

Salesian College,
Reading Road,
Farnborough, Hants.
GU14 6PA

November 1987



Dear Confrères and Friends,

On Thursday 19th November, around five o'clock in the evening, Sister Rose O'Flynn was reciting Evening Prayer at her brother's bedside in Mount Alvernia Hospital, Guildford. As she reached the closing verses of the Magnificat, her brother's shallow breathing stopped and a gentle smile briefly lit up his face. It was then that the Lord took to himself our confrère.

Fr THOMAS BERNARD O'FLYNN S.D.B.

It was the eve of his 78th birthday. Much prayer from confreres, family and a caring hospital Sister, and Mass celebrated at his bedside within the hour had prepared Fr Tom for this final call. In a psalm of Evening Prayer, Sister Rose prayed: 'At night there are tears, but joy comes with the dawn' - the poetry of the Spirit was announcing his birthday into eternal life. Those who knew Fr Tom - even his close Salesian companions - could find him a tantalising yet lovable enigma. Should curiosity have prompted the less knowing to ask him 'Are you Irish? Welsh? or English?', he would surely have turned his head ever so slightly, pursed his lips and dryly answered: 'Yes'!

The eldest of four children, he was born and baptised in Ballymacarrett, Belfast, his mother having moved in with relatives for the birth of her first born. He spent the first fourteen years of his life at New Ross, Wexford, and the next five across the Irish Sea at Pantasaph, near Holywell, where the family had a farm. From there he attended the local County Secondary School, where he passed the School Leaving Certificate with much credit. As he approached his nineteenth birthday, his mind was evidently set on the priesthood, and through the good offices of Fr J. Martin, S.J., of St. Beuno's College, a request was made to Fr McCourt, in Battersea, to accept him as a candidate. His application carried with it the full support of his parents and the highest recommendation of teachers and priests who knew him. His nonconformist Welsh Headmaster wrote of him: 'He is a boy of refined and courteous disposition, very reliable and trustworthy, and I can recommend him strongly for this high calling', whilst his Franciscan parish priest described him as 'exemplary in every way . . . a genuinely pious lad'. The only possible obstacle at this stage was 'his ignorance of Latin'. Battersea accepted him, and on 1st October 1928 he began his long acquaintance with England and Don Bosco. Soon afterwards his family moved to Southend-on-Sea.

Tom's Novitiate year was spent in Cowley, where he made his first Profession on 24th September, 1931. He remained at Cowley two more years for philosophical studies, then moved to Farnborough for three years of practical training. (Who could have predicted that for no fewer than forty nine years Farnborough would be his home?). His study of Theology in Blaisdon followed, to be interrupted by another brief spell in Farnborough, but finally crowned with Ordination to the Priesthood on 25th July, 1943. From that point onwards, until his death, Fr Tom O'Flynn's life and work were interwoven with the life and work of Farnborough. He taught Science and subsequently History until age and ill health counselled otherwise, and at various periods was chaplain to the Past Pupils' Association and to army units around the area. In the late seventies, he spent a year as chaplain to the Salesian Sisters in Hastings, but the loneliness of the situation and trouble with an arthritic hip led him to rejoin his community - it was the only time in the forty four years from Ordination to his death when he was not resident in Farnborough. In the last ten years of his life he was a much appreciated chaplain to the Sisters at Lafosse House, Farnborough, and until his final illness a faithful and willing confessor for boys and confreres.

In the last few months of his life the warning signs of failing health began to show, but, true to character, rather than complain and withdraw, he plodded on, innocently disguising his limitations. On holiday in Ireland he displayed an extraordinary and unaccustomed dependence on his sister, Rose, delegating even special liturgical tasks with guileless pragmatism. On his return, he was seen to move about more slowly and to be even quieter than usual. On the evening of 21st September, he did the Daily Telegraph crossword with Fr Herbert Douglas - a daily ritual for both of them - and it was he who solved the final clue. The following morning he failed to appear for morning meditation - a sure sign that all was not well. The victim of a minor stroke, he was beginning his final chapter of illness. After three weeks in hospital, he was able to return to the community and evolve a new pattern of life, accepting humbly all the daily nursing attentions that his natural reserve would normally abhor. A reaction to medication and a second stroke took him back to hospital where his body systems began to fail and his life slowly slipped away.

Fr Tom was instinctively a community man, simple in his tastes and undemanding. Though sparing his words, he seasoned them with a pungent wit that could always raise a smile but never cause hurt. As Fr Pearce O'Byrne, a fellow ordinand and companion for thirty four years, testified in his funeral homily: 'There was not an ounce of rancour in him, and you could trust him totally with a confidence'. If you look for the spectacular in Fr Tom O'Flynn, you will not find it. Always reserved, he shunned the limelight and would choose the hidden and the humdrum rather than the public and the popular. His was the life of the faithful servant: genuine and unostentatious, single-minded and untiring, dedicated to his work and ministry and deeply rooted in the Lord: the kind of life that is a goldmine of goodness. 'He is like the tree that is planted beside the flowing waters, that yields its fruit in due season, and whose leaves shall never fade' (Psalm 1).

As you commend Fr Tom to the Lord, please pray also for his sister, Rose, and his brother, Frank. Kindly ask God's blessing too, on this community of Farnborough.

Yours affectionately in Don Bosco,
Fr Robert Coupe, S.D.B.

Data for the Necrology:

Fr Thomas O'Flynn, born in Belfast on the 20th November 1909, died in Guildford on the 19th November 1987 at the age of 77 years, after 44 years of priesthood.