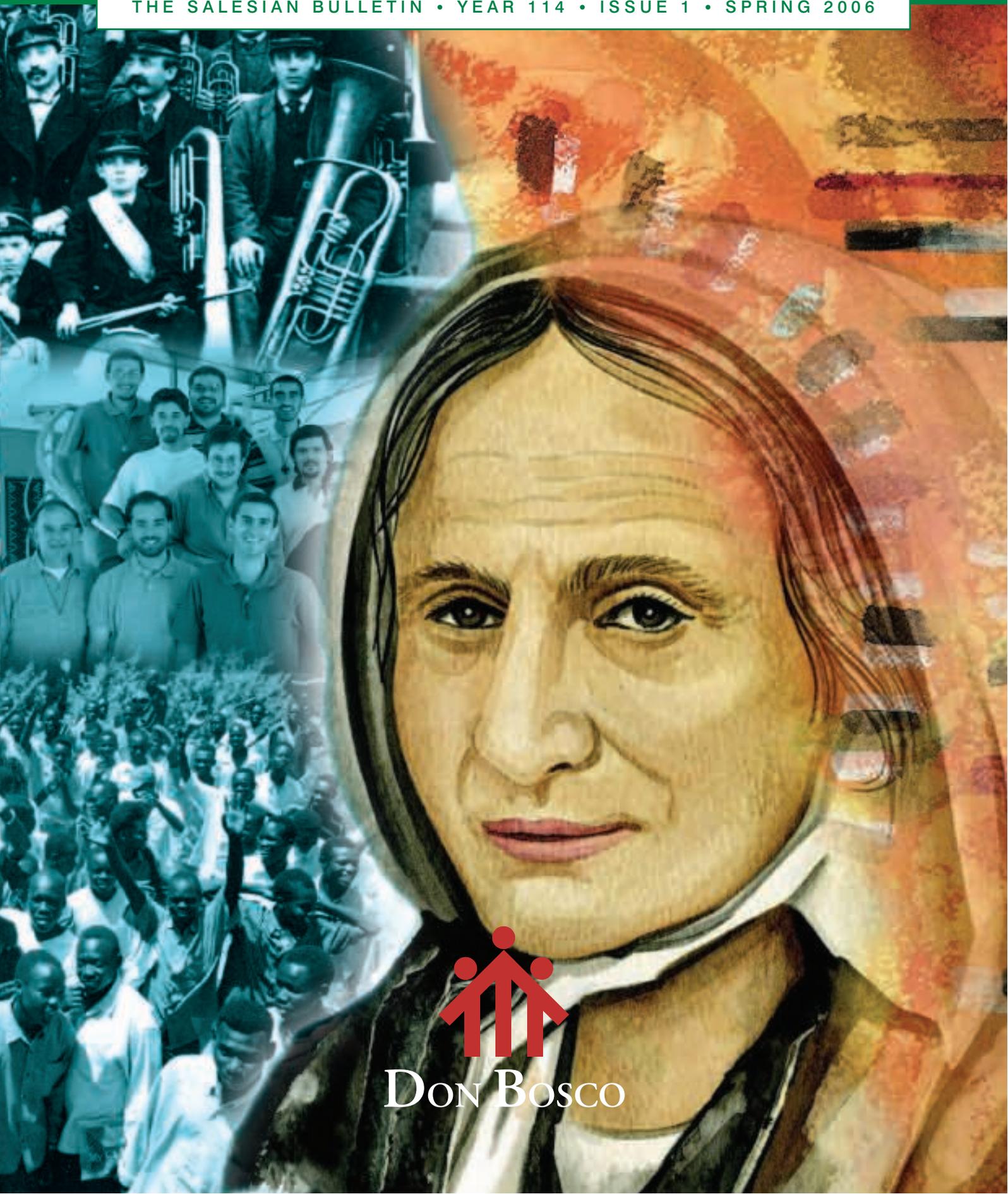


THE MAGAZINE FOR THE SALESIAN FAMILY

# DON BOSCO TODAY

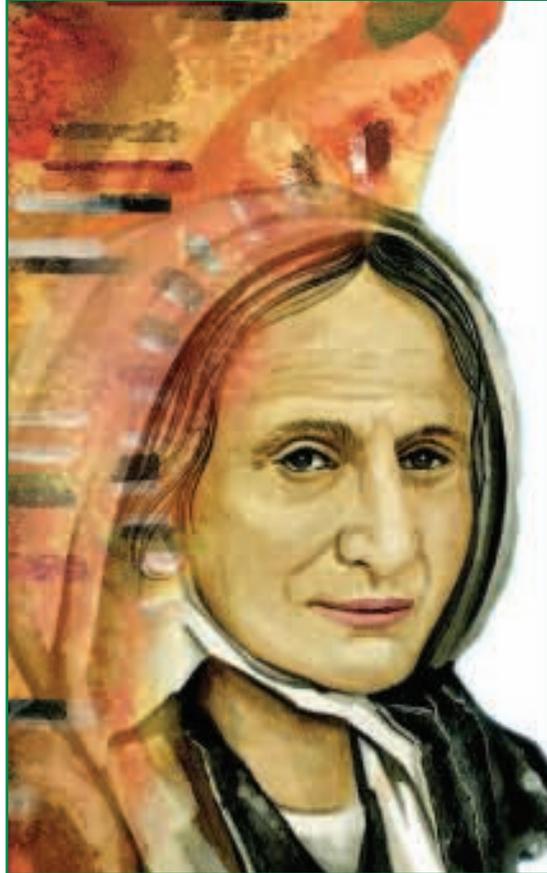
THE SALESIAN BULLETIN • YEAR 114 • ISSUE 1 • SPRING 2006



