

Vale Fr Alan McDonald SDB

"Our final farewell to our oldest Salesian"

**65 years as priest and
75 years as Salesian**

**Born in Brisbane (Qld)
24 June 1918**

**Religious Profession,
Cowley, Oxford, England
8 December 1936**

**Ordained Priest, Melbourne,
28 July 1946**

**Entered Eternal Life,
Brooklyn Park, South
Australia 92 years of age**

**Pastoral Ministry: Teacher,
Prefect of Studies, Rector**

**Service to the General
Council (Rome)**

**Translator and Vice Rector
of the Community, Rome**

Fr Alan McDonald passed away on Wednesday 9 February 2011, at about 7.40pm Adelaide time. He was the oldest member of the province at 92 years of age, 65 years as priest and 75 years as Salesian. Fr. Mac served different roles during his ministry as rector, teacher, head master, historian, and translator of many languages. He was a great musician who also had a shrewd sense of humour.

A Memorial Mass was celebrated at St. John Bosco parish in Brooklyn Park, Adelaide in the presence of Archbishop Philip Wilson. The emeritus archbishop Len Faulkner was present as well. The Mass was led by Fr. Joseph Lee SDB, the rector of the Salesian community in Adelaide, together with a few Salesian priests and a diocesan priest. Many friends of Fr. Mac, including parishioners, Salesian Co-operators, past pupils, old boys and religious, packed the

church in this Eucharist to pay respect and to pray for the repose of his soul.

Many of Alan's confreres, friends and past pupils attended the traditional Requiem Mass for the repose of his soul which was celebrated at Salesian College in Sunbury on Tuesday 15 February and was followed by his burial at the Salesian cemetery in the grounds of the College.

The Salesian Provincial, Fr Frank Moloney, highlighted in the homily the major moments in the priestly and religious life of Fr Alan:

"The readings chosen for today are marked by the peace and confidence that were always present in Fr Alan McDonald's pursuits, whatever they might have been. In the Gospels of Mark and Matthew, Jesus cries out at the moment of his death. But the gentler Luke has Jesus handing over his spirit in a passage that immediately follows upon his welcoming the good

thief to join him in his Kingdom, and his prayer to his Father to forgive those who have executed him, for they did not know what they were doing. We are all aware that Alan was anxious about many things and in his later years especially about his assiduous praying of the Prayer of the Church and the daily celebration of the Eucharist. But for the rest, he exuded a certain peace and confidence in his teaching, his leadership, and his contacts with young people, and with his confreres. Even at the end of his life, when circumstances forced his separation from his beloved community at Brooklyn Park, Adelaide, he went sadly but with dignity, peacefully aware of what lay ahead of him, and open to whatever might happen. There was a quiet yet warm calm that he had in himself, and which he imparted to others. Like Jesus – after such a long journey that has not been without its troubles – today we celebrate Alan's handing over of his Spirit to his Father.

It is difficult to tell the story of 92 years, and I have no intention of doing so. Allow me to touch upon major moments. Born and bred in Queensland, Alan came to the Salesians via the Christian Brothers at South Melbourne. Indeed, his arrival at "Rupertswood" in 1933 had been immediately preceded by his being the outright winner of the brass baritone saxophone solo in open competition at the South Street, Ballarat Festival, one of Australia's most significant music competitions. He was a very small 15 year-old. He was a member of that very early group of young Australians preparing for the Salesian life here at Sunbury, Alan McDonald, Terry Jennings and Jim Hamilton, who set out for England in 1934. Alan spent very happy years in England: a period in Cowley, Novitiate and Philosophical studies at Beckford, and Practical Training at Shrigley. He returned to Australia, across the dangerous Atlantic and Pacific, via the Panama Canal during the war years.

He arrived home in 1943 to complete his Priestly studies at "Rupertswood." He was ordained a Priest by Archbishop Mannix at St Patrick's Cathedral, side by side with Fr Frank Drohan, who died very recently in Japan, and Fr Terry Jennings, who departed in 2001.



