

DON BOSCO SEMINARY
Calamba, Laguna

Canlubang

June 2, 1976



Dear Confreres,

On the morning of May 17, 10:20 AM, our Lord and Creator called to his heavenly home our beloved confrere and confessor

FATHER JOHN MONCHIERO

at the age of 61, the 44th year of his religious profession and the 35th year of his priesthood.

He passed away in the San Juan de Dios Hospital, Manila, in complete resignation to God's will and with the spiritual consolation of the sacraments.

No one suspected that the earthly pilgrimage of Fr. John would come to an end so rapidly. He appeared so strong at the end of the school-year that he had already his plans what to do during vacation and during the next academic year. He simply mentioned that he would be operated of hernia to get rid of an annoyance.

He was operated last March 20, and everything was normal. After two weeks, he came back home in order to continue his convalescence in the community, where he said he was more at ease. On Easter Sunday, April 18, notwithstanding the contrary advice of his confreres, he went to resume his apostolate in the barrios. He celebrated masses and performed baptisms the whole morning. He came back looking very tired and complaining of a pain by his side. The following day he received the news that his mother died last Holy Thursday at the venerable age of 90. Since then, his health seemed to deteriorate.

On May 2, he was admitted once more in the hospital. He felt so sick and had no appetite for food. The doctors tried to diagnose well to find the causes of these troubles; but they could not attribute them to anything but psychological depression. After a week complications set in. His former malaria sickness came back. Then he developed double pneumonia and some days later pulmonary thrombosis. For a whole week his breathing was that of an agonizing man, although his mind remained clear during his conscious moments. Further complications crept in with the malfunctioning of his kidneys and the weakening of his heart. Then on the morn of May 17, he breathed his last.

Father John suffered his last illness with great Christian faith and resignation. The confreres and cooperators who assisted by his side day and night said that Fr. John never bothered about himself and his sickness, but only about the poor barrio people he was assisting in the apostolate, his deceased mother and heaven. He tried to mumble syllables and make the sign of the cross whenever Fr. Provincial or some other priest gave him the blessing of Mary Help of Christians. In other words, Fr. John in his last days, showed himself what he really was, a faithful son of Don Bosco, a saintly and apostolic priest.

He was born at Fossano (Cuneo) on May 1st, 1915. He was the third of seven children and his parents were Giacomo Monchiero and Caterina Servetti. Guided by his pious parents, he grew up in a simple, humble and traditional piedmontese family, very deeply rooted in the faith. At seven, he made his first communion. God awakened in him the desire to be a priest upon his meeting a holy seminarian of Fossano.

He then entered the aspirantate of Benevagienna (1928-1930) under the rectorship of Fr. Guala. His Novitiate passed under the guidance of Father L. Terrone, master, and made his first profession on Sept. 17, 1931 in the hands of Father Rinaldi. Then two years of philosophical studies followed. His tirocinium was spent at Valdocco (1933-34) and at Avigliana (1934-36). Finally, at Chieri (1936-40) he completed his theological formation. In this period, he prepared himself responsibly and diligently for the task of the priesthood; this can be attested by the so many conserved notes and spiritual retreats' resolutions that he made before receiving the orders.

On June 2, 1940, he was ordained priest at Turin by Cardinal Fossati. It was already the outbreak of World War II. The first two years of his priesthood were peacefully spent as assistant and teacher at San Benigno (1941-1942) and Lombriasco (1942-1943). At this time war was in full scale in all Europe, and its atrocities were everywhere evident. The priestly heart of Fr. John could not bear any longer his relatively peaceful life, while he heard about the hundreds of men, dying in the snowy alpine mountains without any spiritual assistance. He decided — and this was to be a major turning point in his life and his health as well.

