

**"Unless the Lord builds the house,  
they labor in vain who build it."  
Psalm 127:1**



**Father Eugene Palumbo**  
**Salesian of Don Bosco**



December 1, 2013

Dear Confreres,

In the afternoon of September 11, 2013, our confrere

**Father Eugene Palumbo, SDB**

quietly departed from this life in the hospice facility located in St. Joseph's Hospital in Wayne, New Jersey, a unit he had entered just one day prior. He had been hospitalized since August 22, the day he had suffered acute respiratory failure while residing at Regency Gardens, a nursing and rehabilitation center located nearby. For nearly three weeks he lingered in the hospital, passing in and out of awareness and relying on the assistance of a breathing machine to survive.

During his conscious moments, it was clear that Fr. Eugene, always a rather independent person, did not want to remain living dependent on a machine. Nevertheless, the process of moving him to hospice care and removing him from any breathing apparatus was a prolonged one, involving family members, doctors, confreres and hospice personnel. Once there, in rather short order his breathing underwent a steady decline, he passed into unconsciousness, his organs began to shut down one by one, and within 24 hours he was declared dead. He was 91 years of age, 72 years a Salesian of Don Bosco and 62 years an ordained priest.



## EARLY LIFE

Eugene Palumbo was born on January 16, 1922 at 134 Beech Street in Paterson, New Jersey, a small house two doors down from the Salesian Parish of St. Anthony of Padua. His parents were Gennaro and Maria (DiTanna) Palumbo. The family history is involved, as both parents, immigrants from Italy, were widowed with children when they got married.

Eugene's father Gennaro had emigrated from San Pietro Avellana to the United States in 1901 at the age of 17, sailing on the steamship Belgravia. He had settled in Paterson and was working as a tailor when his first wife died leaving him with five children: John, Mary, Josephine, Florence and Louis. On a return visit to Italy he got engaged to Maria (DiTanna) DiLullo, herself widowed with two children, Ralph and Emily. He returned to the United States, while she made arrangements to join him.

Maria, at age 32, left her peasant village of Capracotta, Italy with her two children in 1921, sailing on the immigrant ship The Presidente Wilson. According to the immigration records at Ellis Island where she landed, she had \$66 in her possession and was met by her fiancé Gennaro. They soon married and with their children established a blended family. Gennaro and Maria proceeded to have five more children together: Eugene, Vincent, James, Albert, and Augustine.

Eugene was baptized at St. Anthony's Church on February 19 by Fr. Rinaldo De Martini. He grew up in the parish, receiving his other sacraments of initiation there and attending St. Anthony's School, which was administered by the Salesian Sisters.



During his formative years, his mother, a strong personality, was by his own admission a big influence in his life. He admired her courage to come to the United States without any knowledge of English, as well as her generosity and sacrificial spirit in providing for her large family. She sometimes held several jobs at once, among them working for a number of years for the Salesians at the rectory of St. Anthony's as cook and housekeeper.



**Maria Palumbo, the mother of Fr. Eugene**

## SALESIAN FORMATION

When he was in 8th grade, Eugene decided to go to the Salesian aspirantate in Newton, New Jersey. He did his high school studies there from 1936 to 1940, after which he entered the novitiate. His Novice Master was Fr. Joseph Romani. Making his first profession as a Salesian on September 8, 1941, Brother Eugene continued his seminary studies in Newton, now at the college level, which he completed three years later in 1944 with a B.A. degree in philosophy.



**Eugene's novitiate class in Newton on Vestition Day, October 27, 1940, the Feast of Christ the King. Br. Eugene is in the back row, second one in from the right. His fellow novices included Emmanuel Alicino, Ted Ciampi, Phil Pascucci and Al Sofia. The Provincial, Fr. Ambrose Rossi, is seated front and center and flanked by Fr. Alvin Fedrigotti, Director, and Fr. Joseph Romani, Master of Novices.**



