

J.M.J.



SALESIAN COLLEGE,
HIGHFIELD,
CHERTSEY, SURREY

February 4th, 1958

My dear Confrères,

It is my sad duty to announce to you the news of the death of our beloved

Father JOHN GUIDO POGGIO

which took place in hospital during the Novena in preparation for the Feast of Our Lady, Help of Christians, on May 17th, 1957, in the 66th year of his age, 48th of profession, and 39th of priesthood.

Father Poggio was born at Aquis, in Liguria, Northern Italy, on September 4th, 1891. He came to England in 1900 and began his studies at the Salesian School, Battersea.

When he had finished his Grammar School course he expressed his desire to become a Salesian, and went to the Novitiate at Burwarsh, in Sussex, and after his year of Novitiate was finished, he took his first Vows on December 8th, 1909, and he made his final Vows on December 8th, 1912, at Battersea.

After teaching at Battersea for his Triennium, he began his study of Theology, and owing to the First World War his studies had to be made at Battersea instead of going abroad, as was at first intended.

Having completed his theological studies he was raised to the Sacred Priesthood on September 21st, 1918, just before the end of World War I. He remained at Battersea for 10 years as teacher and carrying on the usual week-end supply work in various parishes. In 1928 he was sent to Thornleigh College, Bolton, as Catechist, and there he remained for 15 years with the exception of one year spent at Farnborough, and it was at Thornleigh that he did his greatest work.

As his health had begun to cause anxiety, he was sent to Shrigley for lighter duties, and remained there until 1950. But since his health had not improved, it was thought that the milder weather of the South of England might be beneficial, and so he was sent here to Chertsey in 1950. Unfortunately his health declined rapidly, and he was sent first to a Nursing Home and then to a hospital at Virginia Water, where, after a long illness, he died on Friday, May 17th, 1957.

Such is the statistical framework of the life of Father John Poggio, priest of the Salesians of Don Bosco.

But we who knew Father Poggio and loved him, know that these dates do not reveal the simple, lovable, zealous priest, who did so much good in his priestly life. He was a priest who loved his work, who had few interests beyond his work in the schools and for souls. He was ever faithful to his high calling, and in a quiet, unobtrusive way, did an immense amount of good. He was full of apostolic zeal, humble, somewhat shy, with a sound practical judgment. He was so pleasant in his dealings with boys that they were naturally attracted to him. He had a quaint humour all his own, and many are the witticisms and amusing phrases and situations that we shall remember and enjoy for many a year.

Old Boys sought him out whenever they came on a visit to the school as one who, they considered, was deeply interested in their lives. Whilst, warmly welcoming them he always made some pleasant or half-joking remark, enquiring if they were keeping up to their religious duties. He was completely devoted to them and gave them gladly his time and his talents.

He had a special *flair* for simple catechetical instructions, which were much appreciated both by boys and people. Converts especially found his simple, sympathetic sermons helpful and convincing.

The work, however, that most of us will remember best in this apostolic priest, is his success in promoting Vocations to the priesthood and religious life. There are many priests now doing good for the Church who received the first seeds of their vocation from well-chosen and sometimes half-joking remarks made during a game or a walk in the playground, from Father Poggio.

He seemed to be ever on the look-out for boys who would make good priests, and he cultivated them with his pleasant and kindly humorous manner. Like the sower going out to sow, he found good soil in the hearts of Lancashire boys, and he knew how to bring forth fruit thirty-, sixty-, and hundredfold. We know that God alone is the Author of Vocations, but He makes use of men to cultivate those tender plants until they reach the stage of maturity. Our Lord once said to Peter and his brother, Andrew: "Come after Me and I will make you fishers of men." It can be said with truth that Father Poggio was always "fishing" for priests.

Like his father Don Bosco, he found in the quiet word, in the half-joking remark, in the happy phrase, the way to a boy's heart, and so was able to start many on the road to the priesthood or the religious life. Father Poggio built no churches or schoolrooms, but he gave something more lasting: he gave the Church of God many priests who will continue God's work of Redemption when buildings may have been destroyed or crumbled away. If we are asked to suggest an epitaph for his grave, it would be: "*Da mihi sacerdotes, caetera tolle*" — Give me priests, take the rest. May the example of this good priest encourage and inspire us to follow his example and strive to cultivate many vocations.

Yet for this zealous priest a great trial was awaiting him. Those whom God loves He sometimes allows to follow Him along the Royal Road to Calvary. And God in His inscrutable designs chose Father Poggio to undergo perhaps the greatest of human trials, the gradual darkening of the mind. What distress at times it must have caused this active and zealous priest to find the lights going out one by one, to feel the darkness increasing and the night drawing deeper, until the final black-out enveloped everything. Cardinal Newman could pray "Lead, kindly light, amid the encircling gloom": with Father Poggio the process was being reversed. The light was fading and darkness was surrounding him and there seemed no hope. Milton, in his blindness, could say: "Doth God exact day labour, light denied?" and conclude "They also serve who only stand and wait." Father Poggio had to stand and wait for seven long years — seven years, when every hour was a day and every day a year.

Unable to say Mass or partake of the consolations of the Church or the Sacraments, except at rare intervals: separated from the Religious Family he loved so much, he died alone. Surely often he must have longed to ascend the altar steps and offer the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, but it was not to be.

May we, who knew him so well, we who loved his company and profited so much from his wonderful example — may we pray fervently when we remember the darkness that has been his for so long — let us pray frequently. And may he who has fought so manfully, now speedily find eternal rest.

Of your charity, pray also for this House and for

Yours fraternally in Christ,

THOMAS E. PAYNE, S.D.B., *Rector*.

Data for Necrology: Father JOHN POGGIO, of Acqui, in Liguria, Northern Italy, died at Chertsey, Surrey, England, in the 66th year of his age, 48th of profession, and 39th of priesthood