

Fr. John Patrick Murphy

Salesian of Don Bosco

**Province of St. Philip the Apostle
New Rochelle, New York (USA)**

Born: September 4, 1914

Professed: January 25, 1936

Ordained: November 24, 1945

Died: October 23, 2001

October 1, 2002

Dear Confreres:

It was during the last days of March 2001 that his confreres at Holy Rosary Parish in Port Chester, NY, took Father John Patrick Murphy, SDB, to the Schervier Nursing Care Center in the Bronx after a long life of hard work in the Lord's vineyard. He certainly did not want to go to the nursing home, but he knew it was necessary. He had been very sick, could no longer say Mass, was increasingly and uncharacteristically confused, and could barely walk even with his trusty Irish cane. He was, after all, 87 years old! For 65 of those years he lived as a Salesian consecrated by vows. He was just one month short of celebrating 56 years as a Salesian priest.

So when we presented him with all the options, he asked us to pray the rosary. After his director assured him that there would be Sisters in the nursing home to take better care of him than we could, he forcefully declared: "It's settled then. I'm ready." He was resigned and went willingly, if warily. He was effusive with his thanks and blessed us all. We all felt so relieved.

The very next day I went to visit him at the nursing home after his first night there. As he saw me approaching he said: "Whatever they sent me here for has been accomplished. Take me home."

I believe that's exactly what he said at 3:00 in the early morning of the 23rd of October 2001 to the Lord Jesus Himself, some seven months after his arrival at Schervier, some 38 years after his arrival in the United States, and some 87 years after his birth in Belfast, Northern Ireland, "Whatever they sent me here for has been accomplished. Take me home."

Belfast, Northern Ireland, was his birthplace on September 3, 1914. Just one month before, World War I had broken out. John Patrick came from a family of three boys and one girl. He loved to tell of how closely knit the family was, how deeply religious, and how happy. That family was the prime factor in molding his character and personality. His father, Patrick Murphy, worked in the shipyards of Harland & Wolff, builders of the ill-fated *Titanic*. His mother, Mary MacGee, took care of the home; it was she who kept it all together, John Patrick would often say. From this family background there arose another priestly vocation as well, that of John's brother Robert. He had died just a few months before John, still working hard as a Monsignor and Canon in Belfast.



Young John Murphy leaving for Argentina (1931).
His mother bids him well.



Young John on right with either his brother Robert or Gerald.
(undated)

John was only seven when civil strife broke out in Belfast. It was very acute in the shipyards—they were owned by Protestants loyal to Britain. Patrick Murphy was a staunch Catholic; his loyalties were no secret. After several threats to his life and to his family, he decided to move to Southern Ireland. He became an exile in his own land; his wife and children shared the same fate.

When the Lord inspired young John Patrick Murphy with a dream of the foreign missions, he generously volunteered at the tender age of 17. His Salesian superiors sent him to Argentina. For 37 years he labored there as priest and Salesian. Indeed, his mission there has been accomplished.

When Father Murphy came to the United States, through a series of consequence and happenstance that we can now recognize as the provident hand of God, he came here with a mission. It too has been accomplished.



The new priest blesses his parents. (1945)

And when the Lord called him from his sleep and dreams on the 23rd of October, He brought the good work that He had begun in him some 87 years earlier to fulfillment. Whatever God sent him for has been accomplished, and with love.

He was ever so proud of reminding anyone who would listen, and when Father Murphy spoke, EVERYBODY LISTENED, that he was a subject of the British crown by birth, an Irishman by nationality, a naturalized citizen of Argentina, and a permanent resident of the United States. Our faith convinces us now of what John Patrick Murphy always knew: that in all these earthly nations Jesus had always been showing him the way to his true home: not Ireland, nor Argentina, nor Elizabeth, nor Port Chester.

These places are nothing but the “tents” Saint Paul speaks of: “We know that if our earthly dwelling, a tent, should be destroyed, we have a building from God” (2Cor 5). Now John Patrick Murphy has a BUILDING, a dwelling not made with hands, a home in the Father’s house, eternal in heaven. Jesus was and is his WAY there, because like and with Jesus, Father Murphy has accomplished here on earth what the good Lord sent him for.

What was it that God sent him here to accomplish? I think we can summarize it in one word, PRIEST. He was honored as Man of the Year in Elizabeth (1983). He won a Papal honor, the Bene Merenti Medal in 1986. He was honored by the Lions Club with the Nicholas Migliore Award in 1996. He never spoke of these honors. We in Port Chester did not even know about them until the director started going through Father’s belongings after his death! But we did know his true pride and joy, that on the 24th of November 1945 in Bernal, Argentina, he was anointed to his real mission. That was the day he was ordained as FATHER John Patrick Murphy, Salesian of Don Bosco. In Ireland, in Argentina, in Elizabeth, in Port Chester, “whatever they sent him for has been accomplished” because in those places he lived and exercised his priesthood to the very end.

