

SALESIAN INSTITUTE
SOMERSET ROAD
CAPE TOWN
SOUTH AFRICA

Fr. DAN LUCEY

1906 - 1984

The first time I saw Danny Lucey he was a strong young man in the full vigour of his twenty nine years. He was carrying a sick sheep across his broad shoulders. If ever a vision was prophetic that first sight of him certainly was. The strong young man with the sick sheep disappeared up some steps. That first meeting took place on 15th September 1935, and together with other new aspirants I had just arrived in Copsewood College, Pallaskenry, Co. Limerick. The late evening rain and the cold matched our mood: we were lonely, sad and a little afraid. I knew a few students and they greeted me, and that helped a little.

Forty-nine years is a long time, and a short tribute cannot recall all the memories.

That evening in Copsewood a hand much bigger than mine picked up my heavy case and took it upstairs to the dormitory. I have loved Danny Lucey ever since. Many a time I had to rely on his great strength; the last occasion was when I had to face the ordeal of preaching his panegyric in Nazareth House, Cape Town, at his funeral mass.

I was greatly surprised to find that the young man I took to be the farm manager was a student. He sat with us in class, and we marvelled at his courage. He was a late vocation. Being the eldest son of Michael Lucey and his wife Margaret Randles of Ardagh, Killarney, Co. Kerry, he had battled with his father to work the family farm during the hardship years of the Economic War in the 1930's. In this wonderful family all the children received their strong faith, it is small wonder that three of the boys, Dan, Denis and Tom became priests and one of the girls became Sr. Elizabeth in the Sisters of Mercy.

The Loreto Sisters in Killarney first helped Danny with his Latin. The lesson was tied to the handles of the plough — so he said himself. Initially progress was painfully slow, but his determination kept him going.

In 1934 he was accepted as an aspirant for the priesthood by the Salesians in Pallaskenry. In those days life in Copsewood was spartan, and it took considerable courage for youngsters to persevere. Danny was a tower of strength to many of them. The following events connected with Danny are vivid memories, and their relative unimportance shows how uneventful life was in the aspirantate.

At the Cork Show in 1937 Danny exhibited a bull in the Fresian Class. The bull, Burton Duke, took first prize, and all the boys were given an extra saucer of jelly as a celebration. Danny got a hero's welcome on his return from the show. The second memorable occasion was the ordination of his brother, Denis, to the priesthood in St. John's College in Waterford. Denis used to visit Copsewood during the holidays so we all knew him well. I shall always remember how proud and happy Danny was that morning as he prepared to go to the ceremony.

In August 1937 we were accepted for the final year of our aspirantate in Cowley, Oxford. After the boat journey to Holyhead we boarded the train at midnight for Oxford. Those were the days of the eucharist fast from midnight: and Dan made sure that my hunger was held in check so that we could attend Holy Mass, and receive Holy Communion before noon in Oxford. He was a strong man, who carried us with him.

The great university city with its traditions fascinated him. When we went for walks along the tow-path and the college crews were out on the river, Dan was in his element. Sometimes the Salesian in charge admonished Mr. Lucey for shouting advice to the cox in a boat that was not going well. As usual, Dan knew what he was talking about, because he had been one of the crew which won the championship at the Killarney Regatta in 1934. The year in Oxford was an invaluable experience and an ideal preparation for our novitiate year in Beckford, Gloucestershire.

From the very first day of his novitiate in August 1938, Danny entered into the work of his Salesian formation in real earnest. His novitiate notes, which he wrote daily into a large notebook, show how his natural goodness matured with spiritual direction. It must have been most difficult for an independent young farmer in his thirties to knuckle down to the discipline of those days. He did it purposefully. Bro. Dan Lucey's happiness on profession day, 31st August 1939 was wonderful to see. He was a man approved: now he was certain where the road ahead lay. His mother wrote him a beautiful letter for that day, and he kept that letter in his novitiate notebook till the end of his life. Within a week, the Second World War had burst upon us. Danny, once again, was a great steadying influence on the Irish students in those days of uncertainty and anxiety.

His extensive farming experience was used to good effect when he took charge of the farms at Beckford and Shrigley in Cheshire. That simple statement must cover three difficult years in war-torn England.

He began his theological studies in 1942; and on 14th July 1946 he was ordained priest in Blaisdon Hall, Gloucestershire, by Bishop William Lee of Clifton, who in 1937 had ordained Dan's younger brother, later Canon Denis Lucey of Filton, Bristol.

