

“I wish to be good.  
I wish to do good.  
I wish to become a power for good.”  
Fr. Thomas Judge

### **Remembering John Lewis**

In the Missionary Cenacle Family, we often quote this phrase of Fr. Judge. To me, it is the blueprint for how we are to be formed for and approach missionary life. Recently, I have been pondering the death of John Lewis (February 21, 1940-July 17, 2020), an American politician and more. John was a civil rights leader who served in the United States Congress, in the House of Representatives. He represented Georgia’s fifth district from 1987 until his death in 2020.

In the many eulogies and reflections publicly and privately given, there are three common elements: *John was a really good man, he spent his life doing good in service to others and he empowered others to do likewise.* While not Catholic, John Lewis, is a modern American icon of the strong beliefs of Fr. Judge in the power of laity to evangelize and make a difference in society.

#### **A. What does it mean to be good?**

The story is told that John Lewis wanted to be preacher from the age of five and the chickens were his congregation! John was responsible for taking care of the chickens. He fed them and read to them from the Bible. He baptized them when they were born and staged elaborate funerals when they died. “I was truly intent on saving the little birds’ souls,” he wrote in his memoir, *Walking With the Wind* (1998). “I could imagine that they were my congregation. And me, I was a preacher.”<sup>i</sup>

He was the third of ten children, a child of sharecroppers in rural Alabama. As a child he attended segregated schools, and it is reported that he had only met two white people by the age of six. As he was growing up, his parents cautioned him about challenging the Jim Crow south. But at age 15, he was already listening to the scratchy radio programs of Martin Luther King, knew that Rosa Parks had refused to move to the back of the bus, and through travel with his uncles to the north, was aware of the “whites only signs” on restaurants, restrooms, and drinking fountains. As he witnessed these disparities, John’s faith continued to be shocked by injustices. He was given a great grace to believe that all people were created equal in the image of God.

“One Sunday, I heard Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. preach on the radio. I was 15 years old, in the 10th grade. I heard Dr. King say things like, ‘We must not just be concerned about the pearly gates and the streets made out of milk and honey, but we have to be concerned about the streets in Montgomery, Alabama.’ And I felt like he was talking to me.”<sup>ii</sup>

John was given the insight that the providence of God was not in a far-away place, but right where he lived and worked. John was called by God, there is little doubt. John, knowing that he was called to join in the non-violent movement recognized that he must be prepared to do this work. He was committed to the goal of education for himself and for justice for his people. In 1961, he entered the seminary and as a theology student he spoke about Martin Luther King.

“Martin Luther King Jr. had a major impact on my search for truth. I felt like he was doing the work of the Master. That he was saying in effect that our hands, our feet, our minds, must be the hands, the feet, and mind of God Almighty.”<sup>iii</sup>

“At a very early stage of the movement, I accepted the teaching of Jesus, the way of love, the way of nonviolence, the spirit of forgiveness and reconciliation. The idea that hate is too heavy a burden to bear. I don’t want to go down that road. I’ve seen too much hate, seen too much violence. And I know love is a better way.”<sup>iv</sup>

To desire to be good is about the inner commitment to do all that one can do to be prepared for mission which takes place in every vocation. John Lewis prepared himself spiritually and theologically, he prepared himself intellectually to work in the House of Representatives. Being good was not just doing something good, it was also about *being good!* Out of these on-going formation experiences, John Lewis developed deep convictions. Lewis never loosened his grip on faith. It was much stronger than politics, at which he was adept, or any other force. And that faith bore fruit.

To be good is to live in virtue. In 2009, a blog post published by Seton Hill University, recounted the encounter between Elwin Wilson and John Lewis. “Elwin Wilson was a white man who in 1961 had been part of a mob of young toughs that beat Lewis and other Civil Rights protestors who had dared to enter a bus station waiting room designated for whites only. Wilson asked, ‘Mr. Lewis, will you forgive me? Do you accept my apology?’ To which Mr. Lewis responded, ‘Yes, I forgive you, I accept your apology.’ The man and his son started crying, as did Lewis, who hugged them both. He called Lewis ‘brother’ and he called them the same.”<sup>v</sup>

### **B. What does it mean to do good?**

John Lewis encouraged “Good Trouble.” According to the Associated Press, Lewis’ life was an example of “activism fueled by religion.” During his youth, John Lewis systematically studied the techniques and philosophy of non-violence. With his fellow students they were prepared for their first actions. To list here all the accomplishments of Lewis is not possible. But what can be stated is that he was relentless advocate for human rights.

John Lewis was elected to the Atlanta City Council, where he became an effective advocate of neighborhood preservation and government reform. In 1986 he ran for Congress, and John Lewis, whose own parents had been prevented from voting, who had been denied

access to the schools and libraries of his hometown, who had been threatened, jailed and beaten for trying to register voters, was elected to the United States House of Representatives.

