

WILLIAM GAGNON

Taking Hospitality to the East



50th Anniversary of his death
1972 - 2022



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Introduction

To commemorate the 50th Anniversary of the death of the Venerable Servant of God William Gagnon, 1972 -2022, I have prepared this short biography with a view to making his life and work more widely known.

The legacy that our Brother has left to the whole Order and to the greater Hospitaller Family is embodied in these brief remarks he made to his Brothers during his service as Provincial Superior in Canada: *“Ours is a magnificent vocation: to care for Christ by treating their suffering bodies, and to bring them to Jesus through our life of dedication and charity. But to be able to do this, we need to possess a strong faith that enables us, at all times to see Our Lord Himself in all our brothers and sisters, no matter who they are. This ardent faith is acquired through prayer”.*

This short biography, which sets out the most significant moments of his life, is complemented by photographs that capture certain historical moments, showing them in their context at the time.

It is my hope that this book will touch the hearts of the many people who, in various capacities, are members of our great Hospitaller Family, and who, care for the poor and the sick every single day with great passion and professionalism, according to the Charism of Hospitality which Saint John of God has bequeathed to us.

I would like to close this short introduction by once again borrowing the words of Brother William,

which encapsulate his Hospitaller spirituality in an extraordinary way: *“Honours are nothing but smoke and straw fires. All that is left is the little good we have done, and we are grateful to God for giving us these joys at every moment”*. This sums up our Venerable Brother. In his life he did nothing but good, always eschewing any kind of exhibitionism or self-importance, but making himself all things to all people for the love of God, consuming himself until his death.

Rome, 28 February 2022

BROTHER DARIO VERMI, O.H.
Postulator General

THE GAGNON FAMILY

Delphin Gagnon and Marie Louise Roy were among the 19th century wave of French-Canadians who left Quebec for a new life in New England in the United States, settling down in Dover, a small town in New Hampshire, where they raised a large family of twelve children, one of whom was William. Life was hard, with the Spanish influenza pandemic between 1918 and 1920, followed by the financial crisis – the Great Crash – in 1929, whose repercussions rippled on for years.

William Gagnon was born on 16 May 1905 in Dover. He was baptised on the day of his birth in the Parish Church of St Charles Borromeo. The parish was run by the Missionaries of St Charles (Scalabrinians). At Christmas in 1913, at the age of 8, the young William made his First Communion, and in 1917 he received the Sacrament of Confirmation from Bishop Louis O’Leary in the parish church at Lac Baker in New Brunswick.

In 1930, one of his sisters, Marie-Éva, joined the Sisters of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin, and would later become the spiritual confidante of her beloved brother. It was to Marie-Éva that William revealed his desire to consecrate his life to God. His desire to enter the Religious Life was met with fierce opposition from his father, a fickle man, a heavy drinker and totally illiterate. His mother also opposed his plan knowing that he could be of great help to running the family, which was far from easy at that time. His difficulties at home prepared him

for the hardships and trials he would have to face later on in the Religious life, and when founding the Hospital-Houses in Viet Nam.

As a child, William was often severely scolded by his mother when he took the blame for the bad behaviour of his brothers and sisters, never giving them away. He was good-natured and thoughtful and silently did whatever his parents wanted. Sometimes his mother made him take time off school to look after his brothers and sisters in his teenage years.

By the age of 13, William and his older brother, Joseph, were learning the basics of farming: clearing the land and selling timber to the many paper mills in the area. Until, one day, the Gagnon family were confronted by a dramatic event, that turned out to be providential.



The Gagnon family in Dover in 1921.

THE WILDFIRE

After attending Sunday Mass one morning in 1918, the Gagnon family were on the way home in a horse and cart being driven by their father as their mother was chatting about this and that, thinking about what to get for lunch, while the younger children were playing and teasing each other in the back.

Around them, the sun flooded the hilly Quebec landscape with its shady woodlands and the small farmlands in the distance.

All of a sudden, Mr Gagnon saw a cloud of smoke rising into the sky, and rings of fire covering their neighbour's land. The sight left him stunned and even though his neighbour seemed to be in control of the situation, he shouted, "Hang on while I get the family home and I'll be straight back and give you a hand".

In the meantime, the gusts of wind swept up sparks, and the spreading fire was threatening to engulf all the other neighbours' houses as well. They had to save their tools and implements at once: forks, spades, hoes and machinery. Mr Gagnon could already imagine the disaster awaiting them: their buildings and equipment burnt to ashes, their livestock dead, and all the houses to be rebuilt. He was already thinking about sending his wife and children back to Dover.

While his parents fought to keep the fire under control, William looked after his younger brothers

and sisters. Although he was only 13 years old, he already had a very powerful faith in Divine Providence. Looking into his mother's eyes, he said, "Ma, the good Lord will protect the children, for they are little angels. I will stay here and pray. Our farm will not burn down!"

William took the youngsters to safety in a field nearby and they all began to pray together. Shortly afterwards, when the farmers had managed to put out the fire, the scene of desolation that met their eyes was almost like a sign of hope: over three kilometres, mysteriously, the whole area had now become fertile ground for farming crops.

William had been right: dozens of families had been spared, with their homes and livestock safe and sound.

In 1920, after a three-year stint in Témiscouata, a wooded area of Quebec where the family had returned for work, they decided it was time to go back to Dover, in New Hampshire.

A DIRECTION FOR HIS LIFE

In those days, only children from wealthy families could afford to continue their education, and Joseph and William had to leave school and take temporary jobs working in a cotton mill.

As the second child, young William learned to work very early on, to bring home money to help the family. He worked very hard, to set a good example to his younger brothers and sisters.

Gardener, woodcutter, cotton mill worker, day and night: nothing was too hard for him.

Meanwhile a longing for the absolute was growing inside him: *what if life was more than getting a hard-earned wage, more than just a pay packet to take home?* William longed to become a missionary in distant lands to help the needy. But where could he begin to find a meaning for his life? Should he perhaps enter the Religious life?

He called on two Religious communities, one in Quebec and the other in New Hampshire. But for various reasons he changed his mind. He thought about a third Congregation in the United States, but a priest put him off the idea. So William decided to defer a decision to a later moment.

In 1926, now aged twenty-one, William found a job in a cotton mill in Dover. He was probably staying with relatives, and he sent his wages to his

mother. At the same time he applied to join the Sons of the Immaculate Conception, founded in Rome in 1857 by Blessed Luigi Monti, but was not accepted because medical tests revealed a possible kidney condition. He returned to Barton, where the Gagnon family had moved in 1922, but never gave up the search for another way to consecrate himself.

In 1930, his younger sister Marie-Éva entered the Congregation of the Sisters of the Assumption in the Nicolet Convent, and her decision re-awakened William's desire to consecrate himself to God. It was around the same time that a priest told him about the Hospitaller Order of St John of God, and this thought remained impressed in his mind. One morning, when he opened a newspaper William read a short account of the life of St John of God in the section on the lives of the saints. He asked the publishers of the newspaper for the address so that he could contact the Brothers of Saint John of God.

The Hospitaller Brothers had arrived in Montreal on 16 April 1927, to assist the poor and destitute at the Hospice Notre-Dame de la Merci in the city.

And then he began to glimpse the way forward. He reflected on how he could serve his Creator and his neighbour. Instead of producing manufactured goods in the depressing and noisy environment of a factory, he could bear witness to his love of God and neighbour by practising hospitality.