Fr Jennings, Fr Alan McDonald and Fr Drohan (seated) on their ordination day

Allow me to focus for a moment on Alan's presence at "Rupertswood." The year after his ordination, he was appointed what we then called "Prefect of Studies" here. The Rector was in charge, but the Prefect of Studies ran the school. He held that position, and then the Rector's position until 1958. When Alan began here we ran only a primary school, exiting students with their Merit Certificate. He gradually brought the exit level to Intermediate Certificate, initiating the foundation of the outstanding secondary college that "Rupertswood" is today. In his early "Rupertswood" years he formed and conducted a fine Boys' Choir that was eventually recorded. We still have an old "78" of that recording in the Provincial archives. In 1952 he was appointed the Rector – the first Australian born Rector in this little corner of the Salesian world.



Fr Alan with his 1944 choir



First Profession Day, Oxford, 1939

He held that post for 9 years – only one year short of the record of the present Rector of "Rupertswood." During his nine years as Rector he built the hall, and the fifty bed dormitory above it, upgrading the ablution block that served both the Sacred Heart dormitory, Our Lady's dormitory and later, the Agricultural boys. He built a study-classroom, with an associated science block, especially designed for the agricultural students, adjacent to the Chapel, and he added what in my time was the sacristy. Today we need to especially recall his important project of the Salesian Cemetery that he wanted to locate in the spacious grounds of the Mother House of the Province. The records show that this was a massive task, opposed by both municipal and state government authorities. But his devotion to the Congregation and to his fellow Salesians ensured that this project was seen through to provide that serene place which all Salesians eventually call "home."



Fr Alan, the dedicated teacher in action

Wherever he went, he was charged with new tasks. He was very instrumental in the development of Salesian College, Chadstone. Bishop Tim Costelloe SDB, who apologising for not being able to be with us today, recalls him well in those days and commented to me what an impression "Fr Mac" made on him. Alan was a consummate teacher.

With a BA in Classics and English from London University and the highest level of recognition from the Melbourne Conservatorium of Music, he was ready for the challenge of an emerging secondary school. His assiduous attention to preparing classes, correcting papers, and following each student made him an outstanding teacher. He was reappointed Rector at "Rupertswood" in 1964, in the years when Fr Frank Freeman was finishing off the task Alan had begun by taking the College through to Matriculation, as it was called in those days. At this stage in his life, Alan had been at the helm from 1946 till 1969. There were more Salesians around in those days of the 60's, and it is warmly remembered by many – some of us here today – as the period when "the old 'Rupertswood'" was at its high-point: boarding facilities, a secondary college from Form 1 to Matriculation, an agricultural course with entry at Form 4 level, and exit with either Intermediate or Leaving Certificates, and the beginnings of the presence of day boys, especially the

large cohort that came up on the train each day from Sunshine. It was also at this time that the first lay teachers – so much the backbone of Salesian College "Rupertswood" today – were appointed: Basil and Pat Sheehan.



Although his remaining years saw him in less onerous missions at Chadstone and Brooklyn Park, the years he regarded as his happiest followed. He worked as an official translator at the General House of the Salesians of Don Bosco in Rome from 1972-73, and then again from 1980-1983. Again his qualified, calm and joyful presence made a great impression. I have been in constant touch with the Pisana across these days, and they are joining us as we say farewell. Many of them remember Alan with fondness.

His language skills made him perhaps the best translator from Italian to English we have had, but he is remembered in Rome as a Salesian rather than as a translator. They loved him in community, and his quality Salesian presence impressed them all. He was eventually appointed the Vice Rector of the community there, although Alan once said that all it meant was that he occasionally said the prayer at meals, and poured out the soup! He returned to Brooklyn Park in 1984, and was a member of that community until February 9 of this year. Now he belongs to a much more illustrious community.

