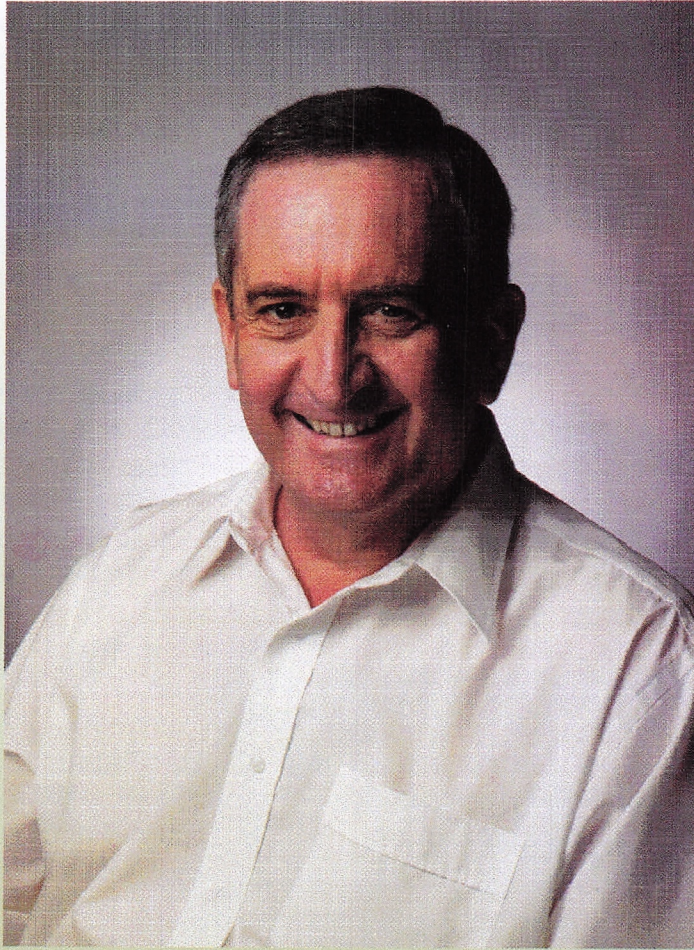


Father Ian Murdoch SDB



Born
First Profession
Final Profession
Ordination
Entered eternal life

24/02/1948 in Port Pirie, Australia
31/01/1967 at Oakleigh, Australia
31/01/1973 at Lysterfield, Australia
02/12/1975 at Port Pirie, Australia
08/01/2009 in Gawler, Australia

Dear Confreres,

Father Ian Murdoch, SDB, passed away on Thursday, 8 January, 2009, at sixty years of age. Shortly after his return from a sabbatical year at the Catholic University of America in Washington, DC, he was diagnosed with gall bladder infection. The operation to remove the infected gall bladder indicated that the organ was cancerous. Under the expert direction of a team of specialists from the Prince Alfred Hospital, Melbourne, he underwent further radiotherapy and chemotherapy for several months. The doctors were happy with the results but, as is always the case with this illness, Ian was told that it was not until he lived for a period of five years without any recurrence of cancer could he begin to be confident that he had overcome the problem. After a reasonably trouble free 2007, illness returned in 2008. He was diagnosed with cancer of the pancreas. As is well known, this cancer is inoperable.

He continued to work on the love of his life, the person and contribution of St John Bosco, giving retreats and lectures on this subject in Australia, the United Kingdom, Fiji and Samoa.

As the year progressed he became more fragile, and on Thursday, 23 October, he became so sick that he had to be taken to the Prince Alfred Hospital for care and relief from his discomfort. Fortunately, the doctors at the Prince Alfred were able to prepare Ian for a journey back to his home State of South Australia, and he took up residence with the Salesian community at Gawler, under the care of Fr Germano Baiguini.

Accompanied by his family, friends, and fellow Salesians, he was always lucid and interested in everything until he eventually fell into a coma, and after 48 hours, passed away at the Hospital, near Gawler, in the early hours of 8 January, 2009. He was happy to have seen Christmas Day of 2008. His father had passed away on December 25, and for Ian that was a day "reserved for his memory."