THE ADVENTURE BEGINS

On 11 October 1930 William wrote to Brother Laurent Cosgrove, the Superior of the Hospice Notre-Dame de la Merci and Novice Master, who saw promising signs in the young Gagnon.

On 22 October William was admitted as a postulant by the Brothers of St John of God and was by now confident that he was on the right path. But not everything would go as smoothly as he had expected. As early as December that year he received letters from his parents asking him to temporarily break off his journey and return home to help his family at a time of need. With great regret, the young man meekly complied with his parents' wishes, placing his trust in Providence.

His burdensome work in the family home never distracted him from his ideal, however. In a letter written dated 6 January 1931, he confessed to his Superior that he was missing his fellow Brothers.

In the family he always tried to do his best. Even as a schoolboy, he had always been a docile and attentive pupil, helping his teachers, clerical or lay, performing small services for them. He had inherited his parents' perseverance, organisational skills, and the faith.

During their stay in Canada, the Gagnons had taken in a family in straightened circumstances caused by sickness and poverty. Outreaching to others in this way had left a deep impression on him.

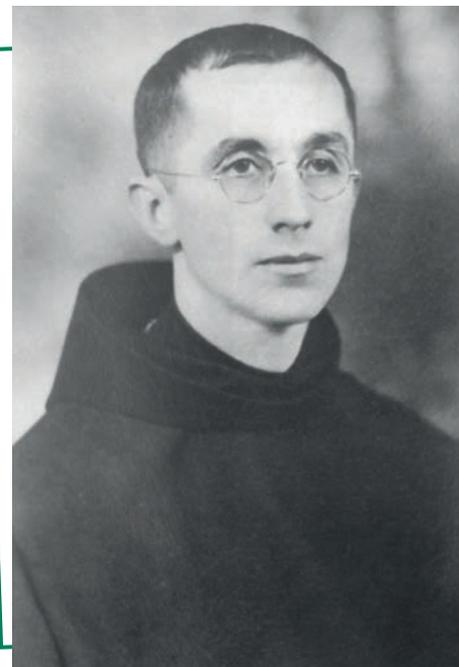
His family experiences had prepared him to take the ultimate decision to consecrate his life to our Lord in the Hospitaller Order of St John of God. William knew about hospitality almost by instinct. It was second nature to him. Caring for his family was like caring for the sick, and helping people in need.

On 29 March, only three months later, William returned to his convent.



*Simple Professed Group.
Brother William in the second row.*

On 17 April 1931, At the age of 26, he began his formation as a postulant, completing all the stages of his religious journey; on 16 July that same year he received the habit of the Order and the name Brother William; on 20 November 1932 he made his temporary vows and on 21 November 1935, at the age of 30, his solemn vows.



Brother William's Solemn Profession 1935.

FAITHFUL TO HIS CALLING

Over the following fifteen years, his exemplary life, made up of both small and large acts of charity towards his neighbour, as well as his profound spirituality, earned him the appreciation of his superiors.

As early as 1937, Brother William was appointed Director of aspirants in Montreal, a duty to which he devoted himself heart and soul, so much so that the Brothers remarked, *"This small man was a reassuring father and elder brother to all the children and young people who knocked at the college door"*.

It was in this college that the young men who would later follow their Religious vocation received their formation. Many witnesses agree on his mod-



Brother William director of the Montreal Aspirantate, 1937.

esty, the confidential tone of his conversations, and his simple and captivating smile that disarmed any attempt at disobedience. Whenever he had to reprimand someone, he always did so in private, never in public, and the person concerned left the interview feeling more confident and a sense of relief. Rather than reprimanding them, he would invite them to correct their failings and try to be better in future.

One of his outstanding features was his punctuality at important moments in community life. Every morning he would urge the young people entrusted to his care to reflect on the liturgy for the day, with a short meditation written especially for them, to help them to prepare for Mass and to set them on the right path towards their future as consecrated men.



Council of the General Delegation of Canada, Hospital Notre-Dame de la Merci, Montreal 12 March 1939.

One witness at the time summed up his candid character by saying, *"Truly great people are the ones who exercise authority by keeping it simple"*. And again: *"Whenever we met him he was always, as they say, à la sauvette (in a rush)"*. He would come to do his paperwork and leave immediately: he was a man who never dawdled.

His life then moved forward quite smoothly, as he took on a variety of roles in different areas of the Order: Councillor of the Canadian Delegation, Local Superior, Provincial Delegate, and later Provincial at the very delicate moment of the erection of the Order's new Canadian Province, just as heated internal tensions were emerging regarding plans for the immediate future, making it necessary for a Visitation by the French Provincial Superior and the Prior General, as well as specific and direct intervention by the Holy See which sent two extraordinary Delegates.

On 23 February 1939, he was appointed third Councillor of the new Delegation of Canada. On 30 March 1941 Fr Henri Bourque, SJ, Apostolic Visitor, appointed him Delegate General of Canada, replacing Brother Mathias Barrett and Prior of the Convent-Hospital of St John of God in Montreal. On 28 October 1941, Fr Bourque, with the permission of Prior General, Brother Ephrem Blandeau, appointed him Provincial Superior and reconfirmed his appointment on 22nd May 1945, also entrusting him with the office of Provincial Bursar.

After the Second World War, the first Provincial Chapter of Canada was finally held on 10 November 1946, with the Prior General, Brother Ephrem Bland-

eau presiding, and Brother William was once again elected Provincial Superior.

In 1947 he Gagnon authorised the foundation of three new Centres in Canada, but found himself in disagreement with the Prior of St John of God's Hospital in Montreal (1947), and then with the Provincial Definitory which opposed the appointment of a lay committee for St Augustine's Hospital in L'Ancienne-Lorette (1948) and again with the Prior of St John of God's Hospital who took over the office of bursar.

On 25 May 1948, having been relieved of his duties as Provincial Superior, as we shall read in the next section, he was appointed Prior of St Augustine's Hospital in L'Ancienne-Lorette, becoming just another Brother, a 'heart within everyone's reach'. He cared for the sick, prayed with them, scrubbed the floors in the evening by way of recreation, and supervised and directed the work of the volunteers and benefactors.

Purely by his personal example he always animated the communities entrusted to him, and his patient and calm approach spoke more loudly than words to enable him to work out and resolve problems.

The members of the community soon realised that Brother William's actions revealed the truth and beauty of the man himself. His humility impressed all the Brothers close to him. His devotion in the Chapel, his kindness to his fellow Brothers and his compassion for the sick faithfully reflected the matters he addressed in his circular letters. The Servant of God was quite small in stature, with a

frail constitution and rather poor health, although he never complained of it, but he had a will of iron with a great enthusiasm that drove every aspect of his religious life. He was dynamic, active, hard-working liked to get things done quickly, but he was also very devout, endowed with a disarming simplicity, apostolic zeal and loving-kindness.

In answer to a Brother in Vietnam who expressed surprise at seeing him taking on laborious jobs, almost like a labourer, Brother William replied: "While I am engaged on doing all these chores, I forget the bigger problems that are plaguing me".



Brother William elected Provincial during the 1st Provincial Chapter of Canada presided over by the Prior General, Brother Ephrem Blandeau, 6 November 1946.