Don Bosco



# Editorial



The last edition of Don Bosco Today featured an article on Don Bosco's mother, Mamma Margaret. Many of our readers wrote to say how deeply moved they were by this short introduction to her life. Soon after the article appeared we heard that the Salesians in Italy had just published a new book on Mamma Margaret. Fr Julian Fox, an Australian Salesian, who works at our Salesian centre in Rome, was busy translating the book into English, and asked if we were interested in publishing it. We were delighted to have the opportunity to publish the life of such an exceptional woman.

In the process of editing this book we discovered a new understanding of Don Bosco's early life, and the tremendous influence his mother had on his educational thinking. We hope that Mamma Margaret will soon be beatified, and that this book will prove an inspiration for all mothers, and an affirmation for all those unsung heroes, whose contribution, in a myriad of different ways, enables others to work for young people in the spirit of Don Bosco.

Mamma Margaret welcomed into her life the poor and unwanted children of Turin, with great love and compassion. The articles in this issue of Don Bosco Today reflect the way the Salesian Family continues to show the same practical concern for those in need.



Anthony Bailey SDB  
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# Contents

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Generosity of the young		4
I was a stranger and you made me welcome		6
Fr Denis Martin SDB		8
Mamma Margaret		9
Booklist		10
Order Form		11
Rosie and Katie go to Mass		12
Fr Terry Lavery		13
Fr Chris McMahon		13
The Bosco Centre		14
In prison and you visited me		16
Grandparents		18

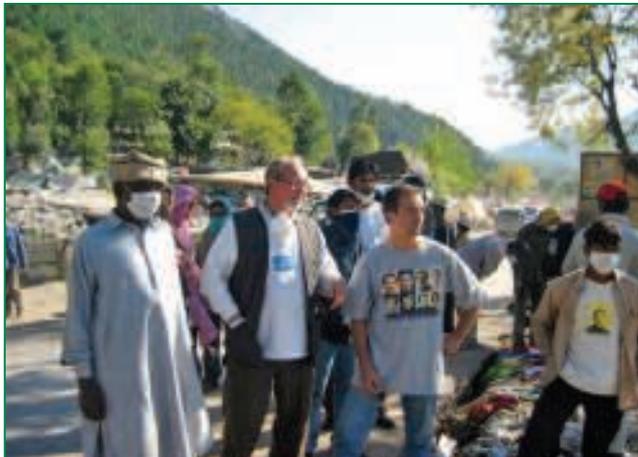
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# Generosity of the Young

## Lahore - Pakistan - October 2005



It was around 9am on the 8th October, Fr Miguel Angel SDB was in his office, when he suddenly felt very dizzy, everything around him started moving. Since he had never experienced something like this before he was totally confused. His assistant shouted, *Father, Earthquake!* They ran outside asking the boys to do the same. The tremor lasted well over two minutes and when they re-entered the building the ceiling lights were still shaking. The wall around the school was badly damaged so they called in a builder who started rebuilding it just two hours after the event. Security is important in Lahore. Several buildings in the city had collapsed and some houses in the Christian Colony had suffered a great deal of damage.

The earthquake, had not affected them physically but it was to change their lives. They soon became aware that in the North West Frontier region of Pakistan, tens of thousands of people had died following the weekend's massive earthquake, and hundreds of thousands were struggling for survival. The earthquake happened at about 9am, a time when schools were packed with students, consequently, 70% of the casualties were young people and children, a lost generation in Northern Pakistan.

Fr Miguel asked for volunteers from the older boys in the school, to help with the rescue work, and about a hundred boys volunteered immediately. He contacted the Military Commander who gave him permission to get involved. The army's response to his request was, *100 boys trained in Don Bosco can do a lot of good over here.* In addition to food and clothing items, the army requested that the group bring with them as many shrouds as possible for burying the dead.

Fr Miguel travelled with the first group of students to set up a rehabilitation camp in the city of Abbotabad, he started the 500 km journey with only 20,000 rupees (about £200 pounds), which he had borrowed, from the Parish Priest, a Maltese priest from the Missionary Society of Saint Paul. It was ten days of hard work for the 60 trainees; setting up a 150-tent camp for 600 people, more than 200 of them patients in need of medical attention. The sixty boys selected, started working on the very day of arrival, after eleven hours trip by bus. A gas kitchen was set up, so many people needed to be fed. Their work was not always easy, about 100 sanitary latrines had to be dug. Storage and management of the camp was discussed daily in their logistics meeting. After five days the hospital near where the camp was located started to send local doctors since the number of patients increased by 25 - 30 people each day.