**Br. Eugene during practical training with the Sodality of Don Bosco High School, Ramsey.**



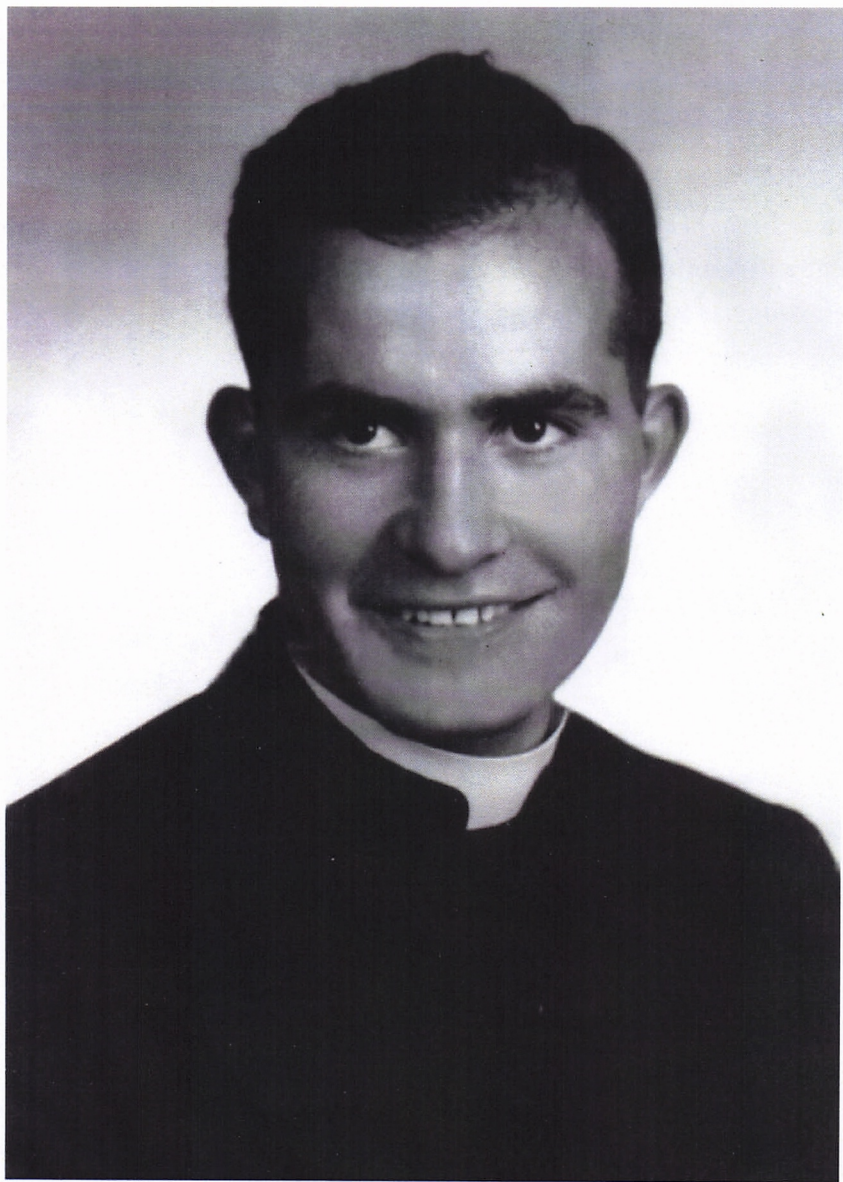
For practical training, Brother Eugene was assigned first to Don Bosco High School in Ramsey, New Jersey. From 1944 to 1945, he taught Latin, English and biology, while also handling the band and choir programs. The provincial, Fr. Ernest Giovannini, then asked him to go to Hope Haven in Marrero, Louisiana, an orphanage conducted by the Salesians. There, where he would later claim “the heat and humidity made life a little tougher,” he taught and assisted the young as well for two years, from 1945 to 1947.



**Br. Eugene during practical training with the band of Hope Haven, Marrero.**

Brother Eugene then returned to the seminary in Newton and, making his perpetual profession as a Salesian on September 8, 1947, he began theological studies. After one year, he and his classmates were transferred to Aptos, California, where the Salesians opened up a new theological seminary program. Three years later, he was ordained a priest there on Sunday, June 17, 1951 by Redemptorist Bishop Aloysius Willinger, at the time the coadjutor bishop of Monterey-Fresno.





