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Fr MARTIN MCPAKE

Member of the General Council

Rome, 12 June 1995

My dear confreres,

Our sorrow, strengthened by Christian hope, is still deeply felt for the death of our dear confrere

Fr MARTIN McPAKE

Regional Councillor for the English-speaking Region

The Lord called him to share the joy of his resurrection in the morning of 18 April last, Tuesday in Easter Week. Assisted by the superior and several confreres of the community of the Salesian Pontifical University, by his sister Mother Georgina FMA and by the Daughters of the Sacred Hearts who are in charge of the UPS Infirmary where he had been cared for during the previous two weeks, Fr Martin peacefully passed away, with on his lips words of gratitude and encouragement to those present: *"All is now finished. Thank you. We shall meet again."*

In this way, with a countenance expressing joy at meeting the Lord, there came to an end a long period of suffering which had begun a year earlier when Fr Martin contracted a liver complaint while engaged on the Extraordinary Visitation of the Province of New Rochelle, USA, and underwent an urgent surgical operation. From the outset the prognosis was unfortunately less than positive: cancerous cells were found in the biliary duct and for this reason, immediately on his return to Rome, Fr Martin was treated by chemotherapy and began a period marked continually by suffering, albeit with some intervals of less pain. From the beginning he faced up to his illness with faith, in conformity with God's will but also full of confidence in a cure which he entrusted to the intercession of Blessed Don Rua, in which he was joined by confreres and sisters. God's designs are different from ours and the suffering became more acute, especially during the last months. He was compelled to return to hospital and undergo a further operation, which originally gave rise to some hope. But the illness continued its advance,



and Fr Martin offered up his sacrifice, praying for the Rector Major – who was undergoing treatment in the same hospital – and for the confreres of his Region. All this time he was constantly and lovingly assisted by his sister, who was close to him to the end, together with his salesian confreres.

The death of Fr Martin McPake leaves a gap in the Salesian General Council of which he became a member in 1984 on his election by the 22nd General Chapter and reconfirmation by the General Chapter of 1990. But it leaves a void especially in the confreres of the English-speaking Region, which Fr Martin served for eleven years with a more than usual love and dedication.

While we adore the holy will of God and pray for our confrere we admire and express our thanks for all the Lord willed to do through him as an instrument.

Attracted to Don Bosco

“I was just a poor little boy, and look at how much I have received from the Congregation, even in my illness”. These words which Fr Martin repeated during the months of his illness, help us to understand the origins of his vocation.

He was a “little boy”, born at Cambuslang, a suburb of Glasgow in Scotland, on 15 January 1925, the fourth of ten children. Quite soon, at the age of nine, he had to begin work in earnest as a newspaper boy to help his family. The newsagent was very fond of him and allowed him to read the children’s literature of the time. He was a bright pupil at school, loved reading, had a great sensitivity for poetry and enjoyed accumulating general knowledge. At the age of thirteen he showed keen interest in the simple scientific experiments he was learning at school, and at one time expressed to his science teacher that he would like to further his studies in this field.

But especially in his family Martin found an environment rich in love and faith. He frequently referred to this in his last months of sickness, frequently expressing his deep gratitude to God for having been



blessed by wonderful parents, his father Martin and his mother Elizabeth, so full of dedication and tenderness, and by his brothers and sisters who helped him to grow and mature. The simple but deep Christian life lived in the family can be gauged by the religious vocations which developed in that environment: in addition to Fr Martin, his elder brother John became a Jesuit Lay-brother, and his sister Georgina, already mentioned, a Daughter of Mary Help of Christians.

Striking was the way in which Martin came to know of Don Bosco. We learn of it from his sister. When Don Bosco was canonized in 1934, the Scottish Catholic Paper of the time (*"The Catholic Times"*) published the event. John, the eldest of the family, took the cutting and photograph from the newspaper and placed it above Martin's bed. This image seemed to inspire him. He asked questions about Don Bosco. Who was he? What did he stand for? Interestingly enough, at this time the Catholic Teachers of Scotland chose Don Bosco as their Patron because he was an educator. The Don Bosco Guild of Catholic Teachers was then formed. Martin was fortunate, therefore, to have some of his questions answered by his teachers as well as by members of his family.

When he was fourteen, the curate of St Bride's Church, Cambuslang, put the question to Martin: "Are you still thinking of becoming a priest?" When Martin assured him that he was determined to do so, arrangements were made for him to begin his salesian training at the aspirantate of Shrigley Park, Macclesfield, England. Don Bosco had drawn him into his great family.

