

24th January 1981

Dear Confreres,

We have just left

FR. MICHAEL MURRAY. S. D. B.

to await the Resurrection under the evergreen lawn of the Emerald Island. Fr. Michael died in Portlaw, Co. Waterford, on the 14th January 1981, and was buried in the Salesian cemetery of Ballinakill.

Born in Co. Waterford on the 26th January 1899 – a full blooded Irishman and a patriot in body and soul – we find him serving in the Royal Navy from 1915 to 1918, that is to say, all throughout the First World War. Soon after the war he went straight to the well-known Campion House, Middlesex, England, where the Jesuits have for many years been nurturing those older vocations which we so inappropriately call "late vocations" – God's call is never late, and sea and war can bring souls closer to God.

After three years we find Michael doing his Salesian novitiate and philosophy in Cowley (Oxford) from 1922 to 1924: and later from 1924 till 1929 in our house in Lansdowne, South Africa, where he did his practical training and then his studies in Theology, which were crowned by his priestly ordination in the Cathedral of Cape Town on the 16th December 1928.

By then, thanks to the generosity of Fr. Adolfo Tornquist, the Missionary College, Shrigley was taking shape. Many missionary vocations were nurtured there, especially for the Indian missions. Father Michael went there as the co-founder, organiser and administrator of that nursery of missionary vocations. From there he went to Malta and finally to South India in 1934. Within a few days of his arrival in Madras, the Archbishop entrusted Fr. Murray with the task dearest to his heart: promoting devotion to the Blessed Mother. Let it be stated here that it was Fr. Murray who started that most flourishing initiative, called to-day "The shrine of Our Lady of Lourdes" in the thickly populated borough of Madras, Perambur. To-day it keeps five Indian Salesian priests busy in the parish and shrine, where, according to the latest news letter of the province, over 65,000 Holy Communions were distributed during last Christmas. It also runs a Youth Centre, Elementary, Middle and High schools, a dispensary and various social works.

I was away from India from the end of 1946 to after the General Chapter of 1947. And it was during my absence that Archbishop Mathias, aware of Fr. Michael's effective propaganda, taking the opportunity of the post-war period of uncontrolled advertising release in U. S. A. by many missionaries of Asia, invited by the American soldiers on their return home, after watching the work of our missions in the East, decided to send Fr. Michael to America to collect funds. Later on, that enthusiastic and fruitful mess would be controlled and brought to order by the American hierarchy; but in the meantime those first few years were most profitable. So there went Fr. Michael to collect funds for the Archdiocese. This unusual and erratic mission imprinted a style on his activities, which were to be the target of frequent opposition and criticism.

Once those early frantic days were over, I questioned him affably during one of his visits to Madras... "Well Fr. Mike, it's all right to help the Archbishop, but don't you have something left for our Salesian works?" "What do you need?" he asked me. "Well, it would help a lot to have some machine tools for our workshops printing press and farm." Soon various machines began arriving; linotypes, tractors, jeeps, trucks, two Hammond organs... plus something more in liquid currency. His help never ceased (In Madras, Goa, Canlubang) though it went on trickling down with advanced age and increasing opposition to his activities.

That continual moving from place to place, the humiliation of begging, the hurt of rejection on being turned down – all that is an out-of-fashion penance which no one can understand except those who have some time experienced it in their own flesh. On some rare occasion – while still a father of a large family – I accompanied Fr. Michael on his trips. He always travelled the economy way (generally by bus, even when the distances would be measured in thousands of miles, eg from New York to California or to Canada, with the only idea of saving a few cents for the cause, and would transform his painful pilgrimage into a constant prayer (Salesian daily prayers, breviary, rosary, litanies.. with myself playing the atheist companion reading the daily news.)

Also his visits became an active religious and missionary propaganda (40, 000 copies of our "Marian Meditations" printed by us in Spain, were exhausted.) Sometimes we were mistaken for rabbis (because he had grown a beard). "May I know which Synagogue you gentlemen are going to ?" one day a bus conductor asked us on seeing us hesitate over which bus stop was most convenient for us while crossing through endless Philadelphia. "Here we have nothing to do with Orientals" an elderly parish priest said, banging the door after him, on reading on our card.. "Armenian Street"... which was the residence of the Archbishop of Madras. Those humiliating hair shirts are worn no longer to-day.

I was moved to read in one of his last writings: "I never achieved anything great... nor anything special". Sure the Good Master and his Blessed Mother, for whom he had worked all his life are – I am fully convinced – of a different opinion.