**Br. Eugene as a young Salesian.**



**Fr. John Divizia assists Fr. Eugene Palumbo during his First Mass.**



**Fr. Eugene Palumbo with his parents on the day of his First Mass at St. Anthony's Church in Paterson.**

## THE BOSTON YEARS

Fr. Eugene's first priestly assignment was to Don Bosco Technical High School in his hometown of Paterson. He considered it a wonderful first year of priesthood. During the week he taught English, moderated the band, and oversaw the basketball and baseball programs of the school. On weekends he would celebrate mass at his home parish of St. Anthony's.

But then came the call to go to Don Bosco Trade School in East Boston, Massachusetts, and over two decades of Salesian work in the Boston area began for him, years Fr. Eugene would cherish and look back on with pride.



From 1952 to 1955 he served as Vice Principal of the school in East Boston, from 1955 to 1964 as Vice Principal of the school in its new location in downtown Boston, and – after a brief hiatus as Director and Principal of St. Patrick's School in Sherbrooke, Quebec, Canada [1964-1965] and as Professor of English at Don Bosco College Seminary in Newton [1965-1966] – from 1966 to 1975 as Director [and for some of those years as Principal as well] of the renamed Don Bosco Technical High School.



**Fr. Eugene reviewing sketches and plans for the Boston construction.**

It can be said that Fr. Eugene understood the value of vocational and technical education and implemented it. And his gifts as builder had ample space for employment in Boston. The school grew in enrollment from a couple hundred young men to nearly a thousand during his two decades there. The curriculum developed considerably, with shops in various areas of technology opening up. The athletic program expanded, as teams were added in a variety of sports.





**Groundbreaking for the recreational complex at Don Bosco Tech, Boston.**

Parent involvement grew, with the formation and accompaniment of a Mothers' Club and Fathers' Club. The number of benefactors increased, as Fr. Eugene energetically sought funding help from all constituencies of the city. And the facilities available for the young improved, as he saw to the construction of a recreational complex with a gymnasium and swimming pool. Many of the students could now remain after classes and enjoy the Salesian playground. This gave him perhaps the most satisfaction.



**Fr. Eugene before the mural in the entrance lobby of the recreational complex.**

Fr. Eugene also developed a St. John Bosco Chapel/Shrine at the school, which made not only mass cards and purgatorials available, but also widely distributed novenas and prayers which he wrote that were well appreciated by many. Here began his simple writings, which, printed by the students in the print shop, were then widely disseminated.

Files that Fr. Eugene kept over the years contain his conferences to the community while serving as director from 1966 to 1975. Reading through them, several things become clear.



First, these were transition years immediately following the Second Vatican Council, and Fr. Eugene read widely and sought to help the community change in keeping with new directions coming from the Church and the Congregation. Second, Fr. Eugene grappled continually with the needs and conditions of youth, seeking to understand the challenges faced by adolescents in a rapidly changing world and concerned that the response of the Salesians be adequate. And third, the death of Br. Charles Bryson in 1972, just three days shy of his 44th birthday, impacted Fr. Eugene greatly. He was shaken by the tragedy of the death, yet greatly inspired by the spirit of acceptance and faith of the parents of Br. Charles, something he would never forget.

Fr. Eugene never shunned the spotlight, and he delighted in becoming a known figure in Boston during his years there. Whether at the chancery or the statehouse, with ecclesiastics or politicians, he unashamedly sought opportunities to engage those in positions of authority. In 1970 he recited a prayer before the proceedings of the Boston City Council. In 1971, he was put by Governor Francis Sargeant on the newly formed Advisory Council on Vocational and Technical Education. In 1973, he testified in the Statehouse before a Committee on Taxation in regards to a bill aimed at taxing non-profit organizations. After extolling the sacrificial work of the 24 Salesians who comprised the Salesian Community that year, he indicated that passing the bill “would serve as a prime example of moral assault and battery on a body of God-fearing, self-sacrificing people. It would constitute a crime crying to heaven for vengeance! I am confident that no such attempt will be tolerated by this distinguished committee.” Needless to say, passage of the bill failed.

The Boston years of Fr. Eugene drew to a close in 1975, a reality he struggled with greatly. The provincial, Fr. Salvatore Isgro, declined his requests to remain at Don Bosco Tech in roles other than director and insisted he move on.



As testimony to the impact he had on the young there, it is worth noting that he was invited periodically over the years to return for alumni gatherings, and some alumni kept in contact with him up until the time of his death, grateful for his positive influence on their lives.