The years of formation

In the aspirantate Martin carried out his secondary studies and matured in his vocation, with the result that in 1943 he sought admission to the novitiate. This he made at Beckford, with Fr James Simonetti as novice master. On 31 August 1944 he made his first religious profession, and then returned to Shrigley for the study of philosophy during the two years of the postnovitiate.

Those were the difficult war-years, and numerous sacrifices and difficulties were experienced in salesian houses, as indeed in every



family. But that did not prevent solid study in the community, and especially the cultivation of the serene and joyful atmosphere characteristic of the salesian spirit. For Martin the years of formation were indeed an invaluable time, not only of intellectual development but also of the acquiring of a deep knowledge of the spirit of Don Bosco and of experience of the way of life, in joy, work and temperance, to which he would later bear witness in his apostolate. He was preparing himself, in fact, to be a future educator and animator, especially for many future young Salesians.

After successfully completing his philosophical studies, he remained at the studentate of Shrigley as assistant to the student clerics: a task of responsibility which shows the esteem the Superiors had for him even at that time, judging him to be suitable and capable of animating his young companions.

In 1950, with practical training behind him, he was sent to Lyons in France to begin theological studies. There, in the studentate of Fontanières, which formed so many effective priests in the genuine salesian spirit, he followed the first courses in theology under the guidance of sound teachers and formation personnel. Among these was Fr Joseph Aubry, professor of theology and master of salesian spirituality, with whom he established a bond of great friendship destined to endure long afterwards.

Of this period we have the testimony of the present Provincial of Lyons, who writes of Martin: "He was admirable in every way, in both class and playground. His intellectual and moral qualities, his kindness and gentleness were well known to all. He became more and more attached to our country, even finding in it qualities which are not necessarily there at all, but which his natural kindness led him to discover".

Fr Martin gave himself so effectively to French language and literature that he learned it to perfection, even acquiring an academic title in French; but especially he learned to love the spirituality of St Francis de Sales, Don Bosco's great patron and inspirer, becoming from that time onwards his student and imitator.

For his last year of theology he returned to Beckford in his own



Province and there received the sacred orders of diaconate and priesthood. On 18 July 1954 he became a priest of Christ through the imposition of the hands of Bishop John Petit.

Formation guide and animator

With his priestly ordination Fr Martin attained the long-awaited goal, prepared for through all the period of initial formation: to be a minister of the love of Christ and distributor of his grace. But the goal of the priesthood did not put an end to his formation which was to continue without interruption all his life, with a constant interest above all for salesian spirituality and with a special talent for following ecclesial updating.

Precisely because of these characteristics, which emerged in the young priest, the Superiors soon asked him to undertake an important service, that of the formation of young confreres. This was the task which was to keep Fr Martin occupied for a great part of his salesian life: first for eight years (1954-1962) as a teacher and animator of the postnovices (in the studentates of Ingersley and Beckford), and then director of novices for eleven years (Burwash 1962-66, Warrenstown 1966-68, Beckford 1970-73 and Dublin (1973-75), and finally Rector and animator of the students of theology at Ushaw, England. During this time he was granted a year at the Salesian Pontifical University of Rome, for a course of updating and deepening of his studies.

This experience as a formation guide – as was emphasized in the homily of the funeral Mass – marked his life and became the definitive perspective for evaluating everything. He learned to understand young people, to discern in them the call and movements of grace, to guide them to a generous and sure response, and especially to form them to the genuine religious life and salesian spirituality. Having to initiate and follow up young confreres gave him a deep and practical vision of Don Bosco's spirit, a sense of belonging without any wavering and a particular taste for our history. The trust he was able to win, his delicacy and prudence in judging, his rectitude and sincerity in expressing himself and his forthright adherence to the Congregation explain his



long assignment to this field. In his future activity of guidance he would always bear the stamp of a "master".

Linked with his service in formation, because of the human and spiritual gifts he displayed and because of his ability as a spiritual guide, the Superiors involved him directly in the government of the Province. From 1975 to 1979 in the first place he was a member of the Provincial Council, and then from 1979 Vice-Provincial, always with special responsibility at provincial level for formation.

The esteem of the confreres of the province for Fr Martin is clearly manifested in his election as delegate for the three successive General Chapters that followed Vatican II: the Special Chapter (GC20) of 1971, the GC21 of 1977-78 and the GC22 of 1984.