From 1946 till 1962 he was farm manager in Blaisdon. Those were the days before this school for underprivileged boys received any assistance from the civic authorities. It was a constant struggle to make it viable, and no one worked harder than Fr. Dan Lucey.

In 1962 he was appointed to the Salesian Agricultural College, Warrenstown, Co. Meath. On the staff were many old friends who were delighted to have Fr. Lucey back in Ireland after twenty-five years spent in England. The late Fr. Pat Collins and he were great friends and Fr. Dan often said how happy he had been to work with him. During those five years in Warrenstown he met many of the future Irish farmers, and he was greatly loved and respected. He was sixty-one years of age and it seemed as if he was to spend his sunset years in Ireland.

Then one day we heard the astonishing news: Fr. Dan Lucey was going to South Africa.

The initial reaction of our community in Ballinakill was one of annoyance. Surely Fr. Provincial should not have asked Fr. Dan to make such a big sacrifice. He would never be able to adjust to a completely new country, to a new environment, to a new apostolate. We were wrong, utterly wrong.

I well remember the day in 1967 when Fr. Lucey left Ireland for South Africa. What none of us knew then was that he would never return. His second journey had begun.

In Cape Town all the pent-up apostolic zeal burst out like a storm. He worked as if he were trying to redeem the time. He could be seen on his way to hospitals, to convents, to the homes of the poor, to institutions in a restless search for those who needed consolation or advice. No task was too daunting, no obstacle too difficult. His compact strength reminded one of a powerful tug as he battled his way through so many storms of human need.

There was the occasion when he heard that a widow and her children in a nearby road in Lansdowne were being evicted. He left the dinner-table immediately. He went down to the house, gave a thumb-nail sketch of the type of person who would perpetrate such a thing, told the workers what he thought of them, and then demanded to know who was ultimately responsible. He caught the next train to City Hall, where his indignant determination swept aside stalling officials till he confronted someone with real authority. In that mood the gentle Fr. Dan was intransigent. When the facts of the case were made known, he obtained a firm assurance that the widow and children would be given a house in a new township on the following Monday. They were accommodated in the garage of the Salesian House in Lansdowne over the week-end. The family got their house: but the matter did not end there. The foreman of the evicting party, in the face of the angry prophet Daniel, had resigned his job. Fr. Dan heard about it. "That's a decent man," was his revised judgment. Next day he found the man a new job.

On another occasion he went into a local bakery looking for bread. He saw a pile of loaves that had been put aside, these were sold regularly to a farmer for pig feeding. Fr. Dan offered to buy the bread to feed some hungry children, who lived in a place ironically named the Valley of Plenty. The farmer came to collect his bread, but found that a priest had already bought it.

He was volubly indignant. He did not realize, of course, that his confrontation was with another farmer... and the Kerry lads are at their best when the ball is wet!

One Sunday afternoon he invited me to go for a walk. As usual, he went into the Savio College Chapel for a short visit. We set off towards the nearby Kenilworth racecourse. After a while I found a ten-rand note. Fr. Dan promptly took the money and put it in his pocket. He was delighted. "I didn't expect Our Lady to answer our prayer so soon. That will pay the rent for a poor woman in Hanover Park." It was as simple as that.

Our Rector at Lansdowne was confessor to the community of Schoenstatt Sisters in Constantia. One Easter Saturday the sisters gave him a beautiful cake in the form of a lamb. Fr. Dan saw it in the refectory and admired the lovely cake. Unfortunately for the community (and the lamb!) a needy family came to see him. The lamb disappeared... that was one paschal lamb that was not sacrificed by the Salesians. The memories of Fr. Dan have become a carousel of vivid pictures....

He was unique. He combined the ardent enthusiasm of a young mind with the garnered wisdom of experience. His mind, so alert to the needs of others, was the mind of a contemplative. He loved the created beauty of nature, and deeply resented its abuse by those who by legalised privilege arrogated to themselves what belonged to all by God's goodness and human right. There was in him a massive strength with childlike gentleness.

The awareness of his priesthood gave him great dignity and a genuine humility which marvelled that Jesus should have chosen him. The Holy Mass to him was everything. He was so patently good that one was reluctant to leave his company. The awareness of the fatherhood of God gave him a protective strength for those who needed reassurance in their faith. The reality of the redemptive Christ enabled Fr. Lucey to be an effective channel of sacramental peace. The power of the Holy Spirit made him a dynamic force against the powers of darkness. Once, acting under obedience, he had to confront Evil as God's priest. Fr. Lucey was God-possessed. He was a blessing to his own Salesian brethren.