## THE MAHWAH YEARS

From 1975 to 1992, Fr. Eugene was assigned to Immaculate Heart of Mary Parish in Mahwah, New Jersey as Administrator, the title he would hold for his entire tenure at the parish, 17 years. His accomplishments, however, would not be limited by lack of appointment as Pastor, and Mahwah soon became a second place where the gifts of Fr. Eugene as a builder found ample scope.

The church, a small wooden structure, dated back to 1916 and was inadequate for any future growth of the parish. A previous pastor, Fr. Joseph Haluch, had constructed a school and a rectory, but the dream of a new church had gone unfulfilled. Fr. Eugene saw the need immediately and set about making it a reality. It would be a long process, 14 years from his arrival until the church dedication, but he stayed at the task steadfastly.



**Fr. Eugene giving  
First Communion in  
the original church in  
Mahwah.**

Fr. Eugene held an array of fundraising programs – polka festivals, bingo programs, raffles and auctions – and began putting money aside for the project. He reached out to Catholic foundations as well as local developers, and more money came in as a result. He held countless parish meetings, formed a parish Building Committee, had plans drawn up by architects, went repeatedly before the Mahwah Planning Board, wrestled with the Archdiocesan Office of Worship and pursued people to pay their pledges – all of it finally leading to groundbreaking for the new church in August 1987 and dedication of the new church by Archbishop Theodore McCarrick in September 1989. Fr. Eugene's pride and joy was great, not only then but also eight months later, when Archbishop McCarrick returned to the new church in May 1990 for the priestly ordination of Lou Molinelli, a Salesian vocation from the parish.



**Archbishop McCarrick, Fr. Eugene and others at the laying of the foundation stone of the new Immaculate Heart of Mary Church.**





Fr. Eugene speaks to some of the schoolchildren about the new church to be built.

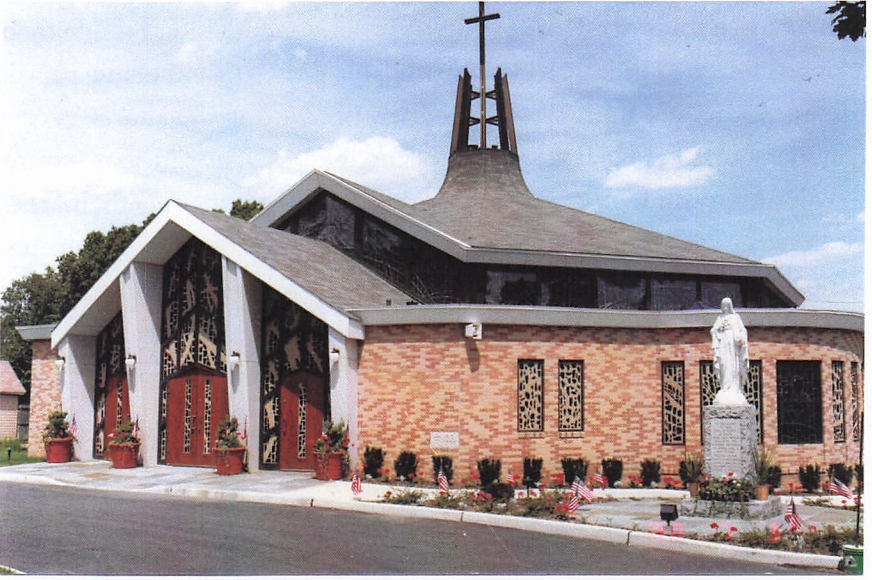




It needs to be noted that the advancement of Immaculate Heart of Mary Parish under the leadership of Fr. Eugene included more than a new church building. He devoted himself to furthering parish organizations and ministries, especially promoting the altar servers, parish ushers, Eucharistic ministers and lectors. The music program developed, with hymns in English, Polish and Latin, and the parish choir grew in membership. Parish missions were held almost annually and the traditional Polish traditions were maintained as well, with the help of Fr. Al Sokol and Fr. Joseph Bajorek.