Councillor General for the English-speaking Region

Participation in these General Chapters inserted Fr Martin in the process of renewal which involved the Congregation after the Vatican Council (the next Chapter would have been his fifth). In a simple but efficacious manner, as a councillor capable of contributing his lived experience and harmonizing diverse sensitivities, he was able to make a valid contribution to the work undertaken by the Congregation for the renewal of its particular mission in fidelity to the Founder's charism and the signs of the times. In the case of three of the Chapters he was called to collaborate in the drawing up of the precapitular document. And he was also a member of the two restricted commissions which drew up the definitive wording of the text of the Constitutions, on which he wrote a personal commentary.

It was only to be expected that the confreres who knew him more closely should see him as an animator within the General Council. And in fact in the General Chapter of 1984 he was elected Councillor for the English-speaking Region, a vast area including various English-speaking countries: Great Britain, Ireland and Malta in Europe; Lesotho, Liberia, South Africa and Swaziland in Africa; the two provinces of the United States of America, with Canada which subsequently became a vice-province; and Australia with the islands of Samoa.



The simple enumeration of the different countries, so distant one from another even though with the same language, makes immediately evident the extent and complexity of the mandate he had been assigned; nevertheless it was a mandate which Fr Martin carried out with complete availability, and especially with a great love for communities and confreres, making himself a friend and brother, in frequent contacts, in visits, and in the animation of those bearing responsibility.

In the fulfilment of his task – as was recalled during his funeral – he had one concern above all others: the individuals, their religious fidelity and their happiness in salesian life. To meeting them and listening to them he gave unlimited time in visits which were proverbially calm and lengthy.

From each Province he was able to glean and pass on whatever was positive, without overlooking a frank statement of their limitations. Every country and culture provided him with some traits to admire and riches on which to meditate.

I quote just two of the statements made by Superiors of two Provinces of the Region. "Many of us already knew him well", wrote one Provincial, "and the valuable work he did in Britain; but all of us have come to know him as the Regional Councillor for the English-speaking Region. During this time he has very faithfully represented the Rector Major and enabled us to keep in close contact with the centre of the Congregation. We have happy memories of his gentle and encouraging visits". And another adds: "We remember him as a warm and hospitable person, an exemplary salesian priest and a dear friend. His deep rooted humanity, well grounded prayer life and unwavering faith were a reflection of both St Francis de Sales and Don Bosco. We give thanks to God for his gift to us of such a gentle, personable, optimistic and genuine Salesian. Fr Martin has left us the precious heritage of his positive leadership, confidence and kindness".

Some traits of his personality

From what has already been said, even though in a form which is concise and incomplete, and also from the testimony of many others who

have written to express their sharing in sorrow for the death of Fr Martin, there emerges the figure of a genuine Salesian, faithful and affable, with a living sense of vocation and a constant desire to imitate Don Bosco ever more closely.

I emphasize some of the traits which struck me more forcibly in him.

— In the first place his *strong life of faith* and his *deep spirituality* which were immediately obvious when approaching him and speaking with him. They were a legacy inherited from the family and Christian community in which he received his first formation. The environment in which the faith was part and parcel of daily life, the spontaneous example of parents who lived according to the Gospel as their natural family attitude, then the formation in a salesian house in an environment rich in joy and commitment, all helped him to mature by forming in him the ability to judge reality and see individuals against the background of the Gospel, uniting faith and life. The religious and priestly vocation strengthened in him this vision of faith, increasing the interior conviction that emerged in his daily life and in his contacts with people. One confrere, recalling one of the last visits made by Fr Martin writes: "I remember distinctly the last visit of Fr Martin to our community just a year ago, during which he spoke of spiritual things with an intimacy that stemmed from his deep personal relationship with God".

Contact with St Francis de Sales, the encounter with and study of his spirituality, had a marked effect on the spiritual life of Fr Martin. He came to understand ever better why it was that Don Bosco looked to St Francis de Sales, even to the point of taking him as the master and patron of his work, and the part played by this saint in inspiring the style of life and action which the Salesians of Don Bosco rightly call "salesian spirit".

It was from St Francis de Sales that Fr Martin learned above all the *centrality of the love of God*, which he used to emphasize in personal meetings and apostolic work, and of which he made great efforts to be the "sign and bearer", according to the expression of the Salesian Constitutions. The following quotation, taken from one of Fr Martin's conferences, is interesting in this connection: "For Francis de Sales the story of the world is a story of love. He had an ambition to write a biography of love. Don Bosco saw himself in the same light. 'With



difficulty will you find anyone who loves you more than I do', he told his young readers in the introduction to the Companion of Youth. He thought of all education as a matter of love in action, as actions along the paths of the heart, to use the phrase of Don Caviglia. The achievements of our two saints, and for that matter of all the saints, comes from the strength of their love".

