



**Rev. James J. Naughton**

Salesian of Don Bosco

1938 — 2013





January 31, 2014  
New Rochelle, New York

Dear Confreres:

In his Second Letter to Timothy, Saint Paul says: “I have fought the good fight, I have kept the faith” (4:7). These same words are appropriate to describe the life and death of

**Father James J. Naughton, SDB**

who was, after all, a fighter in his own right. He fought in a non-violent way for those who were poor. He stood up for the underdog. He did whatever he could to help the person facing impossible odds. And when the odds were against him, he worked even harder. He kept his eye on the prize that is awarded to those who build up the Kingdom of God here on earth.

Father Jim died on November 27, 2013, in the rectory of Saint Theresa’s Church in Leeds, Ala., where he had been pastor since July 1, 2000. Suffering from terminal skin cancer, he came home from the hospital on October 28 and began receiving hospice care. Saint Theresa’s beloved pastor had had an earlier battle with cancer that cost him the sight in one eye.

James J. Naughton, the elder of Michael and Mary Naughton’s two sons, was born in the Bronx on January 27, 1938, and was baptized in the family’s parish church, Holy Family, on February 14 and confirmed there in 1946. He attended Holy Family’s parochial school, where he was a member of the Dominic Savio Classroom Club (before Dominic’s canonization in





1954). In later years Father Jim said that even then he “saw something special in the life of Saint Dominic Savio and his relationship with Saint John Bosco.” That sentiment and the influence of his parents shaped his priestly and religious vocation.

Jim entered Don Bosco Juniorate in Haverstraw, N.Y., as a freshman in 1952 and graduated in 1956. From there he was admitted to Saint Joseph’s

Novitiate in Newton, N.J., part of a class of 39 novices guided by Father Aloysius Bianchi. They made their first profession on September 8, 1957, in Newton.

Brother Jim earned a B.A. in philosophy from Don Bosco College in Newton in June 1962 and carried out his practical training at Saint Dominic Savio High School in East Boston from 1959 to 1963.

In 1963 Brother Jim went to Italy for his theological studies at Bollengo, near Ivrea in Piedmont. He was ordained in the basilica of Mary Help of Christians in Turin on March 18, 1967.



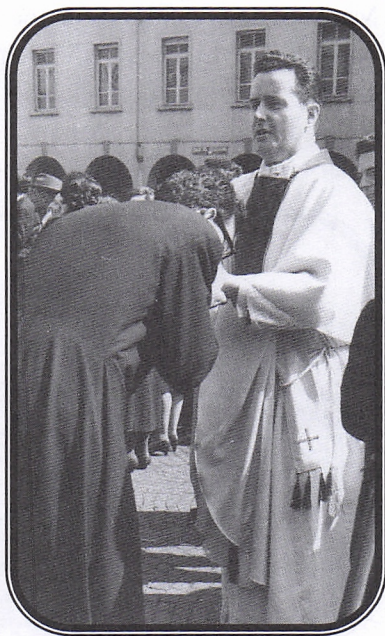
Upon his return to the United States, Father Jim served until 1976 with passion and notable success as vice principal at Don Bosco Tech in Paterson, leaving a lasting, positive impression on both students and





faculty. One of his former students, John O'Rourke, wrote from Pennsylvania: "I still recall with fondness, Father Jim standing at the top of the stairway at Don Bosco Tech in Paterson in 1972 when I was a 17-year-old student. He'd be there each morning as we went to our classes. Sometimes we'd do goofy things as 17-year-old boys do, and he'd try to look stern and displeased, but I knew underneath there was warmth and affection."

Father Anthony Mastroeni of the Paterson Diocese, a parishioner of the Salesians' Saint Anthony's Church in Paterson as a boy, recalled: "I am very sorry to hear of Jim Naughton's passing. I will always recall him as an indefatigable worker. As a boy I clearly remember him as a cleric leading the band from [Saint Dominic] Savio on Father Provincial's Day in Newton when Father [John] Divizia took a group of us [vocation] 'hopefuls' to join in the festivities. He struck me as one who knew what he was doing and was intent on getting it done, and well. Although not profusive in his emotions, he had that gravitas, which could be daunting to those who did



not know him, but which easily gave way to warmth once he knew you and could feel at ease."