**Fr. Al Sokol and  
Fr. Eugene with  
the cross to be  
placed on the top  
of the church.**





**Church of the Immaculate Heart of Mary  
(outside view above and inside view below).**





Unfortunately, during Fr. Eugene's tenure as Administrator of Immaculate Heart of Mary Parish, the decision was taken by the Archdiocese of Newark to close the parish school after nearly 75 years in operation. Declining enrollment coupled with increasing expenses led to the establishment of St. Paul's School in Ramsey as a regional elementary school. Fr. Eugene recognized it as a loss for the parish from a Salesian perspective, but came to see it as inevitable.

In 1991, the parish celebrated its diamond jubilee, 75 years. Fr. Eugene had further plans to finish paying off the building debt of \$700,000 and to build a parish hall beneath the church, but it was not to be as his years in Mahwah came to a close in 1992. Once again, letting go and moving on was a reality that he struggled greatly with. But by the fall of 1992, Fr. Eugene reluctantly departed.

#### THE DESERT YEARS

Now began a period of Fr. Eugene's life that perhaps is aptly considered the Desert Years. He had numerous but brief assignments, he lived outside of community for the majority of those years, and he was not at peace.

Fr. Eugene was parochial vicar at St. John Bosco Parish in Harvey, Louisiana for one year [1992-1993]. He then took a leave of absence and worked for one year at St. George's Parish, Paterson [1993-1994]. He took a second leave of absence and worked for one year at St. Dominic's Parish, Brick in the Diocese of Trenton [1994-1995]. Then he accepted an assignment from the Provincial to serve as the chaplain of the Salesian Sisters in North Haledon [1995-1996]. After a year he moved on to serve as parochial vicar at St. Anthony's Parish in Elizabeth [1996-1997].

Fr. Eugene was next assigned to Don Bosco Prep High School in Ramsey, but he did not make the community his home. From 1997 to 2004, he resided at the diocesan parish of St. Stephen's in Paterson and helped out as a parochial vicar. Once a week he would stop at Don Bosco Prep to pick up his mail, and once a week he might stop at St. Anthony's Parish around the corner from St. Stephen's to connect with the Salesians there.

With a change in pastor at St. Stephen's in 2004, Fr. Eugene then began to live more often at Don Bosco Prep. Nevertheless, he stayed frequently at diocesan parishes, offering help to pastors and replacing priests so that they could go on vacation. Only when his capacity to drive diminished in 2010 did Fr. Eugene finally accept living at Don Bosco Prep.

Despite the challenges of these years, marked by his own inner turmoil, they bore fruit in both sacramental ministry and in writings. Fr. Eugene helped out in numerous parishes in the dioceses of Paterson, Newark and New York, available for service in English, Spanish and Italian. He celebrated countless masses and heard

numerous confessions. He baptized infants and buried the dead with regularity. He also now and again celebrated the Sunday Mass televised by Passionist Communications and broadcast throughout the greater New York area.