After training a group of local people they went back to school, satisfied but already thinking about what they could do next. The answer came when they were called to help a community of about 600 people in the mountains of the North, one of the worst affected areas. The place, called Manu Jabra, was 7000 ft above sea level, right in front of the Karakoram Mountains. It was almost inaccessible, the roads had been opened by the army only a couple of days earlier. Putting together the human and material resources of Don Bosco in Quetta and Lahore, an expedition was prepared, including a bus of students, a nurse and a civil engineer. During their month long stay, the generosity of benefactors around the world made it possible for them to distribute

about 30 tons of materials including food, clothes, kitchen utensils, mattresses, blankets, tents and quilts. They also set up a small school and provided medical care.



Of course, they are still committed and are sending supplies of food to the camp that has grown to almost 500 people. Recently there has been a meeting of Caritas International with other NGOs and they have

decided to work out a long-term action plan to set up a village of prefabricated fibreglass shelters. The Salesians have already volunteered to bring manpower and resources to that project as soon as it starts and the Bishops Conference is really grateful since they were the very first to be involved in this project.

More recently, as a result of the violent emotional reaction to the cartoons, which showed a lack of respect to Muslims, the Salesians felt it necessary to reflect on the implications of their presence in Pakistan:

1. Our presence in Pakistan is not easy, since we belong to a minority often marginalised. Yet we Salesians, rich in Don Bosco's spirit of family and love for the young and the poor, and guided by the preventive system based on reason, religion and kindness, find ourselves appreciated if not loved by the youth who happen to meet us, be they Christians or Muslims. We are able to touch their humanity in caring for their needs, but especially in loving them as they are.
2. During our relief programme for earthquake victims, which is still continuing, we realise not only that we Christians are generally welcomed by the Muslims we help, but are also respected by the military and civil authorities for the dedication and spirit of sacrifice our young Christian students are showing in relief work on a voluntary basis.
3. It is our conviction, proven by the seven years of experience of our presence in Quetta and Lahore, that when we approach the Christian and Muslim youth with love, respect and concern for their human needs as Christ teaches us - *I was hungry, I was thirsty*, and accompany them in their human growth with Don Bosco's system of loving-kindness, there is no doubt that we have a chance to build lasting bridges of dialogue and peace.
4. *Education of the heart makes the difference!* It helps people shake off the burden of ignorance and helps to eliminate misunderstanding between different religions by promoting dialogue.

# *I was a stranger and you made me welcome*

Our world is changing in so many ways. Some of us may be happy with change; others may feel threatened. One development, which causes some people concern, is the movement of people across borders. They arrive on our island as asylum seekers. The question is how do we respond to them? For many, Christians included, it may be a case of *not in my backyard, please*. The tabloid newspapers, those architects of popular opinion, often construct a very negative image of asylum seekers. Politicians of all parties, it seems, react to the prevailing mood; they outdo each other with a tougher policy, crudely aimed at reducing the number of asylum seekers. Good politics used to be about creating hope and idealism, intent on changing society for the better. In recent years the politics of hope have been replaced by the politics of fear, exemplified in the war on terror. But the scriptures tell us that love casts out fear.

A year and a half ago, when I was trying to make some sense of these thoughts, I asked the Provincial if I could get involved with asylum seekers and refugees. I moved from the Bolton to the Bootle community and discovered *Asylum Link, Merseyside*, located at Overbury Street, Liverpool, not far from the Anglican Cathedral. Here in this former Catholic presbytery, a remarkable priest, Fr Peter Morgan has opened up a building, which now provides a whole range of practical services for asylum seekers who come from many distressed parts of our world. This charity provides basic food, clothing and furniture; as well as English classes, computer courses, cooking and sewing classes. The centre also provides an advocacy in accessing services such as education, health care and the processing of asylum claims and appeals.

When I first visited the centre I wanted to make connections between the lives of young people and asylum seekers, to try to break down some of the prejudices, which undoubtedly exist. My request to help with school visits was readily accepted. I found headteachers, chaplains, and teachers only too happy to welcome me and arrange visits. My aim in all this was to get asylum seekers into classrooms so they could share their stories with the youngsters. So far I have concentrated on senior pupils in years 11, 12 and 13. On my initial visit I take the classes or assemblies myself to try establish some of the facts rather than the myths peddled by the national media.



What are the myths about asylum seekers? Well, I find our young people tend to imagine that the numbers of asylum seekers are far higher than the reality. They are also under the impression that most asylum seekers come to rich European nations, such as Britain. They are not aware that poor countries such as Africa take far

more asylum seekers than we do. They also seem to think that asylum seekers *take our jobs*. In fact asylum seekers are not allowed to work at all until they are accepted by the Home Office and given refugee status. Many of them may have substantial loans to pay back to people traffickers, so they may be forced to take illegal low paid work with no labour or union rights to protect them. Hence we witness tragedies such as befell the cockle pickers in Morecambe Bay. Many think that asylum seekers live comfortable lives on generous benefits. In reality they receive very little financial support; what they do get comes in the form of vouchers. And when, for example, they pay a bill for £4.30 by handing in a £5 voucher they don't receive any change.