HIS DISMISSAL AS PROVINCIAL

The Visitor General sent from Rome reported a certain *weakness and indecision on the part* of Gagnon. Personal ambition by some often causes unhappiness to others. Brother William learned, without any prior warning, that he would have to resign his office as Provincial Superior in Canada; his replacement was already waiting in the shadows to take his place. All he had to do was sign the letter of resignation, which had already been written for him. He was given no option but to accept the situation.

In two letters he wrote later to the novice master, he revealed his loneliness and the great suffering he was experiencing by having resigned: "*I am hiding in the wounds of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. That is my only source of consolation, and it is only with Him that I can find any happiness, if it even exists here on earth*". But he never voiced any official recriminations or protest.

He sublimated the sense of dejection caused by this groundless, indeed unlawful, resignation, in prayer.

It was his human and spiritual qualities that enabled him to accept his resignation and face the trial with fortitude and human wisdom.

Officially, he had given up his office, but in reality he had been forced to resign on 10 May 1948.

It is true that the Visitor General had judged him to be rather weak and hesitant as a Superior, but in the opinion of many Brothers this was due more to the prudence of the Servant of God, his efforts to preserve unity, harmony and peace, and his commendable tendency to play down the most sensitive situations. On the other hand, he was very humble with no desire to order people about, and was indeed always ready and willing to obey his Superiors.

His Brothers said that his actions and deeds were worth much more than many treatises on charity and the Religious life; his humility spoke more eloquently than many speeches, and in his circular letters he insisted on piety, gentleness with his Brothers and sincere compassion for the sick. His zeal to spread devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, his concern for the physical and spiritual health of the Brothers and the sick all demonstrated his profound spirituality and the exercise of the theological and moral virtues and his observance of the vows, to an extraordinary degree, including the fourth vow of Hospitality.

Brother William was also a shining example of charity to an extraordinary way, especially when performing his duties as superior. He always found time to feed, wash and serve the sick, often reserving for himself the most distasteful and infectious patients and the most thankless tasks, demonstrating his great capacity for welcoming others and his readiness to serve, all qualities that created an atmosphere of friendliness and warmth around him, especially in Viet Nam.

In spite of his administrative and managerial commitments as the Provincial, Brother William would spend at least one hour a day with the sick, washing them, feeding them, caring for them and comforting them in their suffering. He frequently urged his brothers to do better, to cultivate the spirituality of the Hospitaller Order, saying: *"We have a wonderful vocation: to care for Christ in His suffering members and to bring them to Jesus through our life of dedication and charity. But to be able to do this, we must have a deep faith that reveals Our Lord Himself at all times in all our brothers and sisters, whoever they may be. This burning faith can only be obtained by prayer"*.

He was clear about the primacy of charity and its rationale and dynamics, even with regard to what good it brings, but which vanish without the sense of charity. He was convinced that the war in Viet Nam itself would have gone on to the bitter end without charity, whereas with charity it would have stopped immediately: *"Nothing you do without love and charity can be good and useful: you need charity"*.

And echoing the teachings of St John of God he said: *"Always have charity; for where there is no charity, there is no God, although God is everywhere"*.

To help, to love, to distribute, to share, to care, to be loving, selfless, benevolent, compassionate, empathetic, generous, caring: these are the words that beautifully sum up Brother William's life of charity.

The Servant of God knew how to be a humble instrument of concord and harmony among the

Brothers, among the sick and among the staff, ironing out conflicts and respecting the cultural differences of each and every individual.

One special way of expressing charity is the Order's fourth vow – Hospitality -which the Servant of God practised radically, patiently and perseveringly. He was faithful to his vocation of hospitality, which he always offered to everyone without any kind of social, political or religious discrimination. He wrote to his Brothers: *"It is better to remain in Hospitality well done and let the world go on with its flattery"*.

Faced by the difficulties he encountered in his mission, he tenaciously stayed his ground to serve the sick and confront whatever situation might arise living in a state of war and guerrilla attacks, giving proof of his courageous and great inner strength.

HIS SPIRITUALITY FOCUSED ON CHRIST AND OUR LADY

Brother William's spirituality revolved around Divine Providence, the Child Jesus, Our Lady of Mercy, the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the Wounds of Jesus and St John of God. He spent many hours in prayer and deep meditation; his gaze was often fixed on the Tabernacle. He loved everyone without distinction, he was affable yet austere, dignified and discreet; he embodied goodness, especially when dealing with the sick, who were his favourites and he treated them like his own children; he had the same attitude towards young aspirants and probationers. He had the gift of being a group leader and of making himself loved. He was never indifferent to anyone, but was friendly to all; more than a Superior he was a Brother, aware of his high responsibilities which he took on himself trusting in God's assistance.

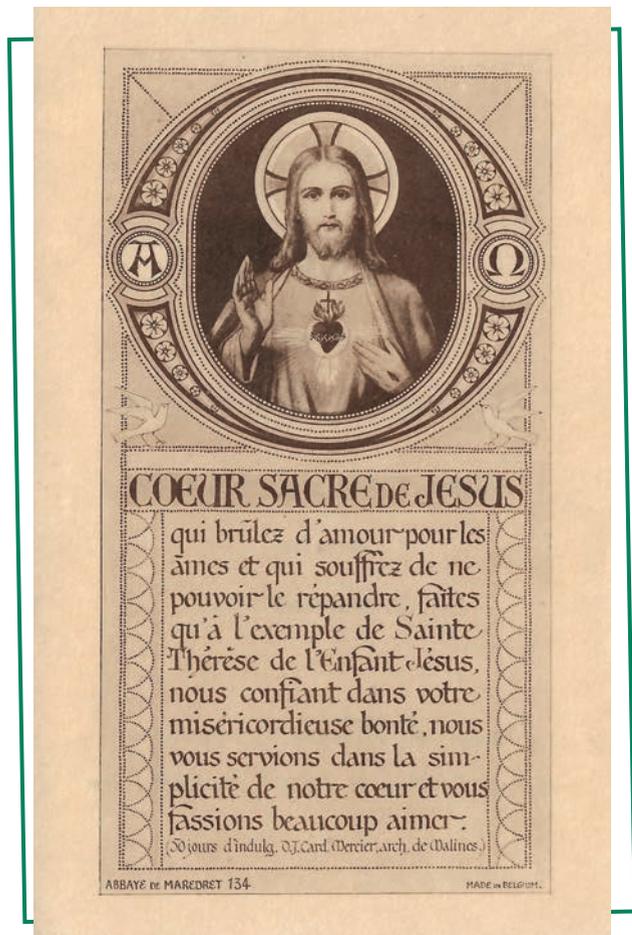
Brother William had an exceptional 'childlike spirit'. He tenderly trusted in the Providence of God the good and merciful Father, who loves his children and asks them to cooperate. He would often say to his Brothers: *"I come to you as a Father"*.