Father Jim remembered that first priestly assignment at Don Bosco Tech fondly: "I learned a lot from the kids that I instructed. They were truly an inspiration."

During his years in Paterson he also earned an M.A. in education at Montclair State College (1972).

From 1976 to 1979 Father Jim was treasurer at Don Bosco Prep in Ramsey.

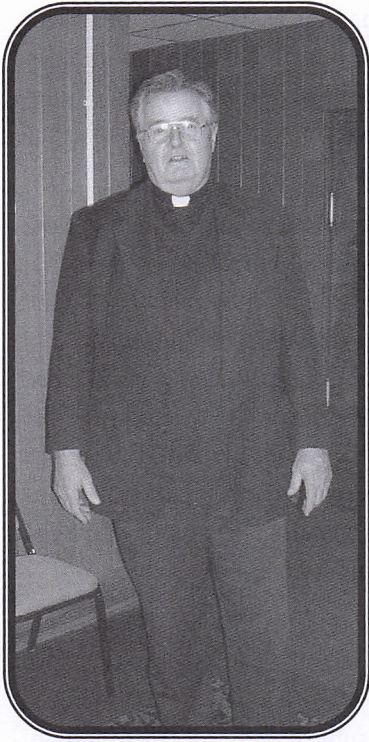
Then came two years as assistant pastor of Saint Thomas the Apostle Parish in Harlem, during a time not long after the Harlem riots. Many of the buildings in the neighborhood were abandoned, even burned out. Likewise, the school attached to the parish had been closed. The next-door neighbor was a methadone clinic. Under Father Jim's direction, the Salesians revitalized the school, opening a computer training program for young men in the neighborhood. Many said

it was impossible, but he persisted. He had no clue how a computer worked, but he knew that if those young people could learn how to repair computers, they would be able to live a better life.

Eventually the people in the neighborhood reciprocated for the dignity and care Father Jim and the other Salesians showed them. Soon, the peo-







ple of the area kept a watchful eye on the rectory, church, and school. The neighbors were proud of the men and women working hard in the name of the Lord to improve the neighborhood. Marvelous things happened there over the course of a few years. Many of the young people educated in that program are the very ones who have now returned to that Harlem neighborhood as successful business people.

In addition to the computer training center, he supported the youth center and summer day camp with his ministry—including the youth workers provided by the city to assist with summer programs. He sent some Saint Thomas youths for vocation weekends at the minor seminary in Goshen,

N.Y., and to the province's youth leadership program in the summer camps. From 1981 to 1985 he was pastor of the church and director of the Salesian community, and for another nine years he was, once again, assistant pastor.

Father Jim also served as provincial treasurer from 1985 to 1991, working at the provincial house in New Rochelle but residing at the rectory in Harlem. It was a very difficult time for the province, and the financial pressure he felt was severe. He talked about it once with Father Dennis Donovan, who was treasurer at the Salesian Center in Columbus, Ohio. His words were: "It's tough. This is probably the toughest thing I ever had to do. But, thank God, he's tougher than I am, and we're getting through it."

In 1994 Father Jim moved to Birmingham as assistant pastor of Holy Rosary Parish, also filling in at various times the roles of youth minister, vice director, and treasurer of the religious community. The Salesians at Holy Rosary were also responsible for Saint John Bosco Parish a few miles away.

Father Jim brought his fighting spirit to Birmingham when he went to work with the people in the Gate City neighborhood, an area that had a higher-than-usual crime rate and greater poverty than most neighborhoods. He saw each person as one of God's people, regardless of color, beliefs, or economic status. If anything, he had a preference for the poor, and he lived a simple lifestyle himself. For example, his nephew Jim donated an old, beat-up minivan to Father Jim, thinking it was too rickety to drive anymore, and the parish could get some money by selling it for scrap. His nephew was appalled one day to find out that Father Jim was using the van as his personal vehicle.



He was Holy Rosary's pastor from 1995 to 2000, when he moved to Leeds, a suburb east of Birmingham, as pastor of Saint Theresa's Church. In Leeds he compiled a short history of the parish, which began in the 1930s with four Catholic families.