I could go on with other examples, but for me the purpose of these school visits is to get the asylum seekers themselves to share their stories. This is not always easy. They have to be able to speak reasonably good English and have the confidence to stand in front of a class of youngsters. I know these visits are very powerful. I have witnessed some very moving moments when people who have fled their own countries in fear are able to talk to our young people, and find a sympathetic audience. Our youngsters begin to learn that asylum seekers do not just decide to come here to enjoy the good life. They carry with them personal stories of pain and suffering, of attacks on themselves and their families, of threats of persecution or physical attacks including rape. They speak of those who drown in makeshift boats, especially from North Africa, trying to get to Europe.

I have listened to people of all different faiths and races who share a common experience of suffering and persecution. They may come from Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan and from many parts of the former Soviet Union, and from many African countries such as Somalia, the Sudan, Congo, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Zimbabwe and Sierra Leone. They talk of threats to their lives, and of children and family left behind. They speak of the frustration of trying to deal with a very unsympathetic Home Office system that often treats them with little respect, of attacks in the street from people who simply don't want them to be here. At the same time they speak of the kindness, friendship and practical help many British people have given them. Last year for example The Asylum Link Centre in Liverpool, distributed more than 2,400 food bags, which equates to around £20,000. Whenever I visit a school I always ask for help with clothes and have received lots of assistance.

More than anything else, what I hope to do is to try to change the perception our young people have of asylum seekers. I have been frequently heartened by the interest shown and the questions asked by the youngsters. I know that a number have admitted that their views have been changed. I'm sure there are still those who fail to be impressed, but the good certainly outweighs the bad.

In a CAFOD lecture in London last November Fr Gustavo Gutiérrez, the founder of liberation theology, said that the poor are increasingly knocking on the doors of the rich. How we respond is one of the spiritual challenges of our time as we remember the cry of Jesus, *I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you made me welcome.* (Mt. 25:35)



Michael Cunningham SDB

# We Remember

## Fr Denis Martin SDB

1921 - 2006

Father Denis Martin SDB died in Hong Kong, China, on January 4th 2006. When he was two years old, his father left his mother with two children, Denis and his older brother Laurence. As a young boy of eight, Denis went to Salesian College, Battersea, as a boarder. He was there for six years. When his brother Laurence finished school, he said to his mother, *I want to become a Salesian*. His mother said, *If it is God's will, go*. He made his profession, as a Salesian, at sixteen years of age. Two or three years later, Denis said to his mother, *I want to become a Salesian, but I have a worry*. His mother said, *What are you worrying about?* To which he replied, *I am worried about who will take care of you when you are old*. She said, *Go, and become a Salesian, and don't worry about me. God will take care of me and will take better care of me than you can*. God took very good care of his mother. She died when she was 105 years old, and for the last four years of her life lived in Nazareth House, a nursing home in London, where the chaplain was her own elder son Laurence, who was with her till she died.

Denis went to the Salesian Missionary College at Shrigley for two years. In 1938 he joined the Salesian Novitiate at Beckford. After Novitiate he went to the Salesian Mission in China, arriving in Shanghai as World War II began. He did his initial studies in the Salesian House of Studies in Shanghai. At that time the Japanese were occupying Shanghai and when they entered the war he was interned in the grounds of the French Jesuits in Zikawei. It was a very mild internment.

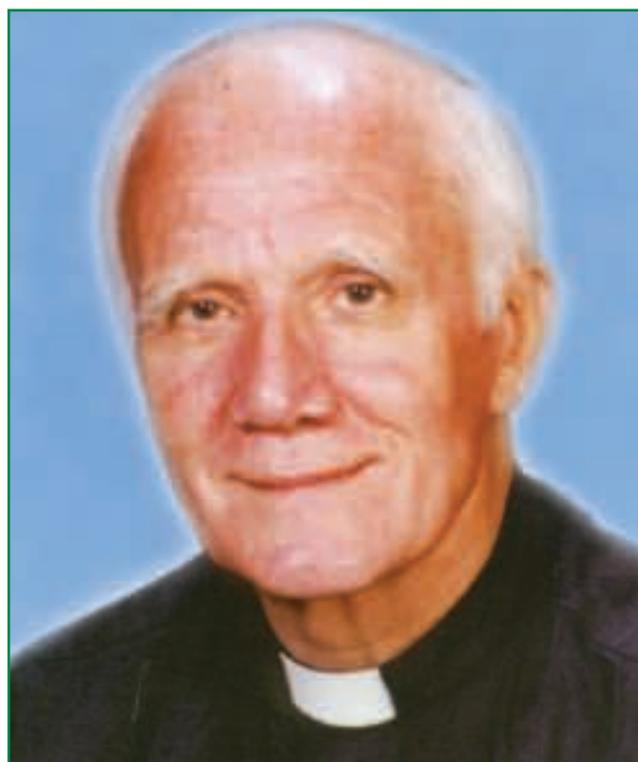
When the war ended Denis resumed his studies and he was ordained priest in Shanghai in 1949. The first two or three years of his priesthood were very painful and harrowing. The Communists had invaded China from the North and they were gradually taking over the schools. After they had taken the Salesian School in Shanghai where Denis was teaching, he spent a brief spell in a Chinese prison and then was expelled from China. In 1951 he was sent to Hong Kong. For the next

forty years he spent a very active life working in many different schools in Hong Kong and also in Macau, which was then Portuguese.