He was a hard working priest, a priest dedicated to Hispanic ministry, both here in the US and in his beloved Argentina, a priest with a distinctively unique pastoral style.

HARD WORKING

On one of my visits to Schervier Nursing Care Center, another confrere and I entered to find him dozing in his chair. We knelt on either side of his chair and gently woke him. His first instinctive reaction was to raise his hands and start the words

for the sacrament of confession. I guess he recognized me and just knew there was a sinner nearby needing absolution. Ministering the forgiveness of God in confession as a priest was second nature to him, literally his first thought and gesture upon waking.

On my last visit to him, I became alarmed at how much he had failed and at how weak he appeared. I asked him how he was doing and he said: “Working very hard, working very hard.” It was in his blood.

He loved to watch the news after supper. We had to end the meal within 30 minutes, else his impatience would show unmistakably, because he wanted the full hour of news. It was fodder for his political salvos and insightful commentary. But the minute someone came to the door looking for confession during that news hour, and it happened a lot, the day’s news was history and he quickly went to be the priest.

He continued celebrating daily and Sunday Masses when he arrived in Holy Rosary Parish, Port Chester, bad as his knees were, summer, fall, winter, spring, until the very end when he went to the nursing home. He was utterly faithful to his Saturday assignment in the confessional, and his line was always the longest.

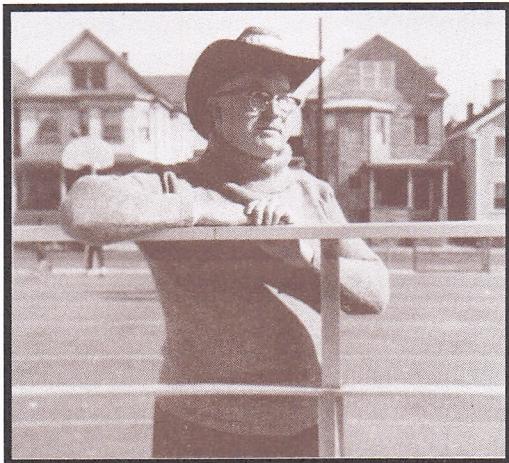
He was intelligent. He loved to keep up with the latest in politics and theology, and he read the *New York Times* from cover to cover every day, with a red pen. He highlighted the articles that he thought we should all read and they became the topic of conversation at the table.

HISPANIC MINISTRY

He would delight in repeating the tongue-in-cheek remark that soon began spreading among the clergy of Elizabeth concerning his work for the newly arrived Cuban immigrants there in the mid sixties:

“If you want to learn anything about Hispanic ministry, go to the Italian church and ask for the Irish priest.”

So true. He was a pioneer of Hispanic ministry, where and when it was not always understood or wanted, both in the Archdiocese of Newark as well as in our Salesian province. When they write the history of the growth of Hispanic ministry among us Salesians in this part of the US, yes, they will refer to all the wonderful Salesian priests we were able to get from Spain to join our province and start us off on the right foot, one of whom, Emilio Allue, is now a bishop, and two of whom, Javier Aracil and Jose Santa-Bibiana, became members of the provincial council. Yes, they will speak of the students of theology studying in Mexico. Yes, they will speak of St. John Bosco Parish in Chicago, and of Mary Help of Christians Parish in New York City, of St. Anthony's and Don Bosco Tech in Paterson, and of St. Philip's in Belle Glade, St. Kieran's in Miami, and of Holy Rosary in Port Chester. But no such history would ever be complete without the whole first chapter being dedicated to the trailblazing work of Father John Patrick Murphy in the Italian Parish of St. Anthony of Padua, Elizabeth, NJ, spending himself there for the neighborhood's Hispanic immigrants. Early on he caught the eye of Archbishop Peter Gerety of Newark, who appointed him Coordinator of Hispanic Ministry for all of Union County in 1980. It was true then and it is still true now. If you want to learn about Hispanic ministry, go to the Irish priest.



Fr. Murphy -The Irish priest at the Italian Church-St. Anthony's neighborhood - Elizabeth, NJ (1960's)

When he came to Port Chester five years before his death and well into his 80's, retirement was no thought of his! Instead he continued his pastoral work among the immigrants of that area, Mexicans, Ecuadorians, Colombians, Peruvians, Dominicans, Guatemalans for as long as he could: serving them as priest, challenging them to become saints, chastising them when they sat in the back of the church instead of up front, or chewed gum, or didn't discipline their children, or didn't come dressed looking like Eva Peron—in her saintly days, that is. “*El regañón*” they called him, but they loved him.

And when his weak knees did battle with his priestly heart, and he could no longer walk around so easily, he had to stay up in the residence, and they came to him. And there he kept his wits sharp translating everything he was asked to render in Spanish, from the *Salesian Bulletin* to our own parish bulletin. And he would apologize that his impeccable Spanish was not always so beautiful, saying that a translation was like a woman—his words, not mine—either faithful or beautiful, but never both.