His great interest in what each one was doing invariably brought plenty of encouragement, sometimes spiced with words of prudent caution. There could be a trenchant demolition of unfair criticism which he dismissed as being "all a cod". Transparently honest, he had a farmer's shrewdness. Immensely strong, he was gentle and compassionate. Though he was most interested in every aspect of the life of the Church, he was also anxious to know the weekly football scores. His words of advice were usually spoken quietly, but at football matches that advice was loud and clear both to the players and to the referee. In 1974 when the Lions were playing in Cape Town, we who attended the game with him had to pretend that we did not know him...yet when he went to the Carmelite Convent in Rivonia, Johannesburg as chaplain for several years, he could give inspired spiritual direction to contemplatives. Though he made many friends in the Transvaal, he was very happy to return to the Cape where he resumed his apostolate at the Salesian Institute in Somerset Road. His increasing deafness was a great cross because it prevented him from administering the Sacrament of Reconciliation. That and the inevitable decline of his physical strength curtailed his priestly ministry. His appointment as chaplain to Nazareth House in Cape Town gave him a new lease of life. There he could have all the priestly work he wanted, and in the large garden the dormant skill and the countryman's love for the soil found fulfilment. He missed community life, and the community missed him terribly, but by this time his hearing was almost totally impaired despite the skilled and careful treatment given him by Prof. Sean Sellars in Groote Schuur Hospital.

He remained a model Salesian to the end of his life. Don Bosco (as he often said) must have had his eye on him all his life: they shared the same birthday, 16th August. His love for Our Lady was not a devotion, it was a way of life. Bishop Naidoo said at Fr. Dan's funeral that he had never seen him without his rosary beads in his hand. Our Lady's presence was as real to him as the beautiful gardens he tended in her honour in Nazareth House. Fr. Dan was born on Don Bosco's birthday, 16th August, and it was hardly a coincidence that Don Bosco's Madonna took him home on her own feastday, 24th May.

His going from us was typical of his whole life. He celebrated Holy Mass on the feast of Our Lady, Help of Christians, and brought Holy Communion to the sick residents of Nazareth House. He had not been well, so the sisters took him to the Groote Schuur Hospital for examination. After X-rays he was sent home to rest. On returning to Nazareth House he took some soup and went to bed. Sister Rita, noting a change in his condition went for some medicine, and word was sent to the Salesian Institute. She entered the room and she described the look on Fr. Lucey's face as that of a radiant schoolboy. Fr. Naughton and Fr. Duffy arrived soon afterwards and gave him the Last Anointing. He never recovered consciousness and slipped away quietly to God. It was about 3.30 p.m., hardly an hour after he had gone to bed.

The news of his unexpected death became known very soon, and it was obvious that a large number of his friends would want to pay their last respects. The Rector and Community of the Salesian Institute asked the sisters to allow the funeral to take place from Nazareth House.

On the evening of May 28th, Fr. Dooley, Fr. Naughton and I concelebrated the Holy Mass at Nazareth House. The large chapel was filled with those who could not attend on the following day. Many people had their own stories to tell of Fr. Dan's kindness to them personally.

Next day the funeral mass was that of the Resurrection, and it was a triumph. The traditional Gregorian Chant and the modern scriptural hymns sung by the children of the Holy Cross Orphanage, Modderdam Road, were an appropriate blend of the old and the new. Many of the children knew Fr. Dan personally, because he loved to celebrate Mass at the orphanage. As Cardinal McCann was out of the country at the time, Bishop Naidoo, Auxiliary Bishop of Cape Town, was the chief celebrant. Bishop Green and 45 priests concelebrated the Holy Mass, at which every religious congregation in the archdiocese was represented. Bishop Naidoo in his tribute to Fr. Dan stressed what a wonderful example of priestly virtue he had been to us all, and how well the gifts of nature and of grace had blended in Fr. Dan's personality. Several hundred people attended the Holy Mass. He is buried in the Salesian plot in Maitland Cemetery, a few miles from the centre of Cape Town.

This appreciation was written by his life-long Salesian confrere Fr. James Kilcullen. I would ask you to pray for all the members of this Community.
Fr. Canice Dooley,
Rector.

Fr. Daniel Lucey: Born 16th August 1906 in Killarney, Co. Kerry, Ireland.
Died 24th May 1984 in Nazareth House, Cape Town,
in his 78th year of age, in his 45th year of profession,
in his 38th year of priesthood.