His special devotion to the Sacred Heart frequently emerged in the letters he sent to his confreres as Provincial. And when he received the Brothers, as novices or postulants for an interview,

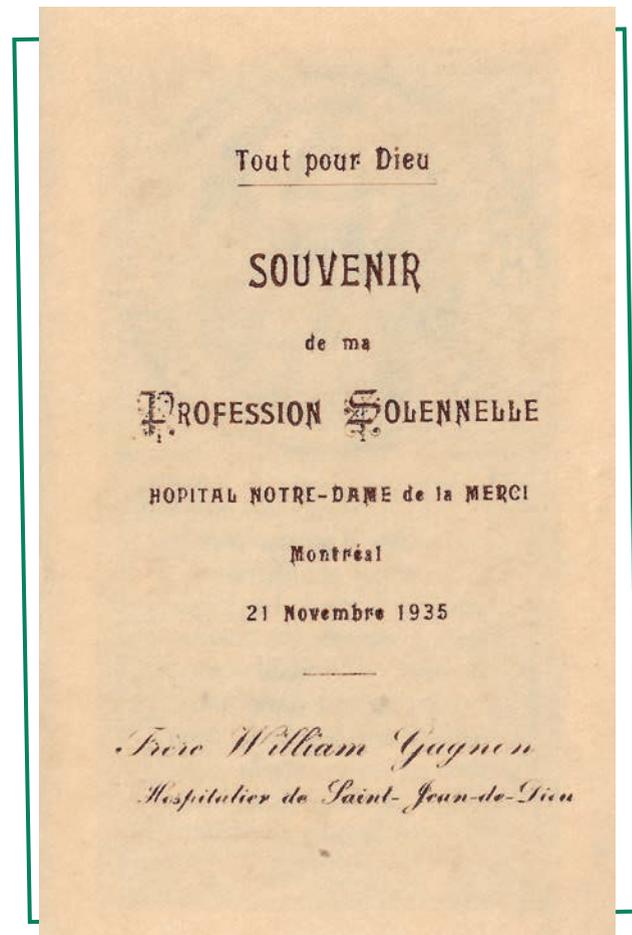
he never failed to give them a small picture of the Sacred Heart, urging them to trust in Him. At one retreat he consecrated the entire community to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. In the difficult moments of the war in the Vietnamese mission, his co-work-

ers heard him murmur on many occasions "Sacred Heart of Jesus, I trust in You!".

Brother William's devotion to the Eucharist was evident from his constant visits to the Blessed Sac-



His Solemn Profession, 21 November 1935 r.



His Solemn Profession, 21 November 1935 v.

rament; whenever he passed by the chapel, he would always stop by for a few minutes in prayer and sometimes stayed there in adoration even late at night. He was particularly attentive to the practice of the First Fridays of the month, with the Exposition of the Eucharist and all the Brothers took turns to make a Holy Hour. He was often seen with the rosary in his hands; he continuously prayed to Our Lady and attributed to her the miracle of our having survived the bombings unscathed. And he used to place a small statue of Our Lady of Fatima in the direction of the fighting.

Reaching out, like the Child Jesus to Mary of Nazareth: this was Brother William's constant concern.

From his youth until his dying day he would implore the support of Our Lady, Queen of heaven and earth, in every circumstance in the knowledge that Our Lady bears everyone in her heart and would always respond to his requests.

With the same affection that one has for a loved one, he placed an image of the Sacred Heart of Mary in his office in Montreal. At the entrance to the novitiate he erected a statue of Mary to encourage devotion to the Mother of God by the novices to devotion to the on the part of the novices. One day, he offered a statuette of Mary to a young Brother in hospital.

One of his Brothers, Gaston Morin, who had been a novice when Brother William was the prior, said that when observing the Brothers and Brother William during meditation, he noticed that Brother

William had the attitude of being in the presence of Someone. In the chapel nothing disturbed him except the cries of the sick. He always smiled, surrendering himself to Providence in spite of the trials and adversities that he experienced.

He knew how to play down everything. If he encountered any poor people without family or a home, abandoned by all, he would bend over backwards for them, giving generously what he could spare. He also possessed the gift of consolation: after talking to him, the patients would calm down again. And as for the gift of Hospitality, his generosity was boundless; he was simply incapable of saying no.

He recited the Litany of the Blessed Virgin daily and slipped the rosary between his fingers, holding it under his scapular, between his old, patched-up cassock and his leather belt that had seen better days.

While in Viet Nam, our 'Good Samaritan' often went on spiritual retreats with the Redemptorist Fathers and used those occasions to travel by jeep to Fyan, to visit the Koho, one of the thirty-three tribes living in the mountains.

One of the Redemptorist Fathers acted as his driver and interpreter in his contacts with the villagers. Brother William loaded everything he needed to set up an improvised dispensary.

In 1970 Brother William visited a leprosarium run by the Daughters of Charity of St Vincent de Paul.

He admired the Sisters' dedication to those sick people who had been marginalised by society.

Our Servant of God knew how to combine the spiritual and the temporal; he did everything for God. There was nothing inseparable in his spirituality.

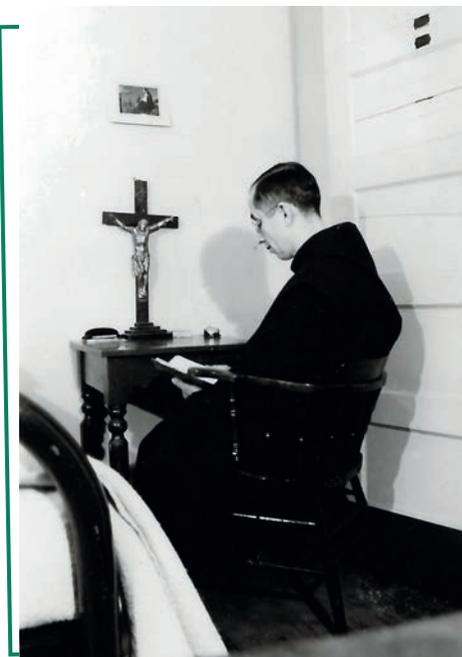
He truly lived a unified life.



Altar of the Sacred Heart in the Chapel of the Sacred Heart Hospital in Bui-Chu 1952.

OUTREACH TO THE MISSION

After standing down as Provincial in 1948, Brother William was transferred to Quebec and appointed first Provincial Councillor and Prior of the St Augustine Hospital at L'Ancienne-Lorette, where he was given the responsibility for vocations promotion. On 17 January 1950 his father, Delphin Gagnon, died at the age of 69. During the months of October and November 1950 he took over from the



Brother William in his room, Saint Augustine's Hospital at L'Ancienne-Lorette 1948-1951.

Provincial Superior who had left for Europe, while Providence was preparing him to leave his homeland, relatives and Brothers to become an authentic missionary.

For the Canadian Province of the Brothers of Saint John of God was planning to found the Order in Viet Nam. William Gagnon, knowing what awaited him in that distant country, applied on 24 December 1950 to become a missionary among the poor.

His request was granted, along with those of two other Brothers, and on 19 October 1951 the Provincial Definitory resolved to send them on a mission to Indochina. In a circular letter of October 24, 1951,



Brother William in prayer

drawing on the Encyclical *Evangelii praecones* on the proclamation of the Gospel, the Provincial of Canada, Brother Exupère Vien, announced that Brother William had been appointed to be the founding Prior of the mission in Indochina, calling on the Servant of God and his Brothers to “*carry the beacon of Charity for which our Order has been officially given the mission by the Church in this vast field of Indochina*”.

So the Servant of God, at the age of 46 and already in poor health, embarked on an interminable journey of about one month, with Brothers Norbert Laserte and Richard Larivée. The three Brothers arrived in Indochina on 18 January 1952 at Bui-Chu, North Viet Nam, at the Sacred Heart Hospital, which had been left by a Religious community of sisters in 1950 due to the political insecurity. But because of the war, from 15 June to 10 July, he was forced to



Brother Norbert, Brother William and Brother Richard departing for Viet Nam, 1951.