Sometime in 1944, he went to the Rector Major, Don Ricaldone and insistently asked permission to go to the mountains to offer priestly services to men dying in the front. Permission was granted on condition that he should wear the cassock during his ministry even in the thick of operations. He was faithful to it. He joined the resistance guerrillas, and was assigned to the 7th Commando Division as chaplain to a group operating at the Biellese region. His desire to bring Christian consolation to all set no bounds to his courage. By night and at great risks, he buried the dead bodies of friends and enemies alike, at times jumping into the very pit he dug to play dead with the corpses to avoid being discovered. He secretly travelled down the mountains at dark to the villages to bring news to the worried relatives of the men fighting in the peaks and valleys. He saw young soldiers blown to pieces and other cruelties of the savage war. All these gruesome experiences left an indelible mark in the spirit and nerves of Fr. John. He never wanted to speak to anyone of this chapter of his life except to a few of his superiors. Nobody of us was even told that he was a captain in the Resistance.

After the war, Fr. Ricaldone sent him a letter assigning him to be a member of the Pontifical Commission for the Prisoners of War at Napoli. He spent a year (1946-1947) helping the poor unfortunates to be united with their families and to be rehabilitated.

Perhaps, the desire to forget the memories of the horror of war decided for him to serve the Lord in the missions. In fact, we find him in China by 1947, a few months after terminating his service to the prisoners of war. He worked in the missions of Kwantung for four years. What he did not expect was that Divine Providence had reserved for him an equally arduous and terrible

experience. Hardly was he getting established in this new life and culture of China when the communist army of Mao Tse Tung began its conquest of the mainland. The sufferings he endured—we have heard the same things from other missionaries who were imprisoned and was expelled from China, he saw the destruction of one of their Christian communities, Cheung Shu Tan with the massacre of 150 persons; prisoners by the hundreds dragged from the city with hands tide behind to face the firing squads. Following six months of strict house arrest, he was expelled from China on 22 August, 1951, together with others. The expelled missionaries were welcomed by the anxious confreres of Hong Kong. At this time, all the Salesian works in China were lost. However, by God's design, the loss of China was a gain for the Philippines.

No sooner had Fr. John recovered his spirit and strength when Fr. Charles Braga, the Provincial Superior, ordered him to do some pioneering exploration for salesian activity in the Philippines. He arrived in Manila on 6 January, 1952 on board the ship SS Sumatra—the first Salesian missionary to come from China. With Fr. Provincial and other Salesians who shortly followed, Fr. John became one of the founders of the Salesian House in Victorias, Negros Occ. Since then, the Philippines became his adopted country. At last, he could live an uneventful life occupied only in humble service and personal sanctification.

His stay in Victorias lasted from 1952 to 1963. His great patience and understanding made him loved by the boys and many other people. His poor health did not allow him to hold any administrative office, except as teacher and confessor. He spent some years teaching technology, not disdaining to work humbly in the shop. Even in later years, he was known as a priest who loved hard, manual work whether in the garden or in the laboratory. This is a trait he certainly inherited from his father whom he always described as a very hard working farmer.

The extremely humid weather of Occidental Negros took toll of his physical resistance. Suffering a nervous breakdown in 1963, he asked the superiors to assign him elsewhere where the climate was better adapted to his health. After a few months vacation in Italy, Fr. Braga sent him to be confessor to the new Salesian Novitiate of Canlubang. It seemed that here he found the right corner for his health, he stayed in Canlubang for the rest of his life.

Fr. John was happy and contented with the work he was doing. From his humble confessional box in a corner of the church, he made his influence felt in the spiritual life of the community. Many young confreres and seminarians went to seek advice from him and they appreciated his wise directions given with great patience. When at home and not in his room, the only place where he could be found outside the confessional was in the vegetable garden. He could be seen digging, planting, weeding, pruning, harvesting, for hours, often daily. This love for humble work was of great edification for our Brothers. Fr. John's presence in the garden has become part of the folklore of the seminary, and the trees and other plants that he planted around will keep his memory alive.

