remarkable man he was; his spirit, his energy, his talents and just abundance for finding the joy in life, and love. His laugh was so beautifully infectious and I shall never forget seeing the cards and letters arrive at home, with his awe inspiring calligraphy, often in a myriad of colours. Each a piece of art in itself." Another follows that with: "Having received a beautifully drawn Christmas cards every year for the past 50 until last Christmas, I sensed something was wrong. He was such a bright and positive individual."

William was born in Nairobi, Kenya, in 1935; and baptised William Thomas Joseph. St Thomas More was mother's favourite saint; though not yet canonised, she knew he would be. His first years were spent at 6,000 ft on the beautiful Rioki Coffee Estate with the Lioki Mission as neighbours. Mount Kenya was usually visible across the shamba 100 miles to the north and lit by the rising sun. Mount Kilimanjaro was visible on a clear day 300 miles to the south and lit by the setting sun. Jacaranda trees overlooked the manicured lawn and a ha-ha containing 100 varieties of rose bushes. Dark green coffee trees sloped away in rows that revealed the contrasting red murrum soil beneath.

Our parents were both devout Catholics. Dad attended Mass every day if he could in the substantial church that he built for the White Fathers. Mum was fond of the Carmelite nuns in Nairobi and would take her children to see the nuns most Sundays. They are a closed order and in those days the nuns were hardly visible behind a dark screen. They are proud to show their photograph album with pictures of our family. The convent was William's introduction to religious life.

Our parents confused us by often talking about "going home to England"; and what was happening "back home". Even more confusing for William and our sister Mary was that, at the age of five and four respectively, they were taken by Dad to Woodlands; a kindergarten for boarders. On the way, sitting in the middle of the bench seat of the Dodge utility truck, Mary was crying and asking Dad to slow down. William's bottom lip must have been quivering, because Dad said to him, "Don't you lose it".

When William was ten, he and Mary were indeed taken Home to England leaving their school friends behind in Nairobi: William from St Mary's, and Mary from Loretto. They were immediately enrolled at Allhallows for William, and Roehampton Park that became The Sacred Heart Convent, Woldingham for Mary; both of them boarding, again. William then moved on to Ampleforth College where he became head boy. He was to lose his best friend, who was on his own, in a tragic car crash at the age of eighteen.

William and Mary were in the care of "the Aunts", Agnes and Monica, in Goring-on-Thames where they spent their holidays. Aunt Agnes was sacristan at the Catholic church down the road and William would assist her in that role and would serve at Masses there. There was a background of religious fervour at Goring with great grandfather, 'the Sergeant', having led the emancipation of Catholics with James Hope-Scott QC and St John Henry Cardinal Newman; and together founding the Oratory School in Birmingham. Two great uncles became Oratorian Fathers and three great aunts were nuns; and there was more. This was the backdrop to William choosing to go straight into the monastery from school.

William had the wildest leaving party using those black vinyl records as Frisbees on the lawn, after dark. Although he joined the Benedictines at the Ampleforth Abbey, he was studying at Oxford, St Benet's Hall, for six years. He changed his subjects and acquired a broader base for teaching. He also became an Officer for the Ampleforth Combined Cadet Force. He was tone deaf before entering the monastery but the Gregorian chant help him overcame this impediment by the time of his ordination in 1965. He became popular as the family priest and his life seemed to be coming together; but then he was sent to the relatively new St Louis Priory in Creve Coeur, Missouri, USA. He had come from abroad after all, and his enthusiasm and energy were needed in that fledgling community.

Fr Miles was appointed Master of Junior House at Priory and chief librarian. He set up a calligraphy workshop and did pastoral work in the neighbouring community. He would even provide pastoral cover in Detroit as a holiday! He played his part in maintaining the grounds at Priory, sitting on the motor mower. It became another beautiful setting enhanced by some very long-lasting friendships. One of the foremost Rules of St Benedict is: Let all guests who arrive be received in Christ. Miles was a magnet for friendship and visitors; and he made more friends wherever he went and his friends became our friends. It was all beautifully inclusive, sincere and lasting; and we siblings will remember his friends. In the words of one of his friends in later life: "William had the ability to make friends with people of all ages and backgrounds. This was largely due to his kind heart, his wit and his interest in what other people were doing. He had also mastered the art of conversation about a wide and fascinating variety of subjects."

They needed a new library at Priory and, of course, Fr Miles was chosen to raise the necessary \$2million in two years. He exceeded that by a very great margin leaving a sustainable fund that included a condominium. On one occasion, he received a call from New York: "Miles, can you get over here?" He caught a flight immediately to receive into his hand a cheque for \$100,000. A former alumnus who returned to Priory to teach tells us that Miles's "reorganising and cataloguing the large but chaotic Priory collection are part of his legacy felt to this day". Another alumnus remembers the design and layout of the library attracting students to study there. When asked if he would like a book for Christmas he replied, "I don't read books!"

For a few years, Fr Miles had been running the annual Xanadu silent auction that raised a lot of money for charity. One of the beneficiaries was the Mater School for Girls, near Meru in Kenya, that has a special ethos in its style of teaching with good results achieved in challenging conditions. Following his successes in fundraising he was chosen to improve the intake of novices. He went out into the highways and byways looking for new vocations; but this is where it all ended for Fr Miles.

After serving in the Benedictine community for forty years, a priest for thirty of those years, it must have been unsettling to have to go in search again for a new home. William advised that when you reach a crossroads in life, look for the signpost. From one of his letters when he was a novice at Ampleforth, all those in the noviciate went cycling to the Lake District and they were caught in dense fog and completely lost up near Scafell. "I see a signpost", says Br Miles. He lifted his bike and got the dynamo running for the head lamp to reveal the unusual white markings on the side of a Friesian cow.

And so it was that the direction facing him after Priory was obscure. He worked for a short time in an educational charity in St Louis then eventually found an opportunity in France. Working with an old Amplefordian, he set about transforming a large hotel on the banks of the Seine near Fontainebleau. He had a small team and was joined by an able partner who was skilled at running a large household, but this dream was shattered when the French wife of a Middle-Eastern diplomat questioned why the English were running a French chateau.

This was William's signpost, which for him might have read: "You can't have the French teaching the French how to speak English", so he followed the signpost back into his core skill of teaching. He found an ideal flat to share in Paris overlooking La Defense and his potential clientele. For the next ten years, William taught French business men and women how to speak English. Paris became a destination of choice for friends and family and some St Louis friends will never be forgotten for their continued support of Miles. New friendships were formed from Paris to Bordeaux with a renewed joie de vivre.

His chosen church in Paris was La Madaleine, where he was a reader; and later Sacre Coeur, with some Benedictine history, was also calling and the two churches became an integral part of his new home, sustaining his faith in God until he turned eighty; then he decided to return to that place in the world that was always referred to as Home. He looked at options but was attracted to our sister Pippa's home in London. She cared for him after his vascular stroke, from which he was recovering until a major fall. Friends and family call until the Covid lockdown. Pippa set him up every morning with the Ampleforth Mass online and he would struggle to get to Mass at The London Oratory whenever he could. He always stopped by the War Memorial at the back of the church to reflect. He would dwell there long past the family names listed; so many others of whom he was aware and would remember.

Towards the end, William recalled Dad's plea: "Don't you lose it!"; only now it might mean, whatever happens don't lose your faith in God, Father Son and Holy Spirit.

Godspeed, William, to your celestial new Home, and may you rest in peace!

Adaptation of the Tribute delivered after the Requiem Mass at The Oratory Church of St Philip Near, London.