At last the hour to stop arrived. Fr. Michael intended to retire in Spain. But the severe climate of our Navarra mountains was too hard for him. And the pleasant climate of the Mediterranean coast came too late, since our little cottage "Villa San Jose", the ideal for him and for other veteran missionaries, was not yet fit to be lived in. When symptoms of senile weakness began to appear, the Salesian community of Pamplona installed him with fraternal love in a warm and comfortable room, with an elevator at his door so as to enable him to go down to the chapel. But the language barrier was too much for him – he felt isolated.

Owing to his weak condition we decided to take him back to the gentle climate of Southern Ireland. There he had a prodigious number of nieces and nephews, who loved him dearly and vied with each other to have him in their homes, scattered between Ireland, England and the United States. In the home of one of his nieces, a retired nurse, Fr. Michael was really pampered. The house was alongside his old parish, near the peaceful estuary of Dungarvan, alongside the sacred land of his ancestors, whose names I could read inscribed on the family gravestones.

Towards the end of his life Fr. Mike was transferred to a Home for the elderly, so lovingly run by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Cluny, a few miles from Dungarvan. It was there that he was to spend the last eight months of his life. And it was thanks to the exertion of good Fr. Michael Hicks, the Salesian Provincial of Dublin, that that ideal shelter was secured. Seldom have I seen a patient so lovingly looked after, so frequently visited by his folks, so christianly waited upon, so peacefully prepared for eternity as Father Michael. I said Mass in his little room and, of course I reminded him of our joint ventures when the great work of our native vocations was tackled, and how our Good Master had blessed those efforts. "If the Lord repays with heaven the glass of cold water given for his love" – I told him – "how much more will he repay you for your efforts on behalf of his seminaries and of His Mother's shrines ?

I came back to Spain with a soul filled with consolation, and the day after my arrival our good Fathers in Dublin phoned me, announcing that Our Lord had finally called to his reward the good soul of Fr. Michael. The Irish Province offered him his last resting shelter at the lovable Salesian cemetery of Ballinakill shared with so many veterans, who under the evergreen Irish soil await the Resurrection.

Let us also offer him the brotherly alms of a prayer.

Your affectionate brother in Christ,

Fr. Jose-Luis Carreno Etxeandia. S. D. B.

FATHER CHARLES McDONNELL. SDB.

Fr. Charles was born in Limerick in 1906 of Mr and Mrs McDonnell of Dunmoylan, Co. Limerick. Three of their sons eventually became priests—Fr William a diocesan priest, Fr Patrick, an Oblate and Fr. Charles, a Salesian. Charles, when 14 entered the Salesian house of Copsewood, Pallaskenry – he was one of the first group of students to enter Pallaskenry when the Salesians came to Ireland in 1919. The young Charles McDonnell entered the Salesian Novitiate at Oxford in July 1921 as a mere 15 year old, and was professed on the feast of the Immaculate Conception, the 8th December 1922. Having completed his philosophical studies at Oxford it was decided that he should study for a degree. He went to University College, Dublin in 1929, the first of many Salesians to study there and he graduated with a degree in Agriculture in 1933. He then returned to England to complete his theological studies, this time at Shrigley. On the 25th August 1935 he was ordained a priest in the church of the Sacred Heart, Battersea, London.

Fr. Charles spent the greater part of his life in the Salesian Agricultural Colleges at Warrenstown (26 years) and Pallaskenry (11 years). It would be impossible to gauge his contribution to these two establishments. He dedicated himself wholeheartedly and unsparingly to the betterment of the young men who came there. He taught them in the chapel, in the classroom, on the farm and on the playing field. He taught them to work hard and he did this more by example than by precept. The young men who came under his influence in Pallaskenry and Warrenstown were inspired by him to build up community in their own localities and nobody can estimate the impact they made on the face of Ireland, on its fields and people. Fr. McDonnell, or Fr. Mac as he was affectionately known concerned himself with the progress of these young men long after they left our Salesian Colleges. He was a key figure in the growth and development of the Salesian Past Pupils Union in Ireland. The measure and esteem for him can be gauged from the numbers who came to visit him and the ready welcome they had for him when he went to visit them.

Fr. McDonnell was a great man in every way. He was physically big and strong, a towering figure that could not be ignored or over-looked. He was big of heart too, generous with his time and energy, always giving and seeking very little for himself. His death came suddenly and was a great shock to his Salesian confreres and to his parishoners in Navan. He was laid to rest in the hilltop cemetery at Warrenstown, overlooking the place where he worked so hard and the people with whom he worked so closely. Please pray that many of the pupils of our schools, and many other generous young men may be inspired to follow in the footsteps of this great man who was the first pupil of an Irish school to become a Salesian.

May he rest in peace.