Father Ian Murdoch's life and death was the first gift the Australian-Pacific Province of the Salesians of Don Bosco made to God in this year of celebration of the 150th anniversary of the foundation of the Congregation (18 December, 1859). He was without doubt the best-prepared, most passionate and creative student of the

figure, the times and the work of Saint John Bosco in this Province. Ian's life was at all times associated with the presence of Don Bosco in Australia and the Pacific. He did his secondary schooling at the Salesian College in Port Pirie, South Australia. He was one of the founding students at that school. One of the early Salesians in Port Pirie, Fr Jack Ayers, recalls his



first impressions of Ian:

I recall saying "We are three Priests, three Masses at our house, and not one altar server, so how about volunteering?" Which he did. He served three Masses every day for the next three years. He was so regular. I thought of him in terms of our genuine Dominic Savio.

Ian was the third child and the first son of Robert and Barbara Murdoch (both deceased), born in Port Pirie, South Australia on 24 February, 1948. He is survived by his two sisters, Hilary Braybrook and Frances Brett, and two brothers, Andrew and Philip. After his secondary education he entered the Salesian Novitiate at Oakleigh, Victoria, in 1966, took his first vows on the Feast of Don Bosco (January 31) 1967, and completed his years of training, both as a Salesian and a budding academic historian, in Melbourne, Australia. Ordained in 1975, he began a long career of secondary teaching that ran from 1976 till 1991. From 1982-1987 he was the Principal of Salesian College, Brooklyn Park, and his years as a secondary teacher came to an end with a period as the senior history teacher at Salesian College, Chadstone, from 1988-1991.

Ian has always had a fascination with history, especially with the presence of the Church in European history. Until quite recent times, of course, the history of Europe and the history of the Church in Europe overlapped heavily. As the present Pope, Benedict XVI laments, this is

no longer the case. Ian never entered that debate, but always believed that our present understanding of Church and Society has much to learn from the critical study of their interaction in the past.

Courageously, on the basis of an original undergraduate degree earned while still in his years of formation for the Priesthood, he set out on a research degree in medieval history at Monash University in Melbourne in 1974. He worked assiduously on the construction of a critical edition from a collection of unedited texts of a commentary of Pierre D'Ailly (1350-1420) on a work William of Occam (1285-1349). Unknown to most who knew Ian and his work, Occam and his commentator were major figures in the turmoils of Fourteenth and Fifteenth Century European and Church history. Occam, a radical Franciscan philosopher strongly opposed the papal claim to secular authority; d'Ailly argued that only an Ecumenical Council could appoint a Pope to resolve a schism. Behind this choice lay Ian's fascination with the various movements within the Franciscan tradition, and the tumultuous years after the great schism (1378-1415) that led to debate over the relationship between the Pontificate and an Ecumenical Council, culminating in the Council of Basel (1431-1449).

What is amazing about this achievement, however, is that Ian researched and wrote his extremely sophisticated work without ever withdrawing from full-time ministry as a Salesian educator. There were a few rushed international trips to visit

libraries and to speak to world authorities, but they had to be fitted into school holidays. His appointment to Salesian College Chadstone in 1978 located him close to Monash University, and it was there that he brought this work to its conclusion. He graduated Doctor of Philosophy in 1981.

A further remarkable and little-known fact about Ian's life across these years as a secondary teacher and a part-time scholar was his conviction that his Salesian vocation was to be worked out as a teacher in a secondary school. There were opportunities to use his specialised training elsewhere, but it was not until 1992 that he joined the staff at Catholic Theological College, a member body of the Melbourne College of Divinity.

As well as an interest in history, he continued to teach courses in modern literature and developed a deep interest in the conjunction between history, the insights of contemporary (especially Australian) literature, and the challenges of postmodern culture. He was an avid reader, and always had a good book "on the go," and was always happy to share books, and enter into discussions about them. His Salesian commitment did not lessen with his step into tertiary education. In 1992 he was appointed the Rector of Salesian Theological College, Oakleigh, the house of formation for young Salesians of the Australia-Pacific Province. After a period of intense study of Don Bosco and Salesian sources in 1998, he returned to a year as the Rector of the community at Chadstone in 1999, where the community for initial

formation had been relocated. He was appointed the Provincial of the Salesians in Australia and the Pacific in 2000.