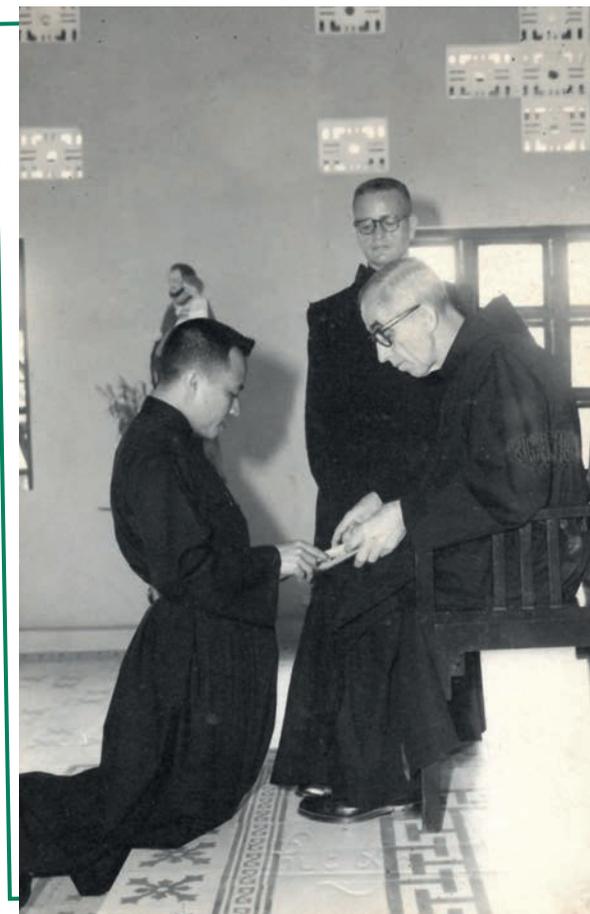


Honai Hospital, 1956.

leave Bui-Chu and took refuge first in Hanoi, then in Dalat (South Viet Nam) with the Redemptorists where he and one of his confrères stayed for a few days. Later on they flew to Nam-Dinh, where they were welcomed by a delegation of priests and seminarians. They spent the first night in the bishop's house, but were awakened in the morning by artillery crossfire. When they reached the old hospital, they immediately had to take care of a young man who had arrived there on a stretcher in a very serious condition; in addition to wounds in various parts of his body, he had lost a leg due to a bomb that had exploded close by. Unfortunately, the hospital no longer had a pharmacy and did not even have a vial of morphine to soothe his pain. The poor man was not a Christian, but wanted to be, and before he died he was baptised. The bishop also arrived immediately and said to the Brothers: "See how much we need you?"

On 28 July 1953, he was appointed Prior of the Sacred Heart Hospital in Bui-Chu. In July 1954, he was threatened with death during the communist invasion and lost the Sacred Heart Hospital in Bui-

Chu. Between September and October 1954, he recreated the mission in an old prison in Tam Hiep (South Viet Nam). In July and August 1955 he started the construction of a hospital in Honai, Bien-Hoa Province. On 8 August 1956 he was appointed Prior of the mission of Our Lady of Good Counsel in Honai (Bien-Hoa) and Provincial Delegate.



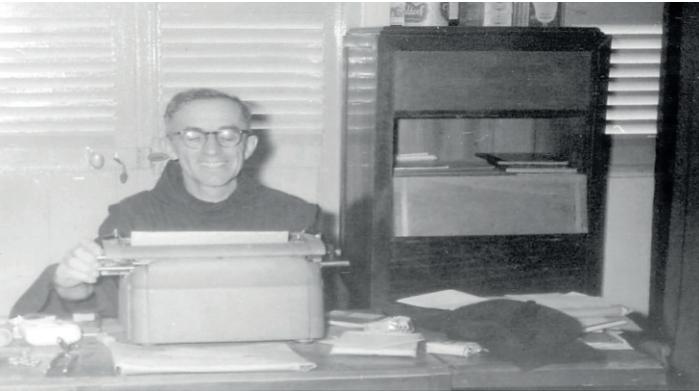
Fra William riceve i Voti di un giovane professore, 1960.

CORRESPONDENCE

Brother William enjoyed writing to people, as if he wanted to give them a sign of life. He wrote mainly to his Religious family, but also to his family in New England. He used letterhead and typed on fine airmail paper, using carbon paper. He kept copies of the letters he sent by post, which took about two weeks to reach their destination.

When a letter did not deal with official canonical matters, he wrote down the news for his young Brothers in the margins, thus saving time and money. He also shared the reading of certain letters with them. It was a way to break the isolation in which they found themselves and to keep up his ties with Canada.

Brother William's compassion made him sensitive to the lives of others and he also practised it in his correspondence.



Brother William doing his correspondence.

One day, Brother William noticed a forlorn-looking young missionary. He advised him to get back in touch with his parents, especially his father. Relations between them had cooled. Brother William took the initiative to write directly to the Provincial of Canada, who was staying with his maternal uncle, and to the Brother's spiritual director.

As a result, relations between the young missionary and his parents gradually improved.

A LIVING CHARITY

From the moment war broke out in Indochina, Brother William had been pleading with Heaven to protect the Sacred Heart Mission-Hospital in Bui-Chu.

Calculating the force and direction of the shelling, he put up a small statue of Our Lady of Fatima to protect the Mission. With this simple gesture, he trusted that the Blessed Virgin would open the eyes and hearts of the belligerents and bring them being talking, and cease fighting, and work for peace.

The walls of the Mission were surrounded by a barbed wire fence, a symbol of despair, but despite this, the Mission was a symbol of how far compas-



Arial view of the Sacred Heart Hospital in Bui-Chu, 1952.

sion and dedication could break through the din of death, but above all of the need to defend and show respect for the human dignity.

Sometimes the enemy would throw grenades onto the sloping roof of the chapel. All you could hear was the dull thud of the grenade landing, then rolling to the ground until it was lost in the damp early morning grass.

Heaven did not appear ready to give up. In this corner of the country the Brothers of St John of God were holding the "Grenade of Love".



Moment of fraternity.

ACTS OF HUMBLE HOSPITALITY

Brother William cared for the sick, the poor and the refugees as if in reparation for the sufferings of Christ on the cross. Relieving suffering was the very raison d'être of this young missionary. In his room he would often kneel down before the Crucifix.

During Mass and adoration he would meditate on the life Passion and Resurrection of our Lord. From that unjust and absurd death sprang Life.

Brother William contemplated and acted. He felt ill-prepared to work out academic theories and unworthy of honours; he always preferred to put himself last. He felt more useful holding the hand of a patient, or preparing a lifeless body for burial.

Brother William presented the patient healed the day before, the family received in the morning at the dispensary, and the burial of the deceased buried in the afternoon -all this humanity lacerated by suffering - to Jesus.

Through these actions, his heart beat to the rhythm of the Truth: Christ.

Respect for the sick was an absolute rule for him, a genuine way of practising the vow of Hospitality, which is specific to the Hospitaller Brothers of St John of God. It was amazing to see him kneeling by the side of sick beds, dressing wounds and sores, even the most repugnant.