Saint Theresa's Web page eulogizes him: "Fr. Jim was instrumental in the tremendous growth experienced during the 13 years he served the parish. The church building was expanded under his



guidance to provide for the surge in attendance, including a new Sunday evening Mass, and a Sunday afternoon Hispanic Mass. Fr. Jim said from the beginning that educating the children in their faith was a priority. Under



his direction the PSR program outgrew the parish hall and three houses were purchased to use for the program. Parishioners and others were welcomed before each mass by his friendly demeanor and the ever-present New York Yankees cap.

“Fr. Jim brought his Salesian Spirit and love for the young to St. Theresa. For several years the parish hosted the Salesian program, Gospel Roads. St. Theresa teens attended the biennial National Catholic Youth Conference, and many teens of the parish were privileged enough to go to Stony Point, New York, for the Salesian January Leadership Retreat. Our own teens became leaders in the Gospel Roads program because Fr. Jim instilled in them the love of serving the youth.

“Fr. Jim invited the Hispanic community in the diocese to join us at St. Theresa. We now have a Mass in Spanish each week, and Spanish celebrations throughout the year. He worked hard to have an active Knights of Columbus Council at St. Theresa. They have grown to be an integral part of our parish.”

An article about Saint Theresa’s Church in *The Leeds News* (May 6, 2004) noted the pastor’s “wit, wisdom and sense of humor [that] he uses in ministering to his congregation and to residents of the community.” As a New Yorker, the article observed, Father Jim had had to

adapt to a much slower pace of life when he came to Alabama, as well as to learn “Alabama English.”

On December 24, 1996, Father Jim received a liver transplant at the University of Alabama-Birmingham, which saved his life and left him ever grateful to his unknown donor. “I don’t know my donor,” he told *The St. Clair Times* of Alabama, “but I try to treat everyone as if they were the one who donated to me or the family of the person who donated to me.”

“I was so ill in November,” he told the *North Jersey Herald* a couple of months later, “that I couldn’t remember anything. I did not know who I was or where I was.” With his typical humor, he began to mark December 24 as his “second birthday” and to tell people that he was about 40 years old—59 years from his first birthday, and perhaps 20 from the age of his liver, averaging out to 40. “You have to have a sense of humor. You can’t feel sorry for yourself. You can’t sit around and mope.”



He also quipped that the prayer at Mass “Deliver us, O Lord,” had taken on a new meaning for him.

Father Jim’s ill health, beginning with his liver problem and eventually with skin cancer, expanded his heart in a unique way. His ministry in both Birmingham and Leeds included jail visits and visits to the sick in their homes, nursing homes, and hospitals. He developed a capacity to understand the sufferings of the sick with a compassion not often found in a priest. Several persons who attended his wake in



Leeds described how Father Jim's compassion and ability to relate to their plight saved their lives when they were in a deep state of depression because of chronic illness.

Father Jim was insistent that his cancer not be the defining moment of his life. Rather, he wanted to be known as a man who worked hard to be another Don Bosco to the young, the poor, and those who needed him most.

He was a famously hard worker at whatever he did, and he had great respect for anyone else—Salesians or others—who also worked hard. Those who seemed to him to be less industrious were often the targets of his deflating humor.

He could gently mock himself, as well. After his liver transplant and his first bout with cancer, and perhaps also considering the vast geographical distance between Leeds and most of the rest of the Salesians of the province, he was wont to identify himself on phone calls as “James of Molokai.”



In 2007, at the time of his fiftieth anniversary of religious profession, Father Jim said that he had stayed young by trying to work with the young. He gladly acknowledged that he has “received more from God than I have given.”

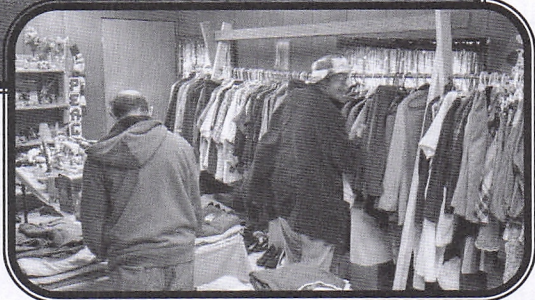
In Harlem Father Jim collaborated with the province vocation director, Father Mark Hyde, who later served with him at Holy Rosary in Birmingham. He writes that Father Jim “had a heart as big as all outdoors when it came to the young and the poor. He thrived on his ministry at Saint Thomas in Harlem and at Holy Rosary and Saint John Bosco in Birmingham and Saint Theresa in Leeds.

work of the Holy Rosary Youth Center and the food pantry.