**Fr. Eugene meets with the Rector Major, Fr. Pascual Chavez, to present to him some of his writings.**

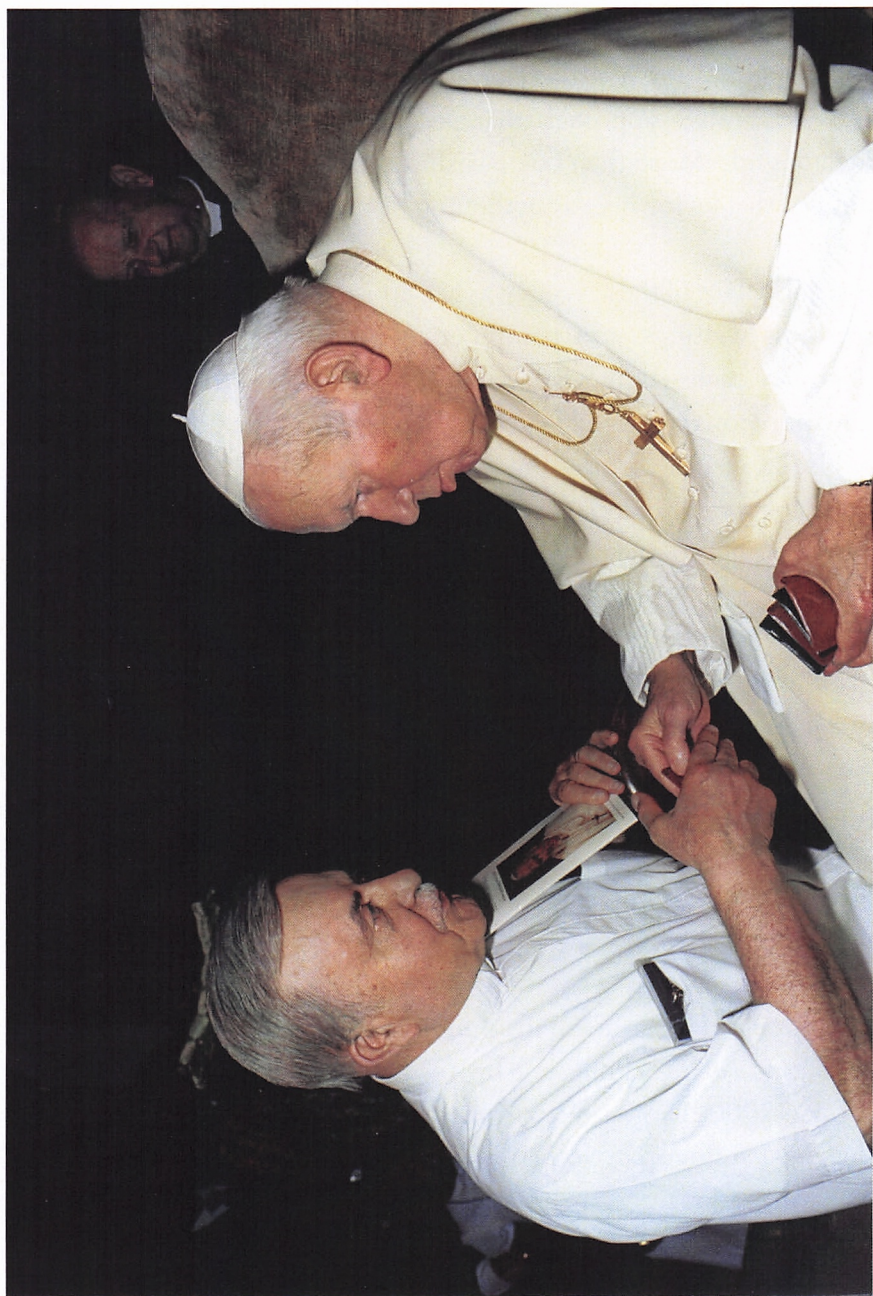


The preaching of Fr. Eugene in particular was well appreciated. He kept numerous books on homilies – in several languages – and peppered his homilies with many anecdotes and stories. His was a narrative approach that people found well-structured and meaningful. More than one parishioner over the years wrote him a note of thanks for his strengthening of their faith.

A second fruit of these years was his “apostolate of the press”. Prolific were his writings – in pamphlet or book form – on all manner of topics ecclesial and Salesian. Whether the joyful election of a new pope or the tragedy of 9/11, Fr. Eugene would in short order publish a writing on the theme. He was particularly enamored of Pope John Paul II, and researched all he could to provide numerous works on him.

And Salesian topics were important to Fr. Eugene as well, whether brief lives of Don Bosco and Dominic Savio, or the qualities needed in a leader when the province was discerning a new provincial! He also wrote histories of the Salesian works in Boston and Mahwah, profiles of Salesians he had worked with, especially Brothers, and a province history for its Centennial Year 2002. Admittedly these were texts written from his perspective; nonetheless they were very informative.

Perhaps his most noteworthy publication was a book entitled *Mother Teresa: Angel of God*. Published by Resurrection Press during the Great Jubilee 2000, it offered a simple and inspiring portrait of perhaps the most influential woman of the 20th century. In addition, for many years Fr. Eugene served as a contributor to, and an associate editor of, *The Catholic Yearbook*, an inspirational magazine containing short stories with a circulation of over 200,000.



**Fr. Eugene presents Blessed John Paul II with a copy of one of the booklets he has written about him.**





**Fr. Phil Pascucci, Fr. Eugene and Fr. Larry Lorenzoni as they celebrated their 50th anniversary of ordination in 2001.**

One cannot measure the amount of good accomplished by Fr. Eugene through his countless hours spent writing, and at an IBM typewriter at that. One note to him from former Bishop of Paterson Frank Rodimer perhaps speaks for the appreciation of many: “It is one thing to have a gift – such as you have for putting your thoughts to words – and another to have the energy to use that gift for the good of others. You have both, and I appreciate your thoughtfulness in sharing your writings with me.”

