

1893



1981

Rev. Stefan Plywaczyk, S.D.B.

April 24, 1981

Dear Confreres:

The **Rev. Stefan Plywaczyk**, the last of the living founders of Don Bosco Preparatory High School in Ramsey, New Jersey (U.S.A.), died Friday evening, February 12, 1981. He was 88.

Father Steve was born in Jedlec, Poland, on January 8, 1893. His parents, Andrew and Sboczak Mary, had 14 children. Stefan was the youngest and the last surviving member of the family. There were eleven boys and three girls. Two of his brothers, Stanislaus and Adelbert, also became Salesian priests.

In 1910 he entered the novitiate at Radna, Jugoslavia, and had the singular distinction of having his own brother, Stanislaus, as his Master of Novices.

After his first year of profession, he was sent to the U.S.A. to our Columbus Institute in Hawthorne, New York. In 1915 he and four other Salesian clerics were sent to Ramsey to establish Don Bosco High School for the exclusive education of Polish immigrants' sons. After the wave of immigrants had ceased around 1935, the school opened its doors to boys of all nationalities.

During his first three years at Ramsey, he continued to pursue his studies for the priesthood, and on February 23rd, 1918 he was ordained by Bishop John O'Connor in Madison, New Jersey. The following day he celebrated his first Mass in the recently completed school chapel. This day was doubly memorable to him, since it was the 24th of the month, a day associated with the commemoration of Mary Help of Christians.

Following his ordination, he became a very active teacher and preacher. He also found time to advance himself scholastically by matriculating at Fordham University. In 1927 he received his doctorate in Education. That same year he was appointed Director of Don Bosco Prep, a post he held until 1931. During this time his reputation grew as a preacher, and he was in great demand in many Polish parishes and schools around the country.



*Three Plywaczyk brothers became Salesian priests:
(from left) Stefan, Stanislaus and Adelbert.*

In 1934 he was privileged to represent this Province at the canonization of our holy Founder in Rome. After witnessing the awe-inspiring ceremonies, he returned to his native Poland. There he was appointed Director of an orphanage and later pastor of the neighboring church. He was doing quite well until the break of World War II. In 1941 he, together with hundreds of other Polish priests, was arrested and placed in the infamous concentration camp of Dachau outside of Munich. There he remained for 4½ years, suffering cruel and inhuman treatment at the hands of Nazi doctors who used him as a guinea pig in malarial experiments, and enduring the hardships of forced labor on farms and in factories. During those nightmarish years, he further suffered the loss of his brother Adelbert, who had been a chaplain for the Polish underground and had been arrested by the Gestapo and quickly executed. Father Steve was finally liberated in 1945 by American troops under General George Patton.



*Fr. Steve in the Dachau
concentration camp.*

Father rarely spoke of those days at Dachau, and when he did, it was with reluctance and a spirit of forgiveness. We are told that while in confinement, he was a model of patience and charity. One of his fellow Salesians, Fr. Zygmunt Kuzak, who was in the same concentration camp with Father Steve and who was celebrating his golden jubilee of priesthood, recently wrote to Father Steve and recalled their friendship at Dachau: "... Even if one were to live a thousand years, one could not forget the kindness and concern you showed me when I arrived at Dachau from Auschwitz—a late comer and alone, destitute of practically every necessity. And when for a period of time we only survived on care packages that arrived from loved ones through the Red Cross, you shared your food with me and told me to consider your packages and food as my own. Whenever I speak to people about those terrible Dachau days, I always mention your name and how I owe my life to you. You always gave me courage, and when I tried to thank you, you would say it was nothing, a little gesture of brotherly concern... Father Steve, if I am alive today to celebrate my priestly jubilee of 50 years and my 80th birthday, I must say I owe it to you!"

After Dachau and the War, Father Steve was sent to Cuba to recuperate. While there he was able to assist the Polish legation by serving as an attaché.

He returned to his beloved school in Ramsey in 1955. Here, once again he took up teaching Latin and Spanish. And from this time to his last day at Ramsey, the spirituality of this extraordinary man began to surface more and more.

The homilist at his funeral Mass, Fr. Joseph Tyminski, S.D.B., spoke of his inspiring example. "One of the most beautiful examples of obedience that I learned from him", he said "was during the time of our preparations for the special General Chapters of renewal. He had received his copies of the 'problems and possibilities for renewal.' He read them carefully and studied them. Then, one day he came to the Director's office with the same books, politely and respectfully greeted me (as he always did) sat down and paged through them, saying: 'There are many wonderful and exciting ideas in these pages. I hope that some of them will be approved and materialize. But I, Father, would prefer not to make any recommendations myself. I have been trained and learned that God's will is made known to me through my superiors. So, whatever they eventually decide, I shall willingly accept.'... And, indeed, he did!"

In the past five years this writer was also privileged to witness the spirituality of this endearing man. In spite of his weakening health, he remained faithful to the daily community practices of piety. He was always first in chapel and last to leave. When his physical condition no longer permitted him to say Mass by himself, he begged for someone to be at his side or to be allowed to concelebrate. His devotion to Mary was outstanding. Father Steve and his rosary were never separated. In chapel, in his room, on his hospital bed, the rosary was ever present, wrapped around his aging hands and slowly sliding along his fingers as he moved one bead after the other in silent prayer.

At times he was so weak he could not get up. The thought of having to stay in bed instead of being up and around as an active Salesian troubled him. He would then ask my forgiveness for not rising with community and attending services.

His humility and piety sustained the community. His presence among us was truly a constant blessing. With his passing an important chapter in the history of Don Bosco Prep comes to a close.

The five co-founders of this school have been memorialized in a large bronze relief, which hangs in the foyer of Immaculata Hall, one of the several buildings on the campus. It serves as a reminder to students and faculty of those great pioneers who left their native Poland to establish this institute of learning for the benefit of the youth of this country. We shall always be grateful!

Father Steve is gone, but his memory—and theirs—will continue to live on in the hallowed halls of Don Bosco Prep.

Fraternally in Christ,
Rev. Anthony A. Spano, S.D.B.
Director

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DATE FOR NECROLOGY: Father Stefan Plywaczyk, born in Jedlec, Poland, on January 8, 1893, died in Ramsey, New Jersey (U.S.A.), on February 12, 1981, at the age of 88, having completed 70 years of religious profession and 63 years of priesthood.

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R.I.P.