

My dear Confrères,

It is with the deepest regret that I have to announce to you that the Anglo-Irish Province, and this house of Battersea in particular, has lost one of its most outstanding, best-loved and saintly members by the death of

Fr. PETER BEDE McCONVILLE, S.D.B.

The deceased priest passed to his eternal reward at midday on Sunday, November 21st, 1954, at St. Joseph's Nursing Home, Boars Hill, Oxford. There, for the last few weeks of his life, he had been under the kindly care of the Sisters of St. Joseph of the Apparition, and we feel sure that St. Joseph himself was at his death-bed to take him safely home.

Tradition demands, and justice seems to exact, that we give some record of the life-story of a deceased confrère and this, very briefly, we shall, in this case also, attempt to do. Those who knew Father McConville well—and to know him was to love him—realise that his life-story could truly be summarised in the words: “He was a prince of charity.” He had a laugh, a cheery word and a helping hand for everybody. He was, indeed, an apostle of peace. A leading Redemptorist once accurately described him in the words of the praise given by Jesus to Nathaniel: “Behold a man in whom there is no guile!” Father McConville was steeped in priestliness and sincerity. He loved everyone and was loved by them, and he loved Don Bosco second to none.

The zeal which so characterised him all his life was a zeal enkindled by the fire of charity: for him no effort was too great which spelt as its reward the salvation of souls or the spread of the Salesian Work. If there seemed to be an almost childish simplicity in his approach to life, it was the simplicity that is born of integrity, of singleness of purpose, of genuine love of God and of souls. And the fruit of all this was manifested in his unquenchable optimism and in the infectious enthusiasm which marked his every word and act. Its value in his missionary and parochial work, as well as in his superlative efforts on behalf of two great causes, those of vocations and of the Association of Salesian Co-operators, can easily be imagined.

Father McConville was born at Bootle, near Liverpool, Lancashire, on February 15th, 1882, and received his early education in the intensely Catholic atmosphere of the Church on Merseyside. As a young man, he took a keen interest in every activity of his home parish of St. Alexander's, Bootle, and particularly in the welfare of the Catholic Young Men's Society. It was noticeable how, on Benediction evenings, he always left the club to go to the Church, and he was finally instrumental in having the club closed during church services.

His parents, Michael and Alice McConville, were good, simple, Catholic working folk and he himself, not being able to avail himself of the benefits of higher education, had to earn his bread the hard way in his youth. After experience, in a humble capacity, with various business firms, and a period as a hospital porter at Bootle, he applied for admission to the Salesian Society.

He came to Battersea as an aspirant in the autumn of 1903, when he was already over twenty-one years of age. He made his novitiate at Burwash (Sussex) from 1905-06, pronounced his first vows there on October 4th, 1906, and was perpetually professed at Mylapore, Madras, India, in December, 1911. His philosophical studies were done at the houses already mentioned and his practical triennium was passed between Battersea, Mylapore and Tanjore. In 1908 he left for India at the express desire of the Venerable Don Rua of saintly memory, who wished him to help Don Mederlet (afterwards Archbishop of Madras) and Don Tomatis in the new foundations of Mylapore and Tanjore. After successfully completing his theological studies in India, he was ordained at Mylapore on January 18th, 1914.

How brilliantly he triumphed over his early lack of schooling and the lateness of the commencement of his studies for the priesthood is seen, among other things, by the fact that at the European Seminary at Mylapore in 1914 he received the mark "Accessit Primus" in Sacred Theology. This was but one of a series of triumphs, for in 1919, at the Pontifical Seminary of the Lateran in Rome, he secured his Doctorate of Philosophy, whilst at Oxford, in 1920, a thesis involving much reading in Sanskrit and Tamil obtained for him the Oxford Research Certificate (B.A. Honours Standard). Few who were unacquainted with his early history, and whose estimate of Father McConville was simply that of a delightfully lovable character, had any realisation of the keenness of his intellect and the depth of his scholarship.

His return to England in 1917 was due to a breakdown in health. The greater, therefore, is the credit that is due to him for his later brilliant achievements.

His early years back in this country were mainly, and highly successfully, devoted to propaganda work for the Indian Missions and to the development, after the upheaval of the first Great War, of the Salesian Work in England. This, for him, was a period of great success in the establishment of circles of Salesian Co-operators in the Liverpool district and elsewhere. To him, too, goes much of the credit for the opening of our now flourishing houses at Cowley (Oxford) and Bolton (Lancs). With the exception of a short spell, from 1926 to 1929, as Rector of the Salesian Agricultural College, Pallaskenry, Co. Limerick, Ireland, he was, from 1921 to 1942, parish priest of Cowley and the beloved father in Christ of each and every one of his flock. The work was progressively heavier, for these years saw a tremendous industrial development take place in Cowley and a village become a great town and an important part of the city of Oxford itself. The year 1942 saw him become parish priest of Battersea and he remained in that post till, after a collapse in the Confessional some two or three years ago, he was stricken with a partial paralysis and forced to retire from active work. Indeed, for the last two years of his life, he was unable to say Mass.

In the long days of his sickness, his intense personal piety and his strong sense of humour were his constant supports. He loved to go down to the chapel for Holy Mass and also, when the weather and his health permitted, to go to the College playground and to chat and to watch the boys at play. With that admirable kindness which was so typical of him, he never forgot the Sisters and, on their feast-days and many another occasion, he went to visit them. Last, but not least, he was often to be seen, leaning heavily on his stick, making his slow but sure way to pay a visit to the teachers and children in the parochial schools nearby. Nor was a quiet visit to aged parishioners or old friends a rarity with him.

He was buried at Oxford amidst the people who had known him so well. Father Provincial delivered a stirring panegyric at the Requiem Mass in our parish church at Cowley before the interment. It was the deep appreciation of a great priest, who merited every bit of the high praise that had been given him.

Dear Confrères, a holy priest and a great Salesian has gone to spend his eternity in the company of Don Bosco. May we who remain and who owe so much to his prayers, to his saintly life and example—things which benefit the whole Society and not merely the particular house or Province in which a confrère happens to reside—not forget to beg Our Lady, Help of Christians, and our Salesian saints to hasten for him the speedy attainment of that everlasting reward which awaits him after his holy and apostolic life on earth.

Please pray, too, for this house, and for

Yours devotedly in Jesus Christ,

Fr. V. COUCHE, S.D.B.,

Rector.

Data for the Necrology:

Father Peter Bede McConville, born at Bootle, near Liverpool, on February 15th, 1882, died at a nursing home in Oxford on November 21st, 1954, in the 73rd year of his age, the 49th of his Religious Profession and the 41st of his Priesthood.