

FATHER CHARLES BERNARD MACEY. SDB.

Dear Confreres,

On the evening of August 9th 1928, Fr. Charles died at Chertsey in the seventy-third year of his age. He was the founder of the house at Battersea and of the English Province.

Fr. Charles was born in Salisbury on December 28th 1854 of Non-Catholic parents, who had twelve children. Of these, only two sisters and a brother are still living. Charles went to the local Elementary School. He became friendly with a Catholic family and especially of Louis, a boy with whom he used to read books of religious instruction and he often used to attend services with him in the local Catholic Church. He liked the services and he became an altar server even before he became a Catholic. In those days there was much religious intolerance and no one else from his family followed his example. He waited until he was sixteen before being received into the Church. He was then allowed by his family to continue his education at the Benedictine College at Downside. His friend Louis Matthews later became a priest and a Military Chaplain. Young Charles, however, was not able to complete his studies nor enter a seminary, but he returned to his home city and obtained employment in a draper's shop. The years passed but Charles' wish to become a priest grew stronger.

The good Lady Herbert, who knew Don Bosco, and had made his work known in England through her writings, heard about Charles' wish and she advised him to go to Turin, where Don Bosco would surely help him with his studies. With a firm and generous will, Charles made the sacrifice of leaving his own country for a place where the language and Don Bosco's work was almost unknown to him. He arrived in Turin on February 12th 1880. He was just 25. The different customs and the poverty of the life at the Oratory in those days did not dampen the attraction that he felt, right from the beginning, for Don Bosco. He loved his goodness, he admired his zeal and he gave himself to following him wholeheartedly.

On November 3rd 1881, Charles had the good fortune to be the first Englishman to receive the religious habit from Don Bosco and the following year he made his religious profession. In those days Charles frequently went to confession to Don Bosco, opened his heart to him and drank deep draughts of his fatherly advice, and he studied his example of piety, zeal and sacrifice. At Lanzo Torinese and Nizza Marittima he spent his years of priestly study and preparation and in the practice of Salesian life. Don Bosco wanted him at Turin for his priestly ordination. The first English Salesian priest was ordained in Turin by Cardinal Alimonda on the 5th June 1887.

Time passes quickly. Don Bosco felt his death approaching and hastened to inaugurate his work in different countries. In these last few months of his life he started his work in England, Belgium, Austria and Equador. Don Bosco blessed the first three Salesians departing for London - Fr. McKiernan, Rector, Fr. Macey, priest and Bro. Rossaro, telling them: "The house in London will become one of the more important of the Congregation. On the 23rd November 1887 in thick fog they arrived at Victoria Station, London, where they were met by Fr. Francis Bourne, our most loved and venerated Cardinal Archbishop, giving them a welcome. He was most helpful to them in those difficult early days. He had rented a small house for them at 124, High Street, Battersea, near the small iron Catholic church and the parochial girls' school run by the Notre Dame Sisters. Here was born the Salesian work, which, in the course of the following year was given new impetus by the arrival of the newly-ordained priest Fr. Giovenale Bonavia and Subdeacon Eugene Rabagliati.

Before a year had passed, death claimed poor Fr. McKiernan, on the 30th December 1888; three months later John Pash, an apostolic and promising young man, who had expressed a wish to become a Salesian, also died. Fr. Macey then had to take on the burden of Superior as well as Parish Priest. He was eventually able to buy two houses in Orbel Street and they became the base for the new community. Frs Macey, Bonavia and Rabagliati were the Salesian pioneers in England: three quite different characters – they complemented and sustained one another with a wonderful respect and devotion. One could say that Fr. Macey was the heart, Fr. Bonavia the mind, and Fr. Rabagliati the arms of the new work in London. An affection and an interest united them – an affection for Don Bosco and an interest in the new Congregation.

Encouraged by the lively faith of Don Rua, who visited the new house and wanted to encourage the development of the work, Fr. Macey decided to start building a large church, dedicated to the Sacred Heart. This was his finest and dearest work. There Fr. Macey showed his qualities as a preacher, director of souls and as a promoter of the decorum of the house of God. For many years Fr. Macey used to decorate the altar, prepare the vases of flowers, organise the religious services with true pomp and decorum and he invited also many well-known priests to preach in the church. Fr. Rabagliati was in charge of the choir and the material side of the house and Fr. Bonavia directed the studies and piety of the clerics and students.

The work grew and extended its branches. Fr. Macey founded the houses of Cape Town, Burwash, Farnborough and Chertsey with little help or personnel from abroad, by raising up and forming his own helpers. When he became Provincial, he remained always at heart the father of Battersea. He was very much involved in making arrangements for the Salesian Sisters to come to England and he was always ready to help them as much as possible.

Fr. Macey got up regularly, early in the morning. He said Mass at 5. a. m. so that he would be in time for the Community meditation. He always led the meditation. He was always present, when possible, at all the Community practices of piety. He took great interest in the progress of the boys and their future careers. One day he met a mother with her son, who was just about to leave the Elementary School after his studies there had been completed. He asked her what her son intended to do – and then he went on to suggest that he had the qualities necessary for the priesthood. Thus John McCourt became a boarder in the Secondary School, eventually joined the Salesians, and is now a Rector.

Fr. Macey was generous and very good towards the needy. He succeeded in this and in facing heavy expenses through his economical spirit and with his shrewdness in managing house affairs. He had the manners of a gentleman and the mind of those who are poor in spirit.

Towards the end of his life he grew quite weak, suffering from senile infirmities. He was, however, comforted by the careful and kindly help of Fr. James Flower; in the last four days of life he deteriorated rapidly. Strengthened by all the religious comforts, he died peacefully on the 9th August 1928.

Cardinal Bourne, just returned to the city after a retreat, came to see him and to express his condolences. He recalled the beginning of the house and took a kind interest in what we are doing and hope to do – and he promised us his support.

The Rector Major, Don Rinaldi wrote. . . "The Lord has taken dear Fr. Macey; and I, who was his assistant and Latin teacher and then friend for so many years, have felt true sorrow. He had great qualities and lived for Don Bosco and the Congregation."

The funeral was solemnised with the help of Mgr. William Brown, the Auxiliary Bishop. Mgr. Amigo , the diocesan Bishop was leading a pilgrimage in Lourdes at that time. He offered Mass there for Fr. Macey. The mortal remains of Fr. Macey were taken to the Salesian cemetery at Burwash, where he rests next to his faithful collaborators – Father Bonavia and Father Rabagliati.

Let us offer generous suffrages for him and pray to Our Lord and Mary Most Holy to bless this Province.

Your humble confrere,

Fr. E. M. Tozzi. SDB.

Necrology: Fr. Charles Bernard Macey, of Salisbury, England, died at Chertsey, Surrey on the 9th August 1928 aged 74 years in the 46th of profession and 41st of priesthood. He was Rector for 31 years and Provincial for 7 years.