In 1965, aside the usual work in the seminary, Fr. John was appointed as the Director of Rizal Institute, a private high school for boys in Canlubang. His patience, understanding, and zeal for the spiritual welfare of all was remarkable. His willingness to do any form of service, however lowly, for the good of the school and the students was a lesson the teachers will never forget. He won their hearts. Two teachers were by his bedside when he breathed his last.

As a Salesian educator, Fr. John was an ardent preacher of purity. He was deeply sorrowed by the ever spreading corruption of youth due to pornography in the mass media. On his desk he left an unfinished rough copy of a letter to be addressed to the President arguing about the necessity of curtailing this evil. He always encouraged boys to confession, communion, devotions to the Sacred Heart and to Mary Help of Christians as means to remain chaste. His concern for morality was so intense that he always spoke of God's chastisement because of the spreading practice of abortion, divorce, artificial contraception, etc. Fr. John always was conscious of being a priest. His piety and love for prayer was edifying almost unnoticeably. He always prayed, especially the Rosary, wherever he was: in the intervals of a meeting, in the confessional waiting for a penitent, travelling in a car. Passing by cemeteries, he made it a point to slow down the car to pray for and bless the dead. What strikes the common people was his pastoral love practiced with no limit to his patience. His tender heart could not bear to see people suffer in miseries. Perhaps it reminded him of the miseries of war. How many poor people of the remote barrios where he made his apostolate did he transport to the hospital

even paying for them their hospital fees. To the doctors and nurses of San Juan de Dios, of the orthopedic hospital, he was the kind hearted priest of the unfortunate. One of his regrets in dying was that he was unable to realize to have an artesian well dug for the poor mountain people of barrio Mabato. He helped young men and women to find jobs. He was generous in giving to beggars who regularly visited him. And when someone told him that some of these were taking advantage of him, he used to reply: "How can we be sure that they are not in need of help?"

One thing that impressed one who took a ride with Fr. John in his combie was that everybody at Canlubang greeted him, especially the children. They loved the white-haired priest who took notice of all, even the lowliest. For this reason, the whole of Canlubang was shocked at the news of his death. They have lost a real friend. They will not see him any more.

The funeral service took place in the late afternoon of 19th May in the church of our Seminary. The concelebration and blessing was presided by the Bishop of San Pablo, Pedro Bantigue with the participation of 36 priests. Fr. Provincial, Jose Carbonell delivered a sermon expressing the sentiments of the whole Province over the loss of such a valuable confrere, and a young Brother made a farewell speech that touched the hearts of all. The church was packed with people: Salesians, Sisters, Cooperators, teachers, students, other religious; but the great mass were people from the barrios who wanted to pay their last respects to the mortal remains of Fr. John. However, because of the inclement weather, the burial was made early the following day in the presence only of the Salesians and Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. Fr. John was laid to rest in the Salesian cemetery of Don Bosco Seminary, just beside the good man who had sent him to the Philippines, Fr. Charles Braga.

All we now have is a memory of a confrere who excelled in humility, patience and kindness. In my years of stay with him, I never heard him speak ill of any one. He did not preach much about virtues, but he practised them.

When putting in order the poor personal belongings that Fr. John left behind, we found a slip of paper pinned by his bedside. It was very yellowish because of time, and on it the following words were written:

**EXPECT NOTHING
ASK FOR NOTHING
BE GRATEFUL IF THEY TOLERATE YOU.**

With this in mind you can do the least that you ought to do.

Perhaps, these words may explain much of Fr. John Monchiero.

Dear confreres, while our trust in God makes us hope that our dear Fr. John is already with our Founder Don Bosco, still, knowing that God's design is so mysterious, I invite you all to unite with our community in praying for our deceased confrere and for all those of our province who preceded him.

Be so kind as to pray also for this formation house

Yours affectionately in Don Bosco,

**Fr. Leo Drona, SDB.
RECTOR**

Fr. John Monchiero, born at Fossano (Cuneo), on May 1, 1915, died in Manila (Philippines) on May 17, 1976 at 61 years of age, 44 of religious profession and 35 of priesthood.