This simple account by the Bishop of Xuân Lộc of one particular episode beautifully sums up the heights which Brother William's charity reached:

"On one of the first days of the Vietnamese new year, a patient with serious lung problems was rushed to hospital. Brother William took him into his arms. This sick man vomited blood on the bedroom floor and on Brother William's clothes, and died. The Servant of God still kissed him in his arms without any sign of repugnance and took him to the dormitory. Faith and charity helped him to overcome and set aside any sense of revulsion about certain unpleasant situations of our fragile human nature".



Brother William assisting a casualty of the war, 1953.

Many Brothers said that they were strengthened in their vocation by seeing Brother William working with the sick.

The dedication and humility with which he worked and his ability to share the sufferings of others in a certain sense also involved his co-workers, creating a climate of serenity and peace in the hospital, a place of suffering.

One Brother reported that Brother William was like a father, full of kindness and love. Sometimes he would get angry or irritated because of the diffi-



Visit to the Community by the local Bishop Mgr Pham-Ngoc-Chi, January 1952.

culty of the language and when he realised this he would immediately ask for forgiveness.

The Servant of God lived out his fourth vow of Hospitality by always being content with what little he had, while being very considerate of others. He gave the impression of someone who always wanted to benefit his neighbour; he never asked for anything for himself. His clothes were patched and worn.

He had a very powerful spirit of service: he often kept the meanest chores for himself, such as weeding, cleaning up, and cleaning the latrines.



The Bui-Chu Community, 1953.

One witness said: *"Having met the Brother several times, I noticed that he was totally dedicated to caring for the sick. Every morning he would drive to the market to buy provisions and things that the sick needed. In the afternoon he would visit the sick and check on their health. When he saw dirty surroundings, he would roll up the sleeves of his cassock and start cleaning them. Every Saturday he would distribute rice and milk to the poor sick people. His charity was totally dedicated to the service of the sick and the poor"*.

A GREAT CONCERT!

Brother William would use this exclamation in his letters alluding to exploding bombs and firearms. He wanted to mock human wickedness, blinded by the power to destroy. To his mind, this brutality would eventually disappear as a nightmare does.

When the nightly, almost pyrotechnic explosions lit up the sky, Brother William would go to the chapel. There, alone or in the company of a Brother, he would implore Heaven to protect all the refugees who were experiencing moments of terror. He prayed to the Blessed Virgin Mary for peace to come into the hearts of each person.

Scenes of war soon became commonplace. Despite the risks and difficulties, Brother William faced the trials of conflict by placing his trust in God. When the Brothers asked him whether he was not afraid of being struck by bombs or bullets, he would reply: *"We must trust in God's Providence! God always protects us in his mercy. Time is God's. Whether we live or die is His decision. So what is there to be afraid of?"* The Prior's example was also a great encouragement to the Brothers who became more determined than ever to stay on the spot, whatever might happen. And it was precisely this courage that attracted numerous vocations.

Brother Jean de Dieu Spenard, who had the Servant of God as his superior in the novitiate and then worked with him for nine years in Viet Nam, said of

him: *“Brother William, in spite of his poor command of the local language, was the most loved and admired by the Vietnamese people who could not fathom how this foreigner managed to remain so unassuming and calm despite his enormous commitments, always ready to listen to everyone. They were certain that he understood their needs, and this attitude won over their hearts. During his early years of missionary life, I saw him always exactly the same man: being an exemplary Brother, he would invite us to follow him by agreeing to perform the meanest tasks such as looking after the hen house, raising and caring for the pigs, gardening, and doing the daily shopping at the market. He continuously gave of himself to the best of his ability. He preached more by his example than by what he said, and that is what amazed me.”* That he preached more by his example than by his words is the recurrent *Leitmotif* we would hear all the time on the lips of all who knew him.

The three Hospitaller Brothers at the mission had to take care of the Sacred Heart Hospital in Bui-Chu and the annexed dispensary, some 120 km south of Hanoi, in the Red River delta. It was a particularly arduous task, replacing the qualified staff, especially the French, who had left because of the worsening situation there, leaving the local people without any hospital care, in a dilapidated building with no medicines or healthcare equipment. He attributed any successes to Our Lady of Fatima, whose statue stood at the entrance to the village, and to the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

A MISSIONARY BEARER OF HOPE AND FORGIVENESS

During the war, Brother William suffered from hunger and the lack of any basic necessities standing alongside the Vietnamese people, but he did not hesitate to look after the children, the elderly and the poor, whose bodies were being torn apart by the shooting and the bombardments. Our Servant of God cared about everyone, without any political or social distinctions, both guerrillas and regular soldiers: for him there was no difference between them. He told the government that it was necessary for the hospital to treat any kind of illness and every patient, without any political or ethnic discrimination.

In 1954, the north of the country was on the verge of falling into communist hands. Various emergencies had to be dealt with, caused by the ever-increasing migration of refugees into the south, numbering some eight hundred thousand souls. As well as conducting mass vaccinations against smallpox and cholera, working with the Redemptorist Fathers the Brothers helped them to get to safety. The situation had become really dire, and in a letter to his sister, Sister Marie-Éva, Brother William spoke about the serious jeopardy facing the community because of one particular patients they were caring for.

For the gravely ill patient being looked after and treated by Brother William and two other Brothers

had given a photograph of them to a band of guerrillas. How and when this picture had been taken has never been discovered, but the Brothers faced the possibility of being arrested and even executed.

Faced with this situation, Brother William felt as if he had been propelled into a kind of Garden of Olives.

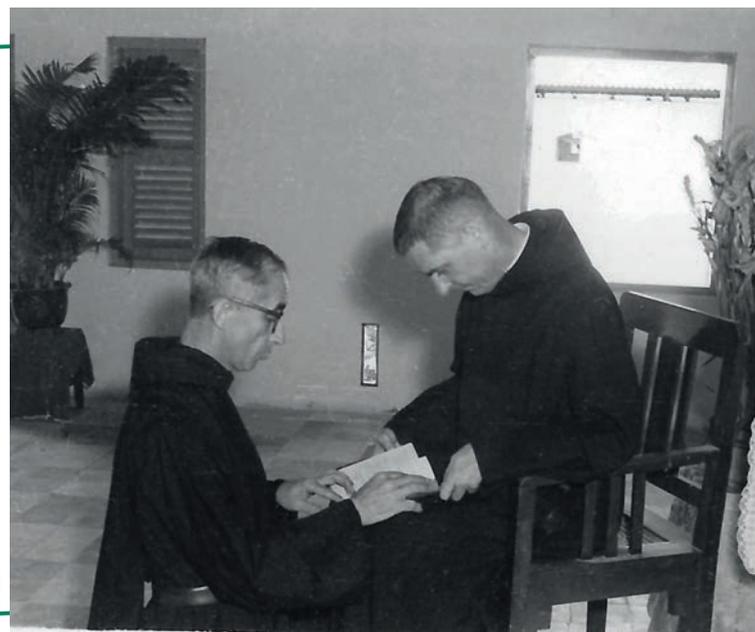


Brother William taking a moment of rest, 22 December 1957.

He recalled that he had advised two Belgian priests to be extremely cautious. Perhaps they took his words too lightly and were not particularly worried, and they failed to heed this warning. One day the guerrillas captured them and it was later learned that they had died in prison.

Following the Bishop's suggestion, the three Canadian Brothers left the Mission for a few days.

