

Father Kevin O'Leary SDB

Funeral Homily by Fr Frank Moloney SDB, Provincial

"More than an Educator, he was First and Foremost a Salesian Priest."

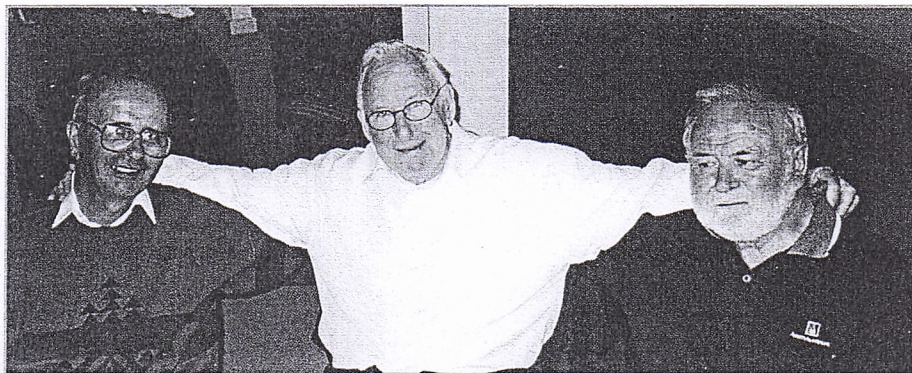


The Easter period of 2007 seems to be a time chosen by the Lord to call to himself significant Salesians from the Australia-Pacific Province. A little over a week ago we were gathered here to celebrate the life and death of Brother Peter Swain. We gather again at this table and in this believing community to celebrate another life, death and resurrection: that of Father Kevin O'Leary.

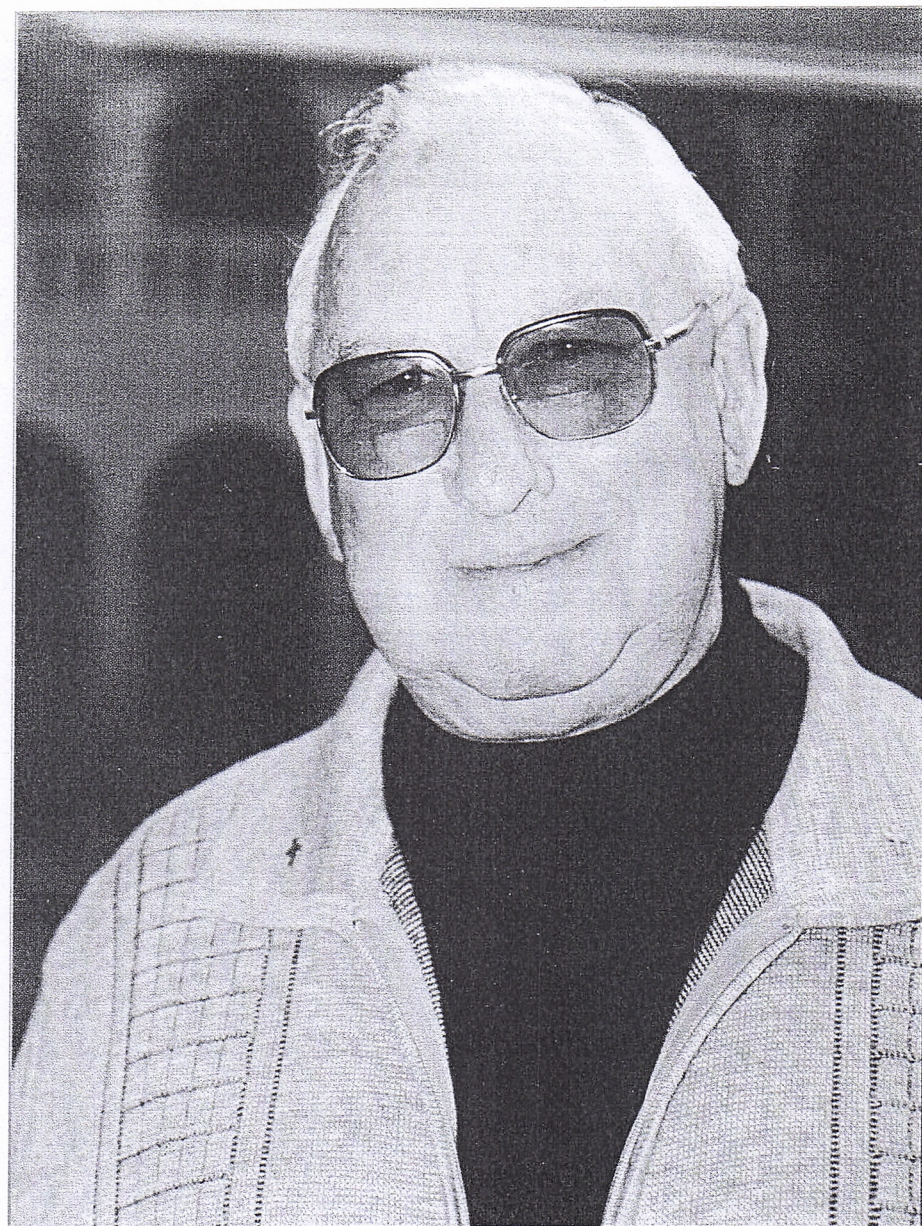
I have chosen texts for today's Mass that speak to at least part of the life and experience of the rich and complex life and character of Kevin O'Leary. The reading from 1 Peter proclaims that faith in the resurrection overcomes all suffering. Scholars have long debated the nature of the suffering that lies behind Peter's regular insistence, across his beautiful letter, on the need for his new Christians to accept and understand suffering. Even in this brief passage which opens the letter in our reading today, he tells his fellow-Christians that "though now for a little while you may have to suffer various trials." These hints become more intense as the letter unfolds. Was Peter writing to a community suffering persecution? Nowadays it is widely accepted that such was not the case. Peter is addressing the still very real experience of the daily pain that forms part of following a crucified and risen Messiah. That pain was part of the final years of Kevin's life.