For more than 30 years, he represented a district encompassing the city of Atlanta and parts of four surrounding counties. Congressman Lewis sat on the House Budget Committee and House Ways and Means Committee, where he served on the Subcommittee on Health. He served as Senior Chief Deputy Democratic Whip, as a member of the Democratic Steering Committee, the Congressional Black Caucus, and the Congressional Committee to Support Writers and Journalists. Apart from his service in Congress, he was Co-Chair of the Faith and Politics Institute.

Mr. Lewis led demonstrations against racially segregated restrooms, hotels, restaurants, public parks and swimming pools, and he rose up against other indignities of second-class citizenship. At nearly every turn he was beaten, spat upon or burned with cigarettes. He was tormented by white mobs and absorbed body blows from law enforcement.

He believed in “Good Trouble” because he was about doing good, good that was transformative and had deep impact on individuals, groups, communities, and the nation. In his commitment to truth, he was called the “Conscience of the Congress.”

Most of us will never live a life like John Lewis. We are called to do good usually in the daily tasks of life, in family, marriage, careers, retirement, etc. If we are called to be missionary in everyday life, doing good is not only about isolated actions; rather, it is about being formed in virtue which influences everything we do on a daily basis, even when we are unable to be active.

John did challenge us to do good: “When you see something that is not right, not just, not fair, *you have a moral obligation to say something*,” he said on the House floor. “*To do something*. Our children and their children will ask us, ‘What did you do? What did you say?’”

### **B. What does it mean to become a Power for Good**

“Do not get lost in a sea of despair. Be hopeful, be optimistic. Our struggle is not the struggle of a day, a week, a month, or a year, it is the struggle of a lifetime. Never, ever be afraid to make some noise and get in good trouble, necessary trouble.”<sup>vi</sup>

At the funeral for John Lewis, his deputy chief of staff, Jamila Thompson spoke on behalf of his staff. She provided a behind the scenes look at working for him. “With Mr. Lewis, he always saw you and made you feel special and worthy,” she said. “I believe he spent every waking moment paying it forward.”<sup>vii</sup>

“For all the achievements of his 67 years of service, Lewis’ commitment to inspiring the next generation of leaders and activists may be his most significant and lasting contribution.”<sup>viii</sup>

In his last op-ed to the New York Times, Lewis words were to the young people of America. “Though I may not be here with you, I urge you to answer the highest calling of your heart and stand up for what you truly believe,” Lewis wrote in his op-ed. “In my life I have done

all I can to demonstrate that the way of peace, the way of love and nonviolence is the more excellent way. Now it is your turn to let freedom ring."<sup>ix</sup>

It is very clear that for John Lewis, it was never about him and all the wonderful work that he did. He was called by God and that Spirit compelled him onward. While doing good, he empowered everyone with him as well as the recipients of the good, to go and do likewise!

"We are the legacy of Congressman Lewis," said Rachele O'Neil, who joined Lewis' staff as a constituent services representative when she was 32 and worked with him for 18 years. "He was committed to young people. The beautiful thing is that he started as a teenager. He believed in the young stepping up, taking action, making noise, fighting for what's right ... that they have a moral responsibility to take stock in what their future is like. There are hundreds of us around the country who have been impacted by him."<sup>x</sup>

We are all called to be good, to do good, and to empower others to be about the good. If the mission is to carry on, it cannot be just about me, or even us, it must be about empowering others to carry on beyond us. This is the grace of God given to us through our Founder.

In the words of John Lewis himself: "Sometimes when I look back and think about it, how did we do what we did? How did we succeed? We didn't have a Web site. We didn't have a cellular telephone. But I felt when we were sitting in at those lunch counter stools, or going on the Freedom Ride, or marching from Selma to Montgomery, there was a power and a force. God Almighty was there with us."

### Reflection Questions

1. How are we as the members of the Missionary Cenacle Family called to be good?
2. How are we called together to be about doing good?
3. How do we as members of the Missionary Cenacle Family empower others to respond to mission, inviting them to be good and to do good?

Brenda Hermann MSBT / August 2020

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<sup>i</sup> New York Times, Katharine Q. Seelye July 17, 2020 Updated July 30, 2020

<sup>ii</sup> Religion & Ethics Newsweekly (PBS) January 16, 2004

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iv</sup> Deseret News July 21, 2020

<sup>v</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vi</sup> Twitter 2018

<sup>vii</sup> CBS News July 30, 2020

<sup>viii</sup> NBC "We Are the Legacy: John Lewis lives on in the generations of young staffers he empowered" July 28, 2020

<sup>ix</sup> New York Times, July 30, 2020.

<sup>x</sup> NBC July 2020.