Sometimes," Brother William used to say, recalling this event, *"even the people we are helping, or caring for, thank us with ingratitude. Actually, their ingratitude is commensurate with the help they are given".*



25th anniversary of his Religious Profession, 22 December 1957.

In 1956 Brother William was appointed Prior of the new hospital in Honai, which he named after Our Lady of Good Counsel, a promise he had made before leaving for the south of the country. There was no shortage of difficulties, but Providence always responded generously to the efforts of the Brothers. In the midst of all these difficulties, new vocations flourished. There were now seventeen young postulants who wanted to prepare for the Hospitaller Religious Life. It is astonishing that, despite his poor knowledge of Vietnamese, "Brother Nhan", as Brother William was called, was the talk of the town. His great simplicity, goodness, humility and the smile on his face, shrunken by exhaustion, with which he ministered to the sick even doing the most repellent tasks, made him a true son of Saint John of God and everyone was captivated by him. Everyone looked to him as a sign of hope and security for all.

CONSUMED BY LOVE

With his feet firmly planted in this land that had now adopted him, and with his gaze turned towards the horizon, Brother William welcomed in the refugees. Accompanied by his Brothers, he attended to their wounds and raised the spirits of the war victims.

He prayed that all that cruelty would only be like a nightmare from which everyone would awaken. He supervised the construction of facilities that could have been destroyed by a bomb in an instant. He also helped to make the bricks, hauling the sand



Brother William at the market, 1956.

and clay like the workers who were engaged on this task.

He always used to say that without Charity, whatever was done would be sterile and without any real strength.

This Brother from the West used to mingle with the crowds at the Biên-Hòa market. On his return he would go to the chapel to pray. After this short break he would retire to the kitchen to prepare a nutritious soup for the tuberculosis patients, the poorest of the poor.

At meal times, he insisted that everyone eat well. The other Brothers went out of their way to provide care and assistance.

As his life was drawing to its close, he would fill his time tidying up the medicine cabinet and writing a few words to his family. He apologised for not being able to do more and for being a burden on the Brothers.

His whole life resembled a lantern that was slowly burning away, not for him, but for his neighbour and above all for Our Lord.

TEARS OF COMPASSION

Although he felt a powerful urge to help others, he was sometimes unable to find the right words to comfort them. And that was not all: he also lacked the surgical instruments he needed to save a dying human being.

To attend to a seriously wounded woman, Brother William tried to set up an operating table so that two of his Brothers could attempt an emergency amputation.

Faced with this tragic scene, he took care to temporarily remove the children from the woman. At the request of the dying mother, he poured baptismal water over her.

But the woman uttered her last breath, and died. A nurse lowered his head in sadness, noting that nothing could be done. Brother William approached her compassionately and gently closed her eyes. He handed the body over to the family. In many cases, he would bury the dead himself.

Once left alone, he would fix his eyes on the horizon with his tears streaming down his face, but his trust in God's mercy never wavered for an instant.

THE CAPACITY TO FORGIVE

If someone slapped him, Brother William would turn his head, offering the other cheek without resistance.

He saw abusiveness as an opportunity for redemption, and also an opportunity to forgive.



Brother William talking in Honai, 1959.

The offender was wrong, but also had qualities and talents. Talking always opened the way to possible reconciliation.

If Brother William thought he had offended someone he would always apologise.

He often acted as a conciliator, mediating between two people in conflict with each other. He would tell one of them about the other's good points, and tell the latter about the former's wish to change his behaviour. Brother William highlighted the positives, without insisting on the negatives. He saw fraternity as an opportunity to end ill-feelings, reject contempt and heal bonds that seemed to be broken.



Conferral of the Medal of Honour for Merit, 3 August 1967.

EXISTENTIAL COINCIDENCES

Our lives are like so many scenes in a film, with only the date and the setting differing. We share our human condition under God's watchful eye. This is often the case between a Founder and his spiritual children.

St John of God's biographers recount the episode when a young rascal decided to put him to the test and deliberately bumped into him, knocking him into a tub full of water. John reacted humbly, and seeing the funny side of it, he merely gave him a broad smile.

In the 16th century St John of God used to carry wood on his shoulders and filled his bag with food scraps. Four centuries later, Brother William used to collect the things that the US Army dumped that could be used for the hospital and the community: old chairs, desks, piping, and so on.

With the help of a few Brothers, he would load these materials onto the Mission truck and take them home.

One day, some passing soldiers passing jeered at our 'recycler'. Brother William reacted to their sneers by laughing back. He had found various items that he could still find useful by practising hospitality in one way or another. That was his reward for the day.

PROVIDENTIAL INSIGHTS

Between 30 and 31 January 1968, during the *Têt* celebrations, the North Vietnamese army and the Viet Cong launched a surprise attack on the South Vietnamese army and the American forces.

In the days following the clash, some 7,000 refugees had settled down on the Mission grounds, around the convent, hospital and the other buildings.

Brother William was concerned by this huge unexpected crowd. Within hours of the occupation, he began to worry about the unsanitary conditions and the possible spread of disease. Reluctantly, he decided to ask his Brothers to disperse the crowd.

The refugees picked up their belongings and trooped away with their children, carrying their few belongings on their shoulders.

The following night, a military attack shook the entire Saigon region. Bombs fell on the Mission grounds and killed the few people who had refused to leave.

To their amazement, the Brothers realised that Brother William's foresight had saved the lives of so many people.

A second incident deserves mention. In the summer of 1969, on an oppressively hot day, Brother William exceptionally excused the Brothers from

recreation in the community room. They all decided to go back to work. This saved the lives of the Brothers when, moments later, a missile exploded in the centre of the room.

His Brothers saw in these events a providential act of enlightenment, of which Brother William had been the messenger.

AN ACCIDENTAL BULLET

In the course of the *Têt* celebrations in 1968, fighting was raging around the Mission. You could hear the booms and hisses of the firing, in addition to exploding bombs. The Brothers threw themselves to the ground, preparing to yield their souls to God. In their fright, they woke Brother William who, still half asleep, asked them why they were so nervous.

Weren't they worrying too much? He told them that they had to place their trust in God and regain their strength for the work that awaited them the next day. Their last hour had not yet come! Time belongs to God alone.

But then the whistle of a bullet could be heard and a Brother jumped on Brother William and pushed him into his room. The bullet shattered one side of the fragile wooden door frame, but Brother William remained as calm as ever.

RETURNING HOME

In August 1959 Brother William returned to Montreal to the Hospital of Notre-Dame de la Merci to attend the October Provincial Chapter, at which he was elected Second Councillor. He remained in Canada for what he felt to be three long years, during which time he recovered his health. He took the opportunity to visit his family and his mother who was seriously ill. The Provincial, Brother Judicael Maréchaux, did not want to send him back to Viet Nam because of his age (the Servant of God was already 57), the Vietnamese climate and the ongoing war. But Brother William's only dream was to go back again. The period of rest imposed on him by his superiors was a great cross to bear, although he abandoned himself to Providence: *"If the good Lord does not wish a particular thing to happen,"* he said, *"there is nothing we can do about it"*. But it was obvious to all that his heart was in Viet Nam.

At last, at the end of 1962 he was permitted to leave for Viet Nam. Brother William made a stop-over in Rome to resign as Second Provincial Councillor and then remained as Prior of Our Lady of Good Counsel Hospital in Bien-Hoa in Honai until 1968.