## TWILIGHT YEARS

The final three years of Fr. Eugene’s life were marked by increasing illness. His conditions were numerous, most serious among them diabetes, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and cardiovascular disease. He had an oxygen machine in his room for frequent use, and he remained in his room for most of the day.



**Fr. Eugene with his last surviving sibling, Albert James and his wife Diana, at the celebration of their 50th wedding anniversary with Bishop John Smith of Trenton in 2001.**

In good weather he might spend some time each day in a rocker on the porch of St. John's Hall. Almost always he would join the Salesian Community for dinner in the evenings.

Periodically, however, he would suffer acute respiratory failure and needed to be brought by ambulance to the hospital. After a stay of a few days he would return to the community, but each time he returned diminished, both physically and mentally.

On June 5, 2013 he insisted on going to the Funeral Mass of Mr. Lou Molinelli, Sr. at Immaculate Heart of Mary Parish, where he sat in the front pew and concelebrated. Returning home, he typed up a draft of a reflection on the funeral mass, and then scribbled some emendations on it. The next morning, he suffered acute respiratory



failure yet again, occasioned this time by pneumonia, and was found on the floor of his room. A hospital stay this time led to a further stay at Van Dyk Manor in Ridgewood for rehabilitation. It was then determined that his return to the Salesian residence was not possible, and he was moved to Regency Gardens in Wayne. It was a decision that he found hard to bear. Throughout these months, confreres from the community visited almost daily. But, ironically, now he could not accept living outside community. So he held to the hope that one day he could return, and he worked somewhat at strengthening himself. Unfortunately, another episode of acute respiratory failure led to his hospitalization at St. Joseph's in Wayne on August 22, his three week agony on a breathing machine, and his eventual death on Wednesday, September 11.

## CONCLUSION

On Thursday, September 12, the mortal remains of Fr. Eugene were received by the Salesian Community at 5 PM and carried by members of the school's track team to the Mary Help of Christians Chapel. Throughout the morning of Friday, September 13, all 875+ students passed through the chapel during the school day in groups of 50 or so. Prayer services were held and the boys reflected on the gift of Father Eugene's life. An afternoon wake and rosary, and an evening wake and vigil service followed, with confreres, family members and parishioners of Immaculate Heart of Mary in attendance.

On Saturday, September 14, the remains of Fr. Eugene were brought to his beloved Mahwah church, where the funeral mass was presided over by Fr. Steven Dumais, vice provincial. There were numerous concelebrants, and a good representation of family members, friends, parishioners and members of the Salesian Family present.



Burial followed a short distance away, in Mahwah Cemetery of Ramapo Reformed Church, where his tombstone erected two months later bears sketches of Don Bosco and the Church of the Immaculate Heart of Mary.

Perhaps the last word should aptly be left to Fr. Eugene. Preaching one Good Friday on the words of Christ, he said:

*‘This day you shall be with me in paradise’. Here is the pledge, the promise, the invitation to be with him again. It is his last will and testament, the most sacred words a man can leave.*

*It is a promise of victory after the defeat of Calvary. It is a promise of the crown after the cross. It is a promise of light after darkness. It is a promise of an eternity of bliss after a pilgrimage in a vale of tears. It is a promise of paradise gained after a paradise lost.*

*Let this day re-confirm our belief in Christ’s message that we shall eventually, after the crosses and crises of life, be with him in paradise.*



Please join our Salesian Community in praying that, indeed, our brother Eugene is joyful and free now, with the Risen Christ, experiencing the promised paradise. And as we thank God for the good his life accomplished, let us implore God that new and faithful Salesian vocations may arise in our age.

Cordially,

*Father James Heuser, SDB*

Father James Heuser, SDB

Director

**DATA FOR THE NECROLOGY**

**Fr. Eugene Palumbo, SDB**

**Birth: January 16, 1922 in Paterson, New Jersey**

**Religious Profession: September 8, 1941 in Newton,  
New Jersey**

**Priestly Ordination: June 17, 1951 in Aptos, California**

**Death: September 11, 2013 in Wayne, New Jersey  
at age 91, a Salesian for 72 years and a priest for 62 years.**