In a letter to a confrere Fr Martin wrote, speaking also of himself: "The only miracle which I take to be a test of the authenticity of faith is the *miracle of love*. I never look for a rash of spectacular happenings. I am perfectly at peace in the obscurity of faith which has always surrounded my own life, one which is singularly free of charismatic experiences. I am content to get on with the job like yourself. Does that preclude my wondering at times whether I am sufficiently open to the transforming power of grace? I think not".

— On this foundation of a life of faith, which finds its full realization in love, grew the salesian stature of Fr Martin, to the extent that he became an expert witness to the *salesian spirit*, as we have already said more than once. A "master of salesian life" was written on the souvenir card distributed on the day of the funeral; not so much through doctrinal treatment (even though, as is said, he made a valid contribution to the process of the renewal of the salesian Rule of Life), but through the experience of the life he lived in the daily practice of Don Bosco's preventive system.

In addition to St Francis de Sales, his teachers were *Don Bosco the Founder, and Don Michael Rua, his first Successor* of whom he made a deep study, especially in connection with the correspondence between Don Rua and the Salesians of Great Britain: 250 letters on which he began to write a commentary to throw light on the beginnings of our work in that country. It was a great work which unfortunately he could not finish, but which made him familiar with the figure of Don Rua as the first faithful collaborator and interpreter of the spirit of Don Bosco. With Don Rua, beatified and at the Founder's side, he established a bond of friendship and trust, and had recourse to his intercession on many occasions, especially during his illness.

With what regard he considered the letters of Don Rua can be gleaned from these simple notes made in a conference: "Letters are like



litmus paper in the way they reveal the mood and character of the writer. (...) In the 250 letters of Don Rua to London there is not a single unguarded comment, not one unkind remark, no indiscretions, no revealing of details in difficult cases. On the contrary there is limitless charity and a wonderful ability to see things through his correspondent's eyes... Faith and love are transparent qualities in the correspondence of Blessed Michael Rua... In the little biography he wrote in 1911, Don Francesia recalls some words spoken just after Don Rua's death: 'He was *un sovrano della bontà*, a king of kindness'."

Of Don Bosco and Don Rua, the first interpreters of the salesian spirit, Fr Martin used to emphasize two characteristics in particular: *kindness*, the true centre of the preventive system, shown in attention, ability to listen, availability; and *Christian optimism*, rich in the joy that stems from the certainty of the presence of God. The life of Fr Martin was a ray of joy, says of him his sister Mother Georgina.

— These rich spiritual elements which, through the power of grace, were gradually moulding the soul of Fr Martin, became part of his personality, honing those qualities, especially in relationships with others, which from the time of his boyhood he had sought to cultivate in himself. We could define Fr Martin's humanity as *simple and rich*: simple, and hence able to wonder at and enjoy everything good and beautiful that he discovered in persons and things, but at the same time rich in human warmth in interpersonal relationships. Many have spoken of the friendship he was able to establish with people: with the young people entrusted to him to help them in their formation, and with the confreres whom he had the task of guiding and animating.

And this friendship found expression in the desire to live experiences of true fraternal communion; he cheerfully sought the exchange of experiences with those who were of his own mind and with those who might have misunderstandings or difficulties, seeking always to harmonize the different views. Family life in a community was always for him a peaceful oasis, a joyful expression of charity and the source of sincere friendship. Right to the end he wanted to take part in community practices and events, and came to the refectory for meals even when his suffering was becoming ever greater.

The following comments written by a confrere are of interest: "I



regarded Martin more as a friend – a good friend at that – than as a superior. He was always pleasant and had a winning smile and a cheery greeting for everyone. He was a man of prayer and was obviously recollected and absorbed in his daily Mass. He always joined us and took part in our community exercises of piety. His was a simple style of life, as I discovered when living with him during his visits to our Province. We had at times to replace his wornout shoes and clothing. He seldom asked! He was dedicated to his work and ever ready to be of help and service to others. He seemed an easy man to deal with, but had the ability to take the firm hard line when necessary, but always with charity. He was an example for all who came in contact with the religious and salesian life".

With the Rector Major he had a particular friendly rapport, which was at the same time an indication of harmony and correspondence, and a sign of esteem and faith in his mediation as Don Bosco's successor.

United with Christ in suffering

The spiritual strength of Fr Martin was manifested in a particular way during the time of his illness. As I mentioned earlier, he faced it with great confidence in a cure so as to be still of use to his confreres (following in this his patron, St Martin), but at the same time with the clear awareness of the trial that God was asking of him and his total availability to the Divine will.

