

Fr Patrick MORRIN S.D.B.

On September 25th, Father Tohill, the Missions Superior in Rome, received a cable from Ethiopia:

"Father Morrin died unexpectedly — acute bleeding pancreas — September 24th — no medical help in the world could save him — burial to-morrow Makale".

The cable went on to ask for his relatives to be informed, giving the necessary addresses. The news was a totally unexpected shock that moved the Superiors in Rome as deeply as it did Father Morrin's family, in Manchester and Hong Kong, and the Salesians in England and Ireland, as well as in Malta, where Father Morrin spent eleven years of Salesian activity.

There had been no previous warning; in a long letter to Father Tohill, dated September 6th, which actually arrived after the fatal telegram, Father Morrin seemed in fine spirits, ending by saying all was going well in every respect. Yet perhaps as one looks back there were not lacking indications that this rich young life might end in just such an abrupt tragedy. But first, to sum up the span of that life. Father Patrick Morrin was born in Dublin, Ireland, in 1933 and met the Salesians at Pallaskenry in 1952. His novitiate was in Burwash the following year and, after profession in 1954, he studied at Ingersley before going out to Malta from 1956-9. His theology then took him to Melchet Court for three years and to Bollengo for one, leading to his ordination at the Mother house in Turin in March 1963. After two more years at Ingersley, he went back to Malta for perhaps the most fruitful period of his Salesian life, eight years as Catechist and Bursar, making an unforgettable impression.

In these years, the Rector Major was making urgent appeals for more missionary volunteers, appealing to confreres and Provinces alike for sacrifice; in 1972 after his annual retreat, Father Morrin wrote to Father Tohill, asking to be allowed to go and work on the missions. In this he was supported by the then English Provincial, who assured the Superiors that, whilst Father Morrin's going would be a serious loss to the Province, no obstacle would be put in his way. The offer was accepted. For some time it was thought that Brazil, sorely in need, offered the best prospect. Negotiations began but were considerably protracted. In 1973 it was agreed that Father Morrin should attend a course at Dundalk, Ireland, to prepare himself for his missionary work. It was there that disturbing signs began to appear that his bodily health might not be equal to his burning desire to work for the under-privileged in distant lands. In May 1974, he confessed to Father Tohill that he had been unwell since Christmas. After Easter he went into hospital where it was discovered that, in addition to a duodenal ulcer, he was also suffering from acute arthritis of the right hip.

Father Morrin was naturally disappointed that, as he put it, his dreams of mission work might fade. But he refused to lose hope, offered up his months of pain and weakness for the benefit of the missions and got on with his Brazilian Portuguese. It was then agreed that he spend another year in his home Province to recover his health; this he spent as Bursar at Shrigley, winning for himself the affection of both Salesians and boys. Meanwhile Father Tohill had decided that the Brazilian forests might present too great a risk and he began to look for somewhere more suitable. On a visit to Ethiopia, where the Salesians were contemplating work at Makale, he felt that this might be a solution. He accordingly wrote to Father Morrin suggesting that, should his health permit, he could go to Ethiopia; there were several other Missionary Orders there, such as the White Fathers and the Jesuits, with many Sisters; and, well, it was only five hours from Rome.

Father Morrin was able to reassure Father Tohill that his health was now much better and he was ready to go out to Ethiopia as soon as possible. He eventually arrived there on October 16th 1975, full of enthusiasm and there is no doubt that he was very happy with the boys and people there. His ideas were always practical and his letters to Europe, to mission centres and organisations, essentially businesslike. It was not to last.

Father Morrin's sister, gives the story of the end. Sister Helen is a trained nurse doing missionary work at Makale. She tells Mrs McQuaid that her brother was ill for less than a week, indeed, gravely so, for only three days. He complained of stomach pains and she treated him for that. As there was no improvement, she arranged for him to go to hospital, where the Doctors thought that possibly his ulcer trouble had flared up again. On Wednesday 21st September the Sister became seriously worried about his condition and watched him the entire night. Proposals to operate brought a request for blood donors and it was noticeable how many boys volunteered to give their blood to their beloved father. However it became clear that an operation would not help; on Friday afternoon, the Bishop anointed Father Morrin, to his obvious pleasure. As it grew dark, he sat up in bed and said good-bye to each of the Sisters and Salesians with him. He did not speak again and died half an hour after midnight on the 24th, Our Lady's day. The cause of death was a bleeding pancreas for which there is no known cure.

At 10.a.m. the same morning, Bishop Worku offered Holy Mass for the repose of the soul of Father Morrin and Mass was celebrated again in the evening by Father K. O'Mahoney. W.F. Father was buried on the following day, the Funeral Mass began at 6.30.a.m. and the funeral procession took place at 10.a.m. This was the first Catholic funeral in Makale and Bishop Worku presided, with the Orthodox Bishop in attendance. The decision of the Bishop to have the funeral at Makele was prompted by his wish to open the cemetery there, to publicly have a Catholic funeral and finally, to assure the people that the Catholic community had come to stay. The funeral procession was indeed a fitting tribute to Father Morrin. Traffic was stopped in the main avenue of the town and the streets were lined with thousands of people. It was of significance that, at the head of the cortege, there was a one-legged youth who, of his own accord and quite spontaneously, had put himself in that position and who insisted on walking all the way to the cemetery — a distance of about three kilometres. The people in Makele said that in their whole history they had never seen anyone receive such a funeral. It was indeed a tribute of the whole town, Catholics, Orthodox and Muslims to a saintly priest who had won their hearts in the short space of two years. In the days following the funeral many families mentioned how proud they were to be Catholics and how the Orthodox christians were saying; "The ceremonies were just like ours, are these Catholics like us?". The changes that are taking place seem incredible. Only fifteen years ago nobody would have dared call himself a Catholic for fear of his life. It appears like the early christians rising from the catacombs.

Sister Helen, in her letter, said that Father Morrin had made a wonderful beginning of the work at Makale, a true foundation stone; his memory will be held dear indeed. To say that he was highly esteemed would be less than correct, for he was loved by high and low. He was very gentle and self-effacing, but, nevertheless, made a deep impact on all who knew him. For the Sisters, she went on, he was always ready to do anything, an Evening Mass, a talk, any kind of service. She said "I think God only gave him to us for a short time to be our example of a perfect missionary".

Now it is ended. Father Morrin's almost desperate desire to give some part of his life to the mission poor was accepted by God. Two years were not enough to show how genuine was his idea of service. In those two years he must have accomplished a lifetime of service, something of Dominic Savio's fast-burning fire, of St. Therese of Lisieux's brief apostolate that accomplished so much. On October 1st, the community of Shrigley — Salesians and boys — who had said good-bye to Father Morrin less than two years before, held a memorial service, many priests concelebrating Mass in the presence of Father's sister and family and many Sisters, Brothers and friends. Father Morrin will surely continue his work from Heaven and we, who mourn his loss, must think of him as still active, still concerned with his mission work, and while we remember him in our prayers, we can surely beg him for his intercession in our needs.

May his good soul rest in peace with God for ever.

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Provincial