As is well known, his years as Provincial (2000-2005) have been the most difficult period for all Church leaders who bore the brunt of the recognition of the serious failures of clergy and religious in the area of child abuse. Ian courageously recognised failure among his fellow Salesians. He tirelessly sought to see that justice and care were given to victims, and that the offenders felt the full weight of both civil and Church law, and that both victims and alleged offenders always received expert professional care. Inevitably, he was also the one sometimes scurrilously attacked by elements in the media who were more interested in sensationalism than justice and care. A thinking man who kept himself to himself, we will never know the extent of his pain over these years.

He brought many skills to the life of the Province. He had an amazing ability to synthesize. His incisive mind led him rapidly to see the issue at the heart of any debate. Inevitably he was elected to chair many Provincial meetings. Along with his interest in history and literature, he was our version of the renaissance man: he relaxed easily with good food, was a connoisseur of good wines, and enjoyed them with his close friends. He had a great love of bushwalking and, of all things, native Australian trees.

Ian's adult life has been a finely tuned blend of two passionate commitments. First, he showed unfailing loyalty to

Don Bosco and his presence in Australia and the Pacific, as a secondary and tertiary educator, as a well-rounded human being, as a Rector and formator of young Salesians, and as a Provincial. Secondly, he dedicated himself, as a serious historian, to the critical study of the lessons our present and future must learn from our past. He was a Salesian who was also a significant historian. As such, he was ideally trained to take up the challenge, issued by the Rector Major of the Salesians, Fr Pascual Chávez Villanueva, SDB, that the Congregation return to a serious and in depth study of Don Bosco so that we might renew our mission to poorer young people and our search for holiness with a firmly grounded understanding and appreciation of our founder.

Ian only had one year of professional training in the study of Don Bosco and his setting, under the skilled direction of Arthur Lenti, SDB, at the Centre for Salesian Studies at Berkeley, California, USA, in 1998. He was admirably equipped to turn his well-trained historical mind and critical approach to the "Don Bosco" material, both primary and secondary, that is currently available. Once he took up his role in the formation of young Salesians he began this work with earnestness. However, as with his doctoral dissertation, it all had to be "fitted in" as he did his task as the Rector of the formation community, and then as Provincial. It was not until January, 2006, that he was able to accept the offer of a position as a visiting scholar at the Catholic University of America, Washington, DC, to begin systematic research and

writing.

Although by this stage of his life his future health and the length of his days were in question, the following two years were spent at the Salesian retreat centre at Lysterfield, Victoria. He used these years for assiduous dedication to full-scale research and teaching. He continued his interest in the Middle Ages and the Franciscan movement, but became increasingly involved in the study of Don Bosco and his legacy. This intensified when I asked him to preach all the Spiritual Retreats in the Province in 2008, focussing upon the challenge of a contemporary and critical reading of Don Bosco. As I have already mentioned, by early 2008 it became clear that the cancer had returned, but Ian preached all the retreats across the Province, including the Pacific. Indeed, he preached the retreat in Apia, Samoa, only weeks before he had to be hospitalised. The day he was taken from Auxilium College Lysterfield to the Prince Alfred Hospital he asked for time to spend at his computer. There were a few precisions that he wanted to add to the script. In the period after his hospitalisation, in palliative care at Gawler, close to his origins and his family, he retouched two more of the Conferences.

I saw Ian in Gawler on Wednesday, 18 December, 2008. During the course of our conversation Ian told me that he regarded the last three years of his life as the time when he had achieved all that he had dreamt of: he had come to know Don Bosco well.

Ian's passing was marked by two significant liturgical and faith-filled

celebrations. On Monday, 12 February, Fr Germano Baiguini celebrated a Requiem Mass at the Parish of Saints Peter and Paul, Gawler. The Archbishop of Adelaide, Archbishop Philip Wilson, was present and spoke of his admiration for Ian, and his gratitude to the work that the Salesians had done for young people in Adelaide and Port Pirie for so many years. The Vice Provincial, Fr John Papworth, SDB, was also in attendance. The Church was filled to capacity by people who had known Ian over his South Australian years – as a young man in Port Pirie and as a teacher and Principal in Adelaide – by his family, and by the parishioners of Gawler. Many had come to know and love Ian, and some served him well, over the final few months of his life, spent in Gawler.