He suffered, sometimes intensely, but always with tranquility and hope, and with a constant 'Thank you' on his lips for those who visited and assisted him, in particular the doctor, the Brother Infirmary, and the Sisters who were close to him in the final days. In the hospital, where he spent almost two months, they recall his kindness, his smile, and his expressions of thanks.

His sickness was for Fr Martin a time of an intense exercise of faith, in preparation for his meeting with the Lord. I would like to recall some of the expressions remembered by those who were close to him, and in particular by his sister, Mother Georgina. He did not conceal the



difficulties of the trial he was undergoing, which became ever more acute as Lent drew to a close; he said at one point: "I am a bit afraid of Holy Week. If Jesus wants me to pass through the tunnel of suffering, pray that I may have the courage to do so". And he added: "But do not ask God to send you suffering; rather ask him for the grace to accept it when it comes". He was strengthened especially by the certainty of God's presence: "I am never alone in this room. Jesus is here; I am only a guest". And again, speaking of the strength he derived from the Eucharist which he received each day: "The goal of Christian teaching is to bring everyone to sit at the table of the Eucharist, that table which will be ours for ever. The Eucharist takes us beyond Calvary to the Resurrection".

And with this certainty of faith, Fr Martin went to meet the Lord, while the Church was celebrating the Resurrection.

The solemn funeral Liturgy took place in the Church of the Salesian Generalate, where the remains had been taken, in the afternoon of Thursday, 20 April. Presiding at the celebration was Fr Juan E. Vecchi, Vicar of the Rector Major, with more than one hundred concelebrants. Present at the ceremony were the Salesian Cardinals Rosalio Castillo Lara and Antonio Javierre Ortas, Cardinal Bernard Law, Archbishop of Boston, and the Salesian Bishop Mgr. Gennaro Prata. On the previous day the Archbishop of Glasgow, Cardinal Thomas Winning, had visited the Church and prayed beside the coffin. Present too at the funeral Mass were the Mother General of the FMA with numerous members of her Council, and various other members of the Salesian Family. Alongside Mother Georgina were her brothers John SJ, Gerard and Thomas, her sister Isabella and other relatives.

The Rector Major, who could not be present in person because of his own illness, sent a message which was read in the introduction to the Mass. "We are here to thank God, our Father", he said among other things, "for the inestimable gifts he bestowed on Fr Martin McPake. He endowed him with outstanding spiritual qualities and accompanied him in a long existence of priestly ministry".

At the end of the celebration Fr Michael Winstanley, former Provincial of Great Britain, spoke some words of gratitude, which well synthesize certain aspects of the personality of Fr Martin: "On behalf of



the members of the McPake family here present, on behalf of Martin's Province of origin and of the English-speaking Region – confreres, sisters, cooperators and young people – and from my own heart as a personal friend, I would like, even if inadequately, to express my thanks to the Lord for the great gift of Martin among us, a gift which brought us great joy and enrichment. His contribution to our salesian life and mission has been a profound one.

We have appreciated his dedication to the Lord. He has always been a true man of God; he walked with the Lord, and recently he suffered with him too. The Lord was the centre of Martin's life. His practical and theoretical awareness of Don Bosco, St Francis de Sales and our salesian spirituality has inspired, guided and helped so very many.

We have touched at first hand his goodness, his availability, his kindness, his simplicity, his patience and his warm and peaceful affection. We have enjoyed his smile, his sense of humour and his laughter. He had a ready ability to appreciate, encourage, heal and give hope to others.

Martin gave himself generously and with a great spirit of sacrifice in the service of whatever mission was entrusted to him, more recently in his task as Regional Councillor.

Before leaving England yesterday I went into the kitchen of our community. The cook asked me to say good-bye to Martin on her behalf. She said that whenever he visited the community he always found time to greet her and to ask after her family; he even remembered the names of her children. For Fr Martin every person was important. Each one he treated with respect and sincere affection. Perhaps here lay the real secret of his life."

Dear confreres, let us thank the Lord who has given us on our earthly pilgrimage travelling companions of the spiritual stature of Fr Martin McPake. He has been a witness of the love of God for the Congregation and the Salesian Family, in the beautiful expression of art.22 of our Constitutions.

And while we thank also dear Fr Martin, who corresponded so well with God's call, we ask him to intercede that the genuine spirit of Don Bosco may be ever more intensified in our Congregation; in particular we ask for his intercession for an increase in salesian vocations, especially in the Provinces which he followed with particular attention in his ministry as Regional Councillor.

Affectionately in Don Bosco,

Fr Egidio Viganò

Rector Major



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