

FATHER FRANCIS McDONAGH. S. D. B.

With very deep regret we record the death of a well-known and loved confrere, Fr. Francis, who died suddenly on the 12th November 1977, in Warrenstown.

Fr. Francis was born to Mr and Mrs H. McDonagh on the 31st May 1911. He received his early education at the O'Connell C. B. S. Dublin. Then he was an agricultural student at Pallaskenry, Co. Limerick and all his life maintained a constant interest in agriculture. Entering the Salesian Novitiate, Cowley, Oxford in 1931 he made his profession the following year and completed his philosophical course in Cowley. From 1937 to 1941 he followed the theological course at Blaistown Hall, Glos, and was ordained to the priesthood there in July 1941. He then took up duty as Farm Manager in Blaistown, where the boys were in training to take up farming. In early June of 1942 he became ill and valvular disease of the heart was diagnosed. A consequence of this was his return to Ireland for a complete rest. He then went to Warrenstown where he began to interest himself in horticulture. Ill health dogged him for the rest of his life. From 1951-7 he was stationed in Salesian House, Ballinakill, where his deep interest in the Travelling People of Ireland began to show itself. In 1957 he returned to Warrenstown. A year later he suffered a stroke which left him partly disabled. As well as acting as confessor to the community and students his involvement with the travelling people began to expand. His renown as a patient listener, a wise counsellor and a guide for souls became widely known, and people from many walks of life came to him to seek his guidance, to receive his advice, to unburden themselves to him and to ask for his blessing and his prayers.

His interest in the travelling people brought them to him at all hours of the day and night, and with the passage of years this apostolate expanded. Not only did they call to see him, but they wrote to him and he was endlessly and painstakingly answering their letters, which came from all parts of Ireland and England. Those who were too ill to come and see him, he would try to visit, at no small inconvenience to himself. His very last task was to listen to and advise some travelling people who came to see him in Warrenstown. A short time after they left Fr. Francis collapsed and died. His work on behalf of the travelling people had the full approval of the Bishop of Meath. In fact on the 30th December 1974, the bishop appointed Fr. McDonagh to supervise the preparation for marriage of travelling couples in the diocese of Meath.

Fr. Francis was a remarkable priest, a complete individualist, with a great love of the Church, of the Congregation, and a deep love of Our Lady, Help of Christians. In spite of his own sufferings, or maybe even because of them, he was moved at the sufferings of others and went out of his way to show his sympathy with them and to share in their sufferings and anxieties. He likewise showed his understanding and sympathy with his own confreres. He will be immensely missed by his confreres and by the multitude of those whom he called his friends. On Sunday evening, 13th November, his remains were placed in the College Chapel, which proved to be inadequate for the vast crowd of people who came to pay their last respects to a priest they loved. Because of the experience of that evening, it was decided to hold the Requiem Mass the following day in the hall. At 3. pm. on the Monday, in the presence of the bishop, Most Rev. John McCormack, the Requiem Mass was celebrated. The principal celebrant was Fr. John O'Mahoney S. M. A., a nephew of Fr. McDonagh. He was assisted by the Rev. Denis Corcoran, Vice-Provincial, and by many Salesian priests and other diocesan clergy – about 40 concelebrants in all. There was also a large gathering of the laity and among those present were Mr. E. O'Mahoney, Mrs J. Plunkett and Miss Sheila McDonagh, his sisters, and many other relations. Fr. Francis was laid to rest in the college cemetery in the presence of the largest gathering of mourning people ever to attend a funeral at Warrenstown – evident proof of the deep affection and veneration in which he was held by so many people. Through the intercession of Our Lady, Help of Christians and St. John Bosco, whom Fr. Francis loved and served so well, may the good Lord give him the reward of those who die in his service.