I cannot speak highly enough of the support and affection – no, genuine love – that the community at Brooklyn Park have given to Alan across these years. Initially Alan made excellent contributions to the life of the community and the Parish, and continued a great deal of highly qualified translating work for the Congregation and the Province. Among the material he had sent to the archives, there is an amazing USB stick containing translations into English of almost all the early letters surrounding the arrival of the first Salesians in Australia. These years were also highlighted by Alan's adventurous scooter riding, especially his annual trip to Melbourne and back for the Retreat. Eventually he fell off on one of those trips, and he decided to end his days on the scooter. His memory began to fade. His assiduous attention to the Prayer of the Church and his daily Mass became a problem, as he could not remember whether he had performed all his responsibilities as a Priest. He was blessed to be surrounded by a wonderful community, and special mention must be made of Fr Brendan Murphy and Fr Joseph Lee, two Rectors at Brooklyn Park with remarkable gifts in their care for the elderly. Never did Fr Mac feel "out of it," even though in these last years his presence (and sometimes his absence) was a matter of increasing concern.



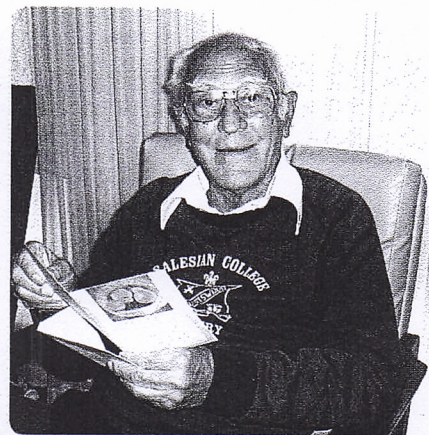
Fr Alan and Fr Bill Edwards meeting Pope Paul VI

When I came on visitation his only concern was, "Am I a nuisance to the other confreres?" It was hard not to say "yes," but the Brooklyn Park community would have murdered me if I had told him that. Not that he would have remembered what I said! I cannot close without a mention of the Flora McDonald Home, named after the mother of St Mary of the Cross MacKillop. He did not think he needed to go there, but his confreres handled that difficult situation with skill and outstanding love for their Salesian confrere. He was able to pray, to say his Mass, thanks to the wonderful and devoted assistance of John Warden, a resident at the Hostel who guided Alan through his Mass every day. He occasionally came back to Brooklyn Park for community celebrations of major events, and went off again without troubling the community further. This was surprising, but perhaps reflects that deeper peace that I mentioned earlier.

On my visitation last year it was obvious that he was fading. However, in 2009 he asked why he had to be out of a Salesian community. Remember that he had been in one – somewhere in the world – since 1933. I gave him all the health reasons, but he waved them away. He did not have any of those problems. Who had I been talking to? In the end, speaking to a good old-fashioned Religious, I resorted to a good old-fashioned practice. "Father," I said, "you are here because I, the Provincial, have decided that you must be here." To this, Alan looked at me intently with those steely blue eyes ... and said in a tone of voice and a subtle sense of humour that you would all recognise: "There used to be a time when I respected Provincials!" I will take that outstanding remark from Alan to my own grave as one of the wittiest things ever said to me. But, of course, he meant it!



Fr John Briffa conducts the burial service in the peaceful Salesian Cemetery



And so we come to say our final farewell to our oldest Salesian. What a privilege it is to recall with you all the life and contribution of this remarkable and gifted man. How blessed we are to be able to recognise our own situation, and Alan's situation, as he goes to meet the one he loved and served so well for so long, and cry out with joy, Paul's words to the Romans:

"Neither death nor life, no angel, no prince, nothing that exists, nothing still to come, not any power, or height or depth, nor any created thing, can ever come between us and the love of God made visible in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen."

After the committal rite at the end of Mass, all joined in the procession to the Cemetery where the burial service was conducted by Fr John Briffa of Engadine New South Wales.