When he retired from teaching he still managed to do a great deal of parish work, catering especially for the people in Hong Kong or Macau who needed Mass, Confession or Sacraments in English. During his later years he was troubled with Parkinson's disease.

Denis always had a great love for the Chinese people. He loved them and they loved him. It was always his wish to end his days in China.

**Fr Laurence Martin SDB**





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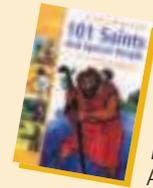
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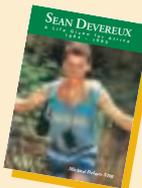
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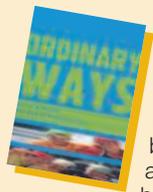
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# We Remember

## Fr Terry Lavery SDB 1923 - 2005



Terry Lavery was born in Glasgow in 1923, and was baptised at St Anthony's, Govan. He was first professed as a Salesian at Beckford near Gloucester in 1942. In the late 1940s Terry taught in Shrigley, Chertsey and Bolton. After theological studies in Lyons, Terry returned to Beckford to be ordained in 1952.

As a young priest, Terry was to teach for a further twelve years at Salesian College in Chertsey. There were boarders at Chertsey in those days, and Terry became what we call the Catechist. He had a special care for the spiritual life and physical health of the boarders and community. Hard working and conscientious, he took his responsibilities very seriously. A Salesian told me, his whole life was devoted to the care of the students; he had no time for anything else.

In 1964 Terry became part of the founding community at the new Salesian College in Bootle, Merseyside, where he was to teach for twenty years. His main subject was French. He gave himself to his new mission with tireless energy. A dedicated teacher, Terry was appointed head of the Lower School. As a priest, Terry had the joy of celebrating family marriages and jubilees, and being present for other family celebrations. Summer holidays were spent with family too. I'm sure his family have good memories of those times and appreciate the part they played in sustaining Terry in his ministry. After 37 years of teaching, Terry had a well-earned sabbatical in California, from where he returned in 1985 to join the parish team in St Paul's Muirhouse, Edinburgh. He was to work there for nearly 15 years.

There was also an urgency about Terry: something of the zeal with which Jesus proclaimed the arrival of the Kingdom. If Terry heard someone was in hospital he would visit them that day. If he heard someone had died, he would immediately go out to console the family with a lovely letter of condolence. I am sure many of those letters are treasured possessions now.

It was a shock when Terry was diagnosed with Cancer in 1997. So, it was with declining health that Terry moved to Nazareth House, Bonnyrigg, at the end of 1999, where he was to stay until his death. My memory of Terry is that he was a truly fine, very gifted, very modest gentleman, who, I am sure, touched the lives of many.

Fr Jim McGarry SDB

## Fr Chris McMahon SDB 1942 - 2005



Chris was born in Horwich in Lancashire. He was professed as a Salesian at Burwash in September 1959, but I have known Chris only since he arrived in South Africa in 1983.

In the messages I have received from those who knew Chris during his very active life, the recollections all echo that he was one who felt strongly for others, a compassion that reached out to others in need. To them he brought the solace and comfort of the sacraments, a friendly word, a blessing. His life as a priest was a conduit for the graces of a Good God to make sense of the spiritual and all too human turmoil in peoples lives, especially those who were young. In the education of young people in England, Malta and South Africa, as headmaster, teacher, mentor, guide, friend in the spirit of Don Bosco, with the Salesians as his brothers, he built the foundations of Faith in a loving God.

His intense concern for the spiritual and physical well being of others in his pastoral care, exceeded the limits of his own capacity to accomplish as much as he wanted to. This took a toll on his own managing and coping skills, as he struggled with personal issues while still all the time deepening his understanding of God's work in his life. His personal medical battle had begun when his body once again became the rival of his spirit. *The life and death of each of us has its influence on others.* But his spirit did not succumb. He continued to work for as long as he could. He planned meticulously for his operations, holidays with family, ensuring that he crowded in as much as he could before he was confined to a room. When the time came for continual care he radiated a peace and acceptance of his condition.

We give thanks for the wonderful way Chris touched our lives, in his life, in his dying and death, and pray for our consolation in the knowledge of his eternal reward.

Robert Gore SDB  
Provincial South Africa.

# The Bosco Centre



Sister Cecily FMA

It is not easy to get time with Sister Cecily; she is a very busy lady! When I arrived she was interviewing a young lad, a prospective candidate for the apprentice scheme, the latest development at the Bosco Centre in South London. He naturally, took precedence. For Sister Cecily Dunn, a Salesian Sister, young people always take precedence.

Waiting for Cecily was not time lost. I was able to absorb the atmosphere of this unique set-up. A teenager welcomed me from a tiny reception area and accompanied me upstairs to the general office, past classrooms emitting a buzz of activity and energy. A twenty year old, whom I later learned was the mother of two children, offered me a mid-morning cuppa. She was very anxious to make sure that Sister Cecily had one too, plus a sausage roll which she had brought in for her. It is well-known that Sister Cecily does not spend much time thinking of herself. Mary, the long-serving secretary made sure I felt at home. She told me that she had brought her child to Sister Cecily's Nursery seventeen years before and had stayed on! Such is the persuasive charm of Sister Cecily!

