

Salesians of St. John Bosco



Salesian House,
Surrey Lane,
Battersea,
London SW11 3PB

March, 1986

Dear Confrères,

FATHER THOMAS McKENNA, S.D.B.

During the night of Friday/Saturday, 7th/8th February, 1986, Father Thomas McKenna died suddenly of a heart attack at the age of 81 years.

He was a man of normally excellent health and he was usually full of energy. During the previous week he had mentioned that he was not feeling well but, in spite of this, he continued visiting the elderly and sick and carrying out with love and zeal his parish and community duties.

He was the son of James and Alice McKenna and he was born on the 18th January, 1905, in Barking, Essex. He was baptised in the parish church of St. Mary and St. Ethelburga and he attended the parish school in Linton Road from 1910 to 1920. Father McKenna's father was a native of Castlegregory, Co. Kerry, and he often spent his holidays with relatives there.

He entered the newly-founded Salesian College at Pallaskenry, Limerick, as a pupil and aspirant for the Salesian Congregation on the 5th October, 1920, and, in September, 1922, he came with some other Pallaskenry students to Cowley, Oxford, in order to begin their novitiate year. In the following September he made his first religious profession and he made his final profession at Chertsey in September, 1929.

From 1923-25 he did his philosophical studies at Cowley, Oxford, and from 1926-29 he started his practical teacher-training at Chertsey, Surrey. In 1929 he moved to the Salesian College, Farnborough, where he combined his theological studies with some teaching. From 1930-33, he followed a similar plan at Battersea, and it was from Battersea that he was ordained to the priesthood by Archbishop Amigo in St. George's Cathedral, Southwark, on the feast of Our Lady's Assumption, 15th August, 1933.

For the two following years, he continued teaching at Battersea. In 1935 he became the headmaster at the Salesian College, Chertsey. But his main apostolate was not to be in teaching but in parish work and, in 1936 he joined the community at Farnborough, Hants., where, in addition to his teaching, he gave some time each day to the parish apostolate there.

In 1942 he went to Cowley, Oxford, as the parish priest, a position which he was to hold until 1980—a period of 38 years. When he first arrived at Cowley, the parish included the district of Littlemore and Mass was said there in a hall on Sundays. Eventually the Littlemore centre was taken over and developed into a separate parish by the diocese. Another Mass centre, started at Blackbird Leys, was also later taken over by the diocese and became the Sacred Heart parish. Meanwhile, Father McKenna replaced the small parish church at Cowley with a larger church dedicated to Our Lady, Help of Christians.

Father McKenna was very much involved with Catholic education and he was responsible for enlarging his own parish school. He was also responsible for building a new parish hall and club. He was chaplain at the local hospital and he was well known and loved for his care of the sick. He had a friendly and helpful interest in all Catholic activities all over the Oxford area.

His retirement from the parish in 1980 was marked by outstanding tributes to his priestliness and apostolic enthusiasm during that time. Bishops, Civic authorities, parishioners, parents, teachers and school children joined in regret at his departure to London and in gratitude for all that he had done during his stay at Oxford.

His last six years at Battersea were a continuation of the same active interest in all parish activities, particularly the visiting of the sick and elderly. His religious life was always worthy of the man; simple, quiet, unaffected, dedicated and, above all, a service of the warmest love.

The remains of Father McKenna were received into the Community chapel on Sunday evening, 16th February, when Holy Mass was celebrated and the Office of the Dead was recited. On Monday, 17th February, the body was transferred to the Sacred Heart church where Requiem Mass was concelebrated by many Salesian and Diocesan priests and in the presence of Bishop Tripp. He was later buried in the Salesian plot at Morden cemetery.

With confidence I commend his soul to the charity of your good prayers, and will you also, please, remember this community.

Yours sincerely in Don Bosco,
Bernard Higgins, S.D.B.
(Rector).

Data for Necrology: Father Thomas McKenna born in Barking, Essex, 18th January, 1905, died in London, 8th February, 1986, in the 62nd year of profession and 52nd of priesthood.

R.I.P