“In his outreach to the young and the poor,” Father Hyde sums up, “Father Jim truly had an oratorian heart like Don Bosco’s. His apostolic zeal made the love of God present in a very concrete way to the young and the poor.”

Father Jim was known for doing whatever he could for children, for teens, and for young adults. And when his energy level started to run out, he compensated by finding the best people he could to continue the task, training them to continue the work he started, in the same way that Christ taught his disciples to preach the Gospel.

Father Jim saw Christ in those who were poor. He had gotten the people of Saint Theresa involved in the work of the Holy Rosary Youth Center and the food pantry, a work which he loved dearly. During his last few weeks, his major concern was the future of the food pantry at Holy Rosary Parish. He explained that there are over 250 regular clients at that food pantry. If it were to close, those people would have nowhere else to go. Every other charity had already packed up and left that part of town. So he requested that, instead of flowers for his funeral, donations be made to support the pantry’s continued operation.





“When Father Jim was in Harlem, he frequently organized outings for his kids to experience life outside the city: to swim, to fish, to frog, to run around and play on grassy fields.”

Father Donovan remarked: “I remember one night Father Jim brought a group of kids from the city out to the country on a camping trip. These kids came from a very rough neighborhood. They were accustomed to the sound of yelling, fighting, and gunfire. Here they were, in the woods under a tree, clinging to each other, terribly frightened by the presence of crickets, owls, and skunks. Father Jim explained that overcoming their fears out there in the woods could make them much stronger people. And he knew that the young people could get closer to God in the quiet of the woods.”

“In Birmingham,” Father Hyde continued, “Father Jim worked tirelessly for the well-being of the parishes, the food pantry, and the youth center. He was ever ready to assist with the youth ministry programs of the diocese and the youth ministry and sacramental programs of John Carroll Catholic High when they had no chaplain. Whenever a nearby, or not so nearby, hospital had an emergency, needed a priest, and couldn’t get hold of their chaplain, Father Jim was called and immediately responded. In Leeds he gave emphasis to youth ministry, which he tied into our province programs. He got the people and the youths of Saint Theresa in Leeds as well as a number of other nearby parishes involved in the



A wake service at Saint Theresa Church began in the evening on Monday, December 2, and continued through the night until 8:00 a.m. the next day, with several hundred people stopping in throughout the night. A glorious liturgy followed at Saint Mark the Evangelist Church in Birmingham, with nearly 800 people in attendance. The celebrant was Bishop Robert Baker of Birmingham. Assisting him was Bishop David Foley, bishop emeritus of Birmingham. Nearly 40 priests con-celebrated.

Another wake and funeral were held on Thursday, December 5, in the Mary Help of Christians Chapel at the Marian Shrine, Stony Point, N.Y. Burial followed the next morning in the Salesian Cemetery in Goshen, N.Y.

Yours in Don Bosco,

Father Dennis Donovan, SDB

Father Michael Mendl, SDB

## **DATA FOR THE NECROLOGY**

BORN: JANUARY 27, 1938 – BRONX, N.Y.

PROFESSED: SEPTEMBER 8, 1957 – NEWTON, N.J.

ORDAINED: MARCH 18, 1967 – TURIN, ITALY

DIED: NOVEMBER 27, 2013 – LEEDS, ALA.

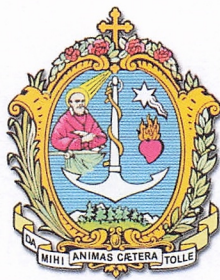
AGE 75 YEARS, 10 MONTHS;

PROFESSED 56 YEARS, 2 MONTHS, 19 DAYS;

ORDAINED 46 YEARS, 8 MONTHS, 9 DAYS.







**Salesians of Don Bosco**  
**148 E. Main Street**  
**New Rochelle, New York**