With President Ronald Reagan in Elizabeth, NJ (1980's)

UNIQUE STYLE

Over his nearly 56 years of Salesian priesthood, Father John Patrick Murphy had exercised his ministry in many an Argentine classroom during his early years. But soon he found his preferred place in the pulpit, in the hospital, and in the confessional. He preached with fiery fierceness, down to earth and practical, and loud. His lungs were formidable right up to the end, as anyone who ever heard him bellow the "PADRE NUESTRO" well knows. But he could be sweet and gentle too. That he was to the penitent in the confessional, to the countless sick people he visited in the hospitals of Elizabeth and thereabouts, in the homes of the sick and dying, and among people suffering unspeakable tragedies like that awful fire in Elizabeth that took the lives of so many children some years ago. He once said that event he considered to be the crown of his priesthood.



Man of the year- Elizabeth, NJ (1983)

His style was unique, because he was able to put together and balance, like no one else, sugar and spice. You could describe him as both milk and honey and at the same time some other unmentionable liquid and vinegar. He was once vested for Mass in the sacristy and while waiting there piously, hands folded, a woman sheepishly came in asking to go to confession. He threw everyone else out, closed the door and welcomed her warmly. But she must have launched into a catalogue of her husband's faults, and then she started to cry. "*No lloras*," he literally shouted, "*dime tus pecados.*" ("Don't cry. Tell me YOUR sins.") Now there's only an open wooden grill on the door, so the whole church heard. Then it got very quiet, and she later came out smiling. Father Murphy then began the Mass with his usual warm welcome!

Whether it was the hand raised in compassionate blessing, or the hand raised with the punishing whip, it was always Jesus' hand he raised. Jesus was his way. Like Don Bosco he was always and everywhere the priest. Jesus who said on the cross "It is finished" taught John Patrick Murphy to put it in his own words: "What I was sent here for has been accomplished. Take me home."

Two funeral Masses were offered for Fr. Murphy, one in Holy Rosary, Port Chester, New York and one in St. Anthony, Elizabeth, New Jersey. Father's remains await The Resurrection Of The Body In The Salesian Cemetery, Goshen, New York.

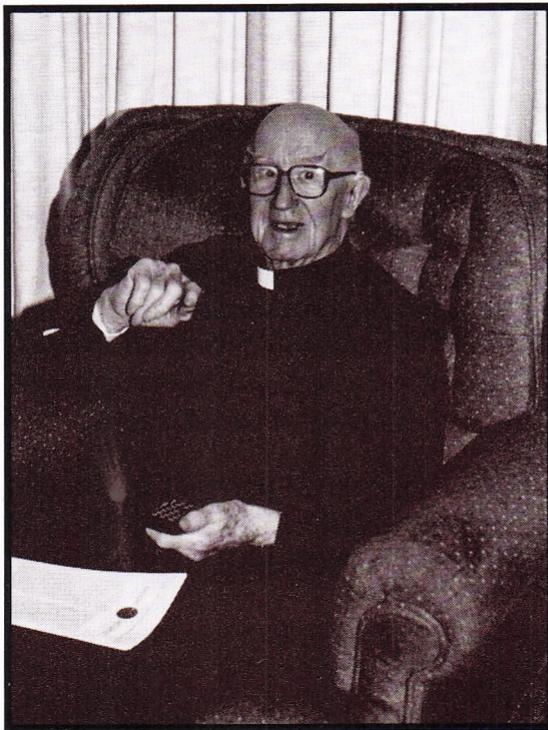
All of us owe a debt of gratitude to Father Murphy for accomplishing his mission in Argentina, in Elizabeth, in Port Chester, and now in death. We want to thank him for showing us Salesians Jesus' way to go out to the poor, especially the immigrant, and to work hard to learn their language and culture and to be their priest. We are thankful for his wit and Irish humor, his unshakeable fidelity to his Salesian vocation, and his outstanding example of what a priest is. May Jesus, who was his way from Ireland to Argentina to the United States, now be his way to his true homeland, where crowns and citizenship papers don't matter at all, that eternal dwelling place in heaven, the house of our Father. For what He and Jesus sent John Patrick Murphy here for has been accomplished. And now dear friend, brother, Father Murphy , may you rest in peace.

Que Jesús, que era tu camino de Irlanda a la Argentina y a los Estados Unidos, sea tu camino a tu patria verdadera, es decir, el cielo, la casa del Padre, en donde no importan por nada los papeles de ciudadanía ni de inmigración. Por lo que El y Jesús te mandaron a cumplir, ha sido cumplido. Ahora pues, amigo, hermano, padrecito, descanse en paz.

Sincerely in Don Bosco,

Timothy Ploch

*Timothy C. Ploch, SDB, Director and
Confreres of Port Chester, New York*



Fr. John Patrick Murphy, SDB

Port Chester, NY

(Christmas 2000)

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