But Brother William's health had been declining for some time, and he was no longer able to perform his duties to the full, and in order not to be a burden on the already overburdened mission community, he made a surprise request in April 1971 to return to Canada. His request was granted by his su-

periors in a letter dated 4 July 1971. But due to a setback, the Provincial, Brother Elias Le Gresley, asked him to stay on in Honai for a while longer to enable him, as their Superior, to set a good example to the Vietnamese novices. Brother William placed himself at the disposal of the Father Provincial and obeyed the request wholeheartedly. He certainly could not contradict his own teaching, when as Provincial, he had written in a letter dated 23 December 1944: *"For you professed Brother in particular, I pray that God will fill you with his grace and grant you to understand more and more each day the heavy task you have been given -- to always set a good example to the young Brothers, to guide them and enable them to appreciate the beauty of our hospitaller vocation by performing all our religious duties and obligations"*.



Brother William with Brother Elie Le Gresley, August 1968.

This delay in returning to Canada proved to be fatal to Brother William's health. In September, he suffered from a severe attack of phlebitis, which caused him constant and excruciating pain in his legs. Then, on 23 December, a heart attack left him bedridden for seven weeks. In addition to suffering from his illness, he also suffered by being unable to help anyone else: he offered everything to the Sacred Heart, his constant spiritual benchmark. His condition worsened further, so much so that on 28 February 1972, after repeated heart attacks, it was decided to transfer him to the government hospital in Saigon, where he received better treatment. But it was too late: a few hours after his arrival, at 12.05 pm that same day, the Servant of God died in the arms of a Brother. He had received the sacraments before going to hospital. And his final last words were: *"My God!"*

WRAPPED IN A BED OF TEA LEAVES

Brother William always placed his trust God in prayer before taking any decision, and he did so during his discernment before he entered the Hospitaller Order by going to the Redemptorists' Sainte-Anne de Beaupré Shrine near Quebec City, Canada.

He also kept up his relationship with the Redemptorists when he lived in Viet Nam; during his foundation attempts in Bui-Chu, Hanoi and Honai, he was accompanied by a few Canadian Redemp-



Brother William and his nurse Brother Maurice Clement in Honai, Bien-Hoa, 25 February 1972.

torist missionaries who remained close to him until his death.

They send tea leaves from their plantation to the Honai Mission. And it was on a white sheet, laid on a bed of tea leaves, that Brother William's body was laid out on the day he died. With his earthly body resting on these leaves, his soul was welcomed into Heaven.

His coffin was watched over by a military platoon in recognition of the service that he and his fellow Brothers had rendered to the people of Viet Nam. In 1967, the Prime Minister, General Nguyen Cao-Ky, awarded him the Medal of Honour for Merit with the same citation.

In his homily, the celebrant repeated a phrase that the Brothers had often heard Brother William utter: "*I have chosen this place to be my homeland*".

As the people of Honai had wished, his body was placed in a precious teak coffin and then lowered into a tomb made of masonry blocks where it still rests, close to the chapel and at the foot of the statue of the Holy Family that he loved so much.

Many people have testified to his holiness. His was a holiness lived day by day, and for the poor and the sick who came into contact with this apostle of the Gospel, he was a great evangeliser, a sure beacon of hope. As an example of boundless charity, the Servant of God *had made himself all things to all people*, to cite the words of a member of staff of the hospital where Brother William worked.

A true son of St John of God.

In 1999, the Cause of Canonisation was launched. On 14 December 2015, the Supreme Pontiff, Pope Francis, recognised his heroic virtues and proclaimed him Venerable.



Brother William's tomb.

FROM THE WRITINGS OF BROTHER WILLIAM GAGNON

"Remember that everything is easy for people who love others, while everything weighs down and tires those one who do not love. They even the things that might bring him happiness distasteful."

"Honours are but smoke and straw fires. All that remains is the little good we have done; we are grateful to God for giving us these joys at every moment."

"It is becoming ever more evident it is not weapons that will bring peace, but prayer and charity".

"The wounds of the Sacred Heart of Jesus are my only consolation, and it is only in Him that I can find happiness, if any happiness exists on this earth".

"I don't care about the title. The essential thing is to submit to God's will".

"We are, first and foremost, men of prayer. Without prayer, we cannot obtain any grace, and without grace, we can do nothing".

SAINT JOHN OF GOD FOUNDER OF THE HOSPITALER BROTHERS 'FATEBENEFRAPELLI'

Not everyone knows that Saint John of God's real name was Juan Ciudad, and that he was born in Portugal, at Montemor-o-Novo. He spent his early years there, until, at the age of eight, he went to Oropesa, in Spain, where he was taken in by the family of Francisco Cid, known as 'el Mayoral'. On two occasions he left Oropesa to go to war in the army: the first time was in Fuenterrabía, in the Pyrenees, and the second time he was in Vienna fighting the Turks. From Vienna he went back to Spain and then to his native country. From here he began a period of searching for what the Lord wanted of him. He went to Seville, Ceuta (Morocco), Gibraltar and finally Granada, where he established himself as a book-seller. Then, on 20 January 1539, the Feast of St Sebastian, after hearing a sermon preached by John of Avila at the Martyrs' Hermitage, he was overcome by an intense feeling of interior transformation which caused him to shout out about his "madness" to the world, so much so that he was considered to be out of his mind and was locked up in Granada's Royal Hospital. He emerged a few months later, ready to follow the Lord. After placing himself under the direction of St John of Avila, he went on a pilgrimage to the Shrine of Our Lady of

Guadalupe and then he returned to Granada to begin his work, to assist the sick and needy poor of the city. He worked, begged for alms, collected the poor and prostitutes from the streets, and was gradually joined by volunteers and benefactors. He had a very original way of asking for charity: "Do good to yourselves! Fate bene fratelli - Do good, brothers!" In the autumn of 1539 he founded his first hospital, the House of God, in Via Lucena, where everyone could find hospitality. Together with his first companions, he organised care according to the needs of those he considered 'his' poor. That same year, the Archbishop of Granada clothed him in a religious habit and confirmed the name that the people had already given him: 'John of God'. In 1547 the Hospital moved to the Salida de los Gomeles. John died on 8 March 1550 with a great reputation for holiness. His first companions then started founding the Hospitaler Order of St John of God, the 'Do-good-Brothers' - Fatebenefratelli. The process for his beatification took place in 1630. On 16 October 1690 he was canonised by Alexander VIII. He was declared Patron Saint of hospitals and the sick by Leo XIII in 1886, and Patron Saint of nurses and their associations by Pius XI in 1930. In 1940, Pius XII proclaimed him the second Heavenly Patron of Granada. Saint John of God stands as an example of being in readiness to reach out to offer help and hospitality to his neighbour.

PRAYER OF INTERCESSION

Merciful Jesus and Good Samaritan, you have revealed to us, in the simplicity and charity of the Venerable Servant of God William Gagnon, a path to achieve evangelical holiness, to follow you with a staunch faith, and to serve you among the sick and those in need.

We ask you to help us to imitate his example in the love of our neighbour; we therefore look to him as our model and intercessor.

By your goodness, Lord, we ask you to reveal his holiness to us, and through his intercession grant us your blessings and the grace we now ask of you, so that the testimony and the holiness of your faithful Servant William Gagnon may be recognised by the Church for your greater glory.

Our Father..., Hail Mary..., Glory be to the Father...

For further information, please apply to:

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