Young people passed in and out of the office while I waited. There were tall, gangly youths, some of whom sported amazing headgear, and attractive girls also in the latest fashions. I noticed the huge ethnic mix. All greeted me in a pleasant, friendly way; they were obviously very much at home in the place and wanted to make me feel welcome too. Outside, the toddlers happily played in the sunshine, enjoying the climbing frame, swings, and chute under the watchful care of the nursery nurses. Eventually Sister Cecily sent the young lad off, assuring him of a place, and she was free for a spell to talk to me about the Bosco Centre.

In October 1984 Sister Cecily was asked to co-ordinate the youth work in the Parish of Rotherhithe, South London. She was given a hall and a free hand to organise things as she saw fit. She brought with her years of experience of working with under-privileged youngsters in Scotland and in Liverpool where she set up a successful drugs rehabilitation programme. The youth club was her starting point and still continues to be an integral part of the Bosco

Centre but the project has grown far beyond that. A large banner which dominates the main hall proclaims the motto of the Centre and its focus: *You are young, you are precious, you are loved.*

Cecily found herself surrounded by youngsters who had dropped out of the system not because they were failures but because the system had failed them. They were experiencing pressures for which they were not equipped. Their schools knew nothing of the trauma they lived in, their teachers were unaware of the impossible situations they came from in the morning and returned to at night. Many of them stopped attending school altogether or failed to even start secondary education. Cecily had a mathematics and science background when she entered the Salesian Sisters and later did an Arts degree plus a Master's Degree in Education, so she was in a good position to teach these so called *failures* herself. Like her hero, St. John Bosco, she began to help the youngsters she knew and the work developed from there.

The Bosco Centre now caters for youngsters from *tots to twenties*. The young Mums can have their babies cared for in the building in which they are studying. One of the courses on offer at Bosco Centre is Child Care. Those who attain level three in the National Vocational Qualification can become qualified Nursery Officers, run their own nursery after a little experience, work as classroom assistants or go on to university and perhaps teaching.

All the pupils study English, Mathematics, Information Technology and Personal Development. The aim is to get as many as possible up to NVQ level three which is comparable to two A-levels.

Sister Cecily now has a full-time staff of twenty-five including her sister who came to help out some years ago and stayed. Another teacher brought her children to the nursery and has been on the staff ever since; her daughters, now grown up, have joined her. One is a qualified youth leader, thanks to her training at Bosco Centre, and is in charge of the daily after school club and the evening youth club. Another daughter works at Sister Cecily's latest development: Bosco Construction. There are also several husband and wife teams working at the

Centre. No wonder there is a wonderful family atmosphere.

Bosco Construction provides Vocational Tasters. This fits into the Government's *Entry to Employment and Apprenticeship* scheme. At the moment, the young people are offered training in plastering, painting and decorating and carpentry. Sister Cecily was concerned that some young people could not get apprenticeships because they lacked the necessary qualifications nor could they get into colleges because they were not employed by tradesmen so, typical of Cecily and reminiscent of Don Bosco, she found a way round the problem and opened her own establishment to get the youngsters started. Sister Cecily is no stranger to the building trade herself; she has extended the original hall at least six times! Once she was dissatisfied with the way the slates had been put on a roof so she personally dismantled them, numbered each slate and had them replaced to her satisfaction and the builder's astonishment!

The *Diamond Project*, for 16 - 20 year olds, which includes NVQ training, probably best epitomises Sister Cecily's philosophy. A diamond, when found, is not very promising; it takes time, patience, hard work to rid it of the encrustation surrounding it and to polish it into brilliance. Cecily has faith in young people; she knows that there is a precious diamond embedded in each of them. All her projects aim at releasing that diamond and making it sparkle. She loves her young people and they know it; they can approach her at any time of the day or night and they do. She is totally committed to their welfare and has proved it on countless occasions over many years. She is very firm, she has to be, she is working with South London kids, street-wise and wary but they respond to the caring atmosphere at Bosco as they call it. They appreciate the way they are treated and respond positively to the way the staff work. They say: *It's not like school, it's different. They treat you like a grown-up here.*

Like Don Bosco, Sister Cecily has developed her work directed by the Spirit and responding to needs as they emerged: Youth Clubs and After School Clubs, Nursery provision, Bosco College and Bosco Construction. She has also opened a well-equipped Hostel to provide accommodation for homeless girls. For Cecily, pastoral guidance is pivotal; her aim has always been to provide a safe, caring environment where the young people would feel that they belonged. From this basis, training in citizenship develops naturally, the young person grows in self-esteem, confidence and maturity.

Currently the youngsters of sixteen years and over who attend the *Bosco Centre* receive from the Government the *Education and Maintenance Allowance* of £50 a week. In a year, Sister Cecily and her staff can work with an average of 135 youngsters and achieve at least 60% success rate in pupil achievement. The fear is that the Grant is going to be reduced to £30 and awarded for only five months. Trying to live on £30 a week without any parental support will discourage young people from attempting to improve their qualifications and will drastically reduce the span of time they can afford to spend at *Bosco*. To turn around a life in a year is remarkable, to do it in five months would be nothing short of miraculous but Cecily has enough faith for miracles.