A man with a vigorous mind, a sharp wit, and a lifetime of successful achievements in the Salesian mission of education, and also in the governance of the Province, Kevin suffered greatly as his life came to a close. It was not as if he had to face major physical agony. That may have been something Kevin would have faced courageously. We will never know. However, as his health steadily faded, and he was in need of continual help physically, his mind never faded. Beautifully cared for at Nazareth House, Camberwell, he was never able to accept that he belonged there. His mind raced, he kept in touch with the affairs and people of the Province, the affairs of the nation and the world, the ups and downs of his beloved Collingwood, and he delighted in the many visitors who came to see him. I remember my first visit to him as a Provincial. He was so glad to see me, as he felt he could confide in me and tell me that we had it all wrong, and that he should not be in such confined care. I felt so sorry that I could do nothing to help him.

Eventually, as his debilitation increased, he came to ruefully accept that he would end his days in care, but it was his great cross to while away the hours, missing the cut and thrust of intellectual discussions, and the simple banter that goes on in a community ... or which always went on when Kevin was there! It was clear to all of us that those last years were an enormous burden for him. But today we proclaim with joy: "Blessed be the God and Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy, Kevin, you have been born anew into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and to an inheritance which is imperishable, undefiled and unfading, kept in heaven for you." The various trials are behind you ... and you have come to your precious inheritance.



But it would be mean spirited to focus upon Kevin's final, difficult years. Kevin was born on 1 August, 1925. After a period at Don Bosco Club and Hostel in Brunswick, he became a member of the very first Salesian Novitiate to be established in Australia. Kevin, John Henry Neale and John Murphy made their novitiate under Fr Ciantar, here at "Rupertswood," in 1941. After further studies and teaching at Brooklyn Park, Adelaide, he went to the Salesian Pontifical Faculty of Theology in Turin, and was awarded a Licence in Sacred Theology in 1951. After a brief period as a young Priest at Glenorchy, he was sent back to Italy, and was awarded a Licence in Philosophy in 1956. This well-educated young Salesian Priest returned to Australia and began his considerable contribution to the Salesian mission of education, and to Catholic education in 1956.