On Wednesday, 14 January, I celebrated the final Requiem Mass in the College chapel at Salesian College “Rupertswood,” Sunbury, where all deceased members of the Australia-Pacific Province are buried. The Salesian Bishop, Bishop Timothy Costelloe was in attendance, spoke of his years of close collaboration with Ian in the formation of young Salesians, and prayed the committal prayers over the coffin in the Chapel. A choir of Salesians provided beautifully prepared music, and fifty-five Priests concelebrated the Eucharist. There was a very large presence of students and staff from Catholic Theological College, where Ian had taught Church History from 1992 till 2008. Family, friends and fellow Salesians filled the Chapel. Ian was laid to rest with the Salesians who have gone before him, whom he loved, with whom he laboured, and

whom he served so unselfishly during his years as Provincial.

As well as a much-loved and dedicated Salesian, there was a side to Ian Murdoch known only to those closest to him, his closest family and friends, Salesians and non-Salesians. So many wonderful testimonies have come to me in the period since he has died. It is impossible to share them all. Allow me to share just a few.

An ex-student from his days in Brooklyn Park shared:

This man had a great impact on my life and taught me so much. I've been married for 19 years now and have two beautiful girls. I first met Ian when he was Principal in Brooklyn Park when he taught me English in Years 11 and 12. ... I have spent hours on the phone to Ian over the years discussing so many different things. He was always there for me. During difficult times when he was Provincial I would call him with what must have been such trivial things. ... He never gave any indication that he was maybe tired or stressed from the burden of his work. ... I just wish there was one more lunch, one more chat, one more phone call. That's not to be. Ian was a special person in my family's life and he is irreplaceable.

His longest-standing friend, Msgr Brian Ferme, currently in Venice, commented:

Ian was my oldest and one of my closest friends and I shall

miss him dearly. The last time we spent together was here in Venice when he visited me for a few days before heading off to England to preach a retreat to the English Province. He was an extraordinary person whose constant thoughtfulness towards others was an example for all. He was also a thoroughly good priest and I know that his understanding of both the priesthood and being a Salesian was something that marked him over the past few years, and I know marked others who had the privilege to come within his presence.

One of his colleagues from Catholic Theological College wrote:

Fr Murdoch was a first rate historian who respected the past, and intuitively recognised the need to read the present, especially the present moment of the Catholic Church, in the light of the lessons of the past. Above all, he was a gentle and sincere Priest, a wonderful colleague. He will be greatly missed.

As the Provincial of the Australia-Pacific Province, I join my confreres in wondering what the Lord is asking from us as he takes so many young and major figures to himself, well before what we would think is their due time. There is no need for me to list names here, as we are all familiar with this mysterious element in this Province's history, reaching back as far as the deaths of Michael Maiocco (died in 1942 at 41 years of age) and John Biloni (died in 1946 at 38 years

of age). Indeed, Ian is the third ex-Provincial we have lost in his early sixties (the others are Fr Fedrigotti [64] and Fr Cornell [65]).

Ian has blessed the Province, and the whole Salesian world, by leaving behind a written version of the retreats that he gave during his last year of life: *Starting again from Don Bosco*. Reading through Ian's script instructed me on the mystery of the Province's losses of Salesians that we would prefer to have still with us. Don Bosco had the practice of closing a retreat with a final thought that he wanted all the participants to take with them. Following Don Bosco's practice, Ian did the same for all of us who attended his retreat in 2008. He went back to words from the beautiful lady who spoke to young John Bosco in his dream as a nine-year-old. Ian's final thought, keeping Don Bosco alive among us, rings powerfully as the Province, and indeed the Congregation, face our challenges at the beginning of 2009, the 150th anniversary of the foundation of the Congregation: *Make yourself humble, brave, persevering. In due time you will understand everything*. Please keep all the members of the Australia-Pacific Province, in Australia, New Zealand, Fiji and Samoa, in your prayers. Pray also for vocations to the Salesian way of life in this part of the world. May we be worthy of the man whose passing this letter commemorates.

*Francis J. Moloney, SDB
Provincial of the Australia-Pacific Province
Feast of St John Bosco
31 January, 2009.*