So what is Sister Cecily's secret? What is the root of this charismatic dynamism? Sister Cecily is a woman of great faith and trust in God. She is inspired by the spirit of Don Bosco, the friend of youth. Each day ends with a time of quiet reflection, the traditional *Salesian Goodnight*. She believes in his system of reason, religion and loving kindness and she is not afraid to practise it. The place is very appropriately named the *Bosco Centre* since the work which radiates from it is truly Bosconian.

**Sister Ella Flynn FMA**

# *In prison and you visited me*

Anyone who believes the claim, *Prison works* clearly doesn't know what they are talking about. This slogan is especially wrong for young males in prison. Home Office statistics show that 76% of prisoners under 21 re-offend within two years of release. For 14 -16 year olds, the figure is 86%. Is that what you'd understand by *prison working*?

I've been going to prison one day a week since January 1997. I'm a volunteer tutor, usually in basic maths, at a Young Offenders Establishment. There, I frequently say, *This place is a mad-house*, and no one contradicts me. I like things to be orderly and predictable, as they usually seemed to be in the schools I used to work in, a long time ago. Here, no matter how carefully I make arrangements; things seem more likely than not, to fail to happen as planned.

Nevertheless, I still keep going back, and want to go on doing so for as long as I possibly can. There are so many lads there who need a helping hand, not just in maths but much more importantly the help to make them feel valued and appreciated. Their experience of life, so far, has convinced them they are the refuse of society. They write themselves off as worthless, and have little or no hope of ever leading an *ordinary* life. They find it almost incredible that the volunteer tutors are giving them time and personal attention, and are not being paid for it. We try to show them that we don't accept that they are worthless. We appreciate all that they might be, if only they had been given the right opportunities, and had taken them.

The Volunteer Supported Education office (VSE) works like this. First a name appears on a list. He is referred to us as wanting one-to-one help with literacy or numeracy. When a tutor is free, the inmate is interviewed and an assessment form filled in. As soon as an appropriate tutor can be matched to his needs, he gets his own tutor, who will see him once a week for one and a half to two hours. Most volunteers do either

a morning or an afternoon stint. I do both on the same day. Even if my only contact with an inmate is for an assessment interview, I always feel my time has been well spent. The helping hand I stretched out has been grasped by a lad in need, and what I had to offer in that short session has been warmly appreciated.

Here is what happened on a recent, not untypical, day for me. I left home at 8.10 am and arrived about 9.30, after my 15 minute walk to the station, a rail journey, an uncertain wait, and then a bus journey. I was expecting to continue with the two lads I'd seen last week, but one of them was back in court. I took the long walk out to the wing only to find my morning student had been taken, ten minutes earlier, to IBIS, the former Segregation Unit for boys in trouble of some sort.

I phoned back to the office. They advised me to stay put for five minutes while they checked the availability of two other possible candidates. Neither was available so I returned to the office. Eventually they did find someone needing maths, whom I could assess. We had about 90 minutes at our first meeting. Steve, aged 18, came from a Sussex village and in some ways seemed less self-confident and street-wise than most inmates. His favourite pastime, he told me, was to spend four or five hours sitting quietly with his mates in a pub. It had been a big deal for him when, a month before his 18th birthday, he told the publican, at his local, he was now 18 and was served a pint of beer.

Mum had re-married when he was fourteen and soon afterwards he was *taken into care*. Since then, he said, things had gone steadily downhill. He'd been moved around, had attended a variety of schools, and received some home tuition. Entered only for Art and Maths GCSEs he'd got F grades in both.

As usual, I began by sharing with him how to be certain he'd got the right answer when adding up, and left him with some questions to practice on, while he was waiting to be assigned his own regular tutor. His body language, even more than his words, showed me he'd been glad we'd met. And so was I.

By chance, my morning student the following week said he was sick. Once again I was at a loose end! Finally it was sorted out I'd have another one-off class with Steve. He'd done the work from last week, nearly all correctly, but today was in a difficult mood. He said, *Everyone hates maths*. I replied, *I don't!....But, you know you don't have to do this if you don't want to. I've got to get a GCSE or I'll never get a proper job*. I struggled on, even though he seemed so distracted and unwilling to concentrate. I coaxed him through subtractions till he could do on his own 5005-2897. I knew he was pleased with himself. The comment he wrote on the report at the end of the class was *I learnt I must push myself!* Teaching Steve would always be a tussle. I felt relieved I was able to remind him I would be back next week with my regular student. He'd have to wait for another tutor to become free. His reply was, *Could I say the only tutor I'd work with is you?*

Two weeks later I did become Steve's regular tutor! For how long he will be able to stick with me, as I try to help him gradually to learn to believe in himself, remains to be seen! Long journeys have small beginnings, with the train of opportunity possibly having several initial stops and starts!

For most of us, our students seem to be *shipped* out to another establishment after about six weeks or so. A few of my students have lasted very much longer. This year I had 31 sessions, nearly 60 hours together, with a very intelligent, courteous and hardworking inmate from Eastern Europe. It was a real pleasure to work with him. He's now been deported back to his own country (as he very much wanted) carrying a GCSE equivalent certificate in Maths, and another *triple certificate* in English. We were both very satisfied with what he'd achieved.