There is no call for me to list his many achievements, but I would like to single out his epoch making contribution to the development of Dominic College, especially in collaboration with Sister Pamela Davis, OP, who is with us here today (1966-1973). I have been told that Pamela knows more about Kevin than anyone, but I will leave it to her to share those memories. We are also blessed with the presence of Sister Margaret Mary Brown who followed Pamela at Dominic. We Salesians nowadays regard Dominic College, Glenorchy, as one of the little known treasures of the Province. Thanks Kevin O'Leary, Pam and Margaret Mary for what you did to make this happen. I would also like to single out his long years of leadership at Salesian College, Chadstone (1977-1983), and his period as the Vice Provincial of the Province (1974-77). Anyone who worked with Kevin in Glenorchy and Chadstone, despite the difficult physical conditions of both of those emerging major educational communities (and there are several others from those days with us today), regard them as the "golden days." Who will ever forget the Thursday community nights at Chadstone, as Kevin reigned and Jim Brawley looked after the menu? Kevin's final major contribution came during his years as the Director of Education in the Port Pirie Diocese.





Kevin has been among the founding group of Salesians that went to Port Pirie in 1957. From 1985 till 1991 he took great delight in his further major involvement with the Diocese. They were important years for Kevin, as he devoted his administrative skills and his sharp mind to the care of the schools, the students and the staff of the Diocese of Port Pirie. We are most grateful to Bishop Eugene Hurley who has joined us from Port Pirie for this celebration. He will pray the final commendation at the end of this Eucharistic celebration.



Kevin O'Leary, however, was more than an educator. He was first and foremost a Salesian Priest. It was with alacrity that – despite his failing health – he went to help as best he could in our Parish Ministry at St Joachim's, Victoria Park, and Perth. He was there from 1991-2002. It was fitting that the final ministry of Kevin O'Leary, the Roman Catholic Priest, was priestly. The Gospel reading tells us of the need to eat the flesh of the Son of Man and to drink his blood. This powerful Eucharistic text promises resurrection and eternal life to those who participate in this mysterious presence of the crucified and risen Lord. Kevin never shied clear of his priestly situation in life. He celebrated the Eucharist regularly and well, he enjoyed the Word of God and studied it closely, and he was capable of delivering an unforgettable homily. One of his final requests was that he be buried in Eucharistic vestments. I saw him the day before he died and, in his usual lucid fashion, he told me that the doctor had called him "sir." Kevin made it clear to him that he was a Roman Catholic Priest, had been one for 56 years, and was not allowing that to pass unrecognised in his final illness. No doubt his combative response to the young doctor had its effect. Posted behind his bed at the Epworth Hospital was the title: "Father Kevin O'Leary." He was an educator, but it was as a Priest that he was an educator, following the best of the traditions left to us by Don Bosco, Priest and Educator.



I think Kevin always regretted that he never made the scholarly contribution to the Province and to the Church that he knew was within his capacities. As well as his ecclesiastical degrees in Philosophy and Theology, he had an excellent BA from the University of Melbourne, specialising in English Literature and Psychology. He did that degree while teaching Philosophy to a group of young Salesians at Oakleigh. In those preconciliar days we had to plod our way through dreary manuals, but on one occasion Kevin's brilliance came to the fore. Up for inspection so that our tiny institution at Oakleigh could continue to give Primary Teaching Certificates to our young Brothers, Kevin appeared in the classroom dressed in his magnificent cape, with his hair parted down the middle. To our delight, and impressing the stunned inspectors, Kevin taught two full periods that took us from the pre-Socratics to Descartes with a brilliance that I have not experienced elsewhere. We all have fond memories of that day. Much later, perhaps showing off my own increased sophistication, I asked Kevin why he stopped at Descartes. His answer: "Oh, European Philosophy is all downhill after Descartes."

In 1955, Kevin O'Leary wrote a poem to mark the Ordination of his fellow Salesian, Fr John O'Day. I will let Kevin have the final word this morning:



*The bread and wine, the Twelve, the Upper Room
The mystic change is yet a plan divine
By which man's food and man to God's design
Shall change. The gold-red sunset rays illumine
The Agape when Jesus speaks: "Consume!"*

*My Friends, this Paschal Feast, this Body Mine
Once bread, now changed, this Blood appearing wine.*

*"Hoc facite!" – these priestly powers assume.
Today the labour of the Twelve is yours
And you go forth to tread the path they trod
To offer Christ to God on high anew.
Across two thousand years for them, through hours
For you ring out the self-same words of God:
"You chose not me but I have chosen you."*