I have always enjoyed working with young people, and sharing with them anything I could, as a teacher and guide. The young men imprisoned by the courts are some of the most necessitous in our society. Unless they are helped to value themselves, to open up their minds and to obtain qualifications, they will never be able to break out of the cycle of *offending - prison - reoffending* in which we see they have already been trapped.

Out of thirty VSE tutors, mostly helping with reading and writing, 25 will be women and of a wide range of ages. We are always needing new volunteers to enrol as trainees. If you know of anyone who might become a volunteer, do urge them to join us. These lads desperately need help. And our society needs to protect itself for the future.

If you feel you could help as a volunteer in a young offender's establishment near you, why not volunteer now. Details can be found in your local library.



Fr Joseph Merriman SDB

# Grandparents

*It is necessary to see the family as a community of persons, in which, in the light of the gospel message, those of all ages live together, respecting the rights of all: men, women, children, and the elderly.*

**John Paul II.**

The grandfather was very old. He had difficulty walking, his sight was poor, he was a little deaf, eating was an effort and he stained his clothes and the tablecloth. His son and daughter-in-law were so annoyed that they made him eat his meals in the kitchen. One day when they were giving him his soup, the old man was not quick enough to take the dish and it fell to the ground and broke. His daughter-in-law went wild and said that in future he would have to eat from a wooden bowl, like the animals. The old man gave a deep sigh and bowed his head. The next day Michael, the grandson, sitting on the ground next to his grandfather was trying to fit together some small thin curved pieces of wood. *What are you doing Michael?* his dad asked him. *I'm trying to make a wooden bowl. When you and Mum are old I'll be able to use it to feed you.* The man and his wife looked at each other and burst into tears.

This story, very frequently found in elementary school reading books, takes on a new meaning today in many societies. Today we are in danger of judging the value of people by the contribution they make to society, in danger of putting the elderly to one side and denying them their proper place both in the family and in society. As always happens, the young can only learn from what they see: including how the elderly should be treated. We need to teach our children the value of old age. It is indispensable and urgent, because we have to recognise that *the effort of growing old* is not as easy as it seems. It is a complicated and chaotic process, filled with contradictions: marked by anxiety and serenity, bitterness and joy, security and fear, activity and passivity, a closing in on oneself and great openness.

Elderly people need others and yet often they are left to their own devices: *they are useless and a drain on finances* - unless they are only used as *babysitters*. If

growing old is difficult, it is equally difficult living with the elderly: they are weak, they need patience and tolerance, virtues that are almost unknown. In a culture that is geared to super-efficiency, old age seems an injury, something wrong, a fault. For too many it takes on the appearance of the waiting room of death. The elderly need the tenderness of people who are dear to them. They feel it as a cruel wrong when they are removed from family life: an exclusion that *mortifies* them, in the original meaning of the term. They are treasure chests of experience: every time an elderly person dies, a library dies. The first great gift the elderly make to a family is precisely that of *handing on*, not so much material benefits as those things that make life better. They have paid a heavy price after all.

So the age of the *grandparent* has come. Life has given them great experience; they have learned to be better, they have slowly acquired a treasure of wisdom: a collection of memories, of disappointments, of secrets, of habits, of hopes. Grandparents can pass on to their grandchildren a collection of stories and memories, so-called *family history* that the grandchildren find extraordinarily fascinating. Grandfather can represent for the grandchild a certain *stability in family relationships of affection*. He is able to talk as someone who was there when Mum was a little girl and Dad was at school, of when in the place where the supermarket stands there were open fields, of when in place of the multi-storey car park there was a pool where Mum and Dad went swimming and where everyone knew them. In this way the child has the idea that his family has always existed and always will. *He gets an idea of how affections continue*. A child is afraid, more than anything else, of the collapse of his world of affections; the presence of grandparents is certainly a source of security and comfort.

Since the times of their childhood to today so much has changed: society, values, even the Faith. Many of today's Grandparents have painfully lived through this evolution. Their way of fitting in to this new world determines the place they want to occupy and the influence they have in communicating the Faith to their grandchildren. Some of them, perhaps, find it frustrating and they even feel at fault that their own children are no longer practising, and are not handing on the faith to their children. *Is it our fault?* they ask themselves. I ask myself whether this break in the chain of those handing on the Faith has not something to do with the almost total exclusion of the elderly, whose experience of the Faith, which helped them to face up to life especially while sorrow came knocking on the door of their homes, is ignored and has passed into oblivion. Perhaps, as a theologian has written, *We are in the presence of one of the most anti-Christian aspects of our society and culture.*



**Fr Pascual Chávez Villanueva SDB**  
Rector Major

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*How beautiful they are  
In the autumn of their days  
White hair and wrinkled hands  
Showing the passing of the years  
Love and pain have made them strong,  
Have bound them both together,  
Have given them hearts which overflow  
With graciousness and blessing.  
May love enshrine their sorrow,  
And each new day as it comes along  
Herald a glad tomorrow.*

**Sister Margaret Renshaw FMA**

