

# Brother Peter Swain SDB



Born: 20 November 1920  
Prahran, Victoria, Australia

Entered Eternal Life: 13 April 2007  
Engadine, New South Wales, Australia



Dear Confreres,

During the solemn Easter Octave 2007, the Australian Province held its Provincial Chapter. At the same time, one of the outstanding Salesian Brothers of this Province was preparing himself to close its human existence and to return to the Father in heaven.

**Brother Peter Swain SDB** entered eternal life on the morning of 13th April 2007, at the nursing home of the John Paul Retirement Village, at Heathcote, one of the works attached to the parish of St. John Bosco at Engadine (Sydney-Australia). Brother Peter Swain spent the last few years in retirement with the community of Engadine after his return from Rome in 2004.

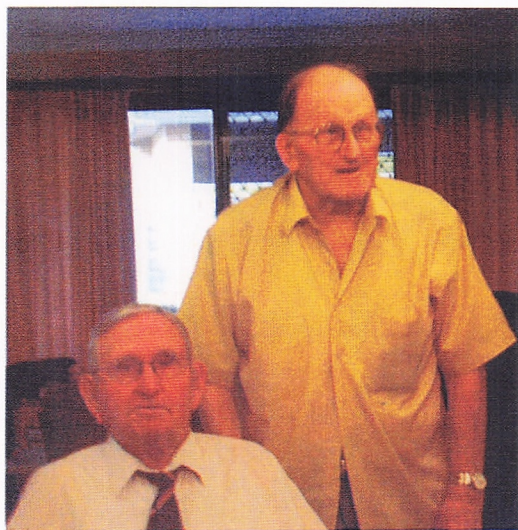
After a memorial Mass at Engadine, Bro Swain's body was taken to Melbourne for burial at the Salesian cemetery in the grounds of Salesian College Sunbury (Vic.) - the school where Brother had received his secondary education.

Brother Peter was 86 years old when he succumbed to the ravages of cancer. He was well aware that his days were numbered, as the doctors had warned him that the disease was spreading - all they could do was to delay the inevitable.

In the last couple of years Brother Peter had taken the trouble of writing down the salient aspects of his life-story. Many details of this mortuary letter and tribute to Brother Peter are taken from the account of his life written by Brother himself.

Peter's journey in this world began in Prahran (a suburb of Melbourne) on 20th November 1920. After a few years the family moved to Elwood (a bay-side suburb of Melbourne), and Peter attended the local State primary school. Peter wrote that he was brought up without religion. At the other end of the street lived another boy, a couple of years older than Peter; he attended the local Catholic school. The two met several times on their way to their respective schools. That boy was none other than the well known Salesian Brother and identity at Engadine and Boys' Town - Brother James Hamilton! *(Note: Bro. James passes away, aged 90 years, also in the same Nursing Home, a few weeks after Bro. Peter).*

Peter's father was killed in a railway accident in 1931: this must have shaken young Peter, who was sent to live with some relatives for about a year. Peter, remembering those days, admits that some people who knew him described him as "a bit of a villain" when he was young. So the year after his mother decided to send Peter to board at the Salesian School at Sunbury (Vic.). He arrived there on 2nd February 1932, and discovered that his friend Jim Hamilton had arrived at the same school the day before! Jim (being a few years older than Peter) had gone to Sunbury to join a small group of boys who were training to become Salesians - the "aspirants". Peter and Jim not only remained friends for life, but also became two of the finest Salesian Brothers of the Australian Province. In February this year, on the occasion of Brother Jim's 90th birthday, Peter insisted on having his photo taken with Bro Jim, conscious that this would have been one of the last occasions when the two were together.



At Sunbury Peter was invited to become a Catholic, and was baptized by Fr Patrick O'Grady on 26th April 1932 - in those days that was the Feast of Blessed John Bosco. He received his first communion on 21st June, the Feast of St Aloysius, and was confirmed by Archbishop Mannix in September 1934. In the meantime, in 1933, two more boys arrived at Sunbury to join the "aspirantate": Alan McDonald and Terry Jennings - both became Salesian priests (Alan is now a member of the Salesian community in Adelaide; while Terry died a few years ago). Father Bortolo



Fedrigotti invited Peter to join the group of aspirants. At this time at Sunbury there were some wonderful Salesians who had known and lived with Don Bosco himself. One such outstanding Salesian priest was Fr Patrick O'Grady, the Rector. Fr O'Grady, when he was a young Irish student, was invited to join the Salesians by Don Bosco himself. Peter Swain remembers being asked by Fr O'Grady to look after his office. This same Father O'Grady had the day and month (but NOT the year! ...) of his death predicted by Don Bosco. When Patrick took seriously ill in Turin, he was told by Don Bosco that he would die on his (Don Bosco's) birthday. So every year (on Don Bosco's birthday) Fr O'Grady would get ready to go to heaven! Peter remembered Fr O'Grady sharing this story. Fr O'Grady indeed died on Don Bosco's birthday: 16 August 1943 in California. Fr John Cerruti was also in the community: he had known Don Bosco when he was a boy. Fr Fedrigotti (another outstanding Salesian, and later the first Provincial of the Australian Province) took a special interest in Peter. Then there was a group of wonderful Salesian Brothers who ran the farm. Peter always remembered with real affection and gratitude the Salesians at Sunbury in those days: their hard but joyful life, their dedication to the boys, their active presence and sharing in various activities from sport to music to drama ... all contributed to make a lasting impression on Peter.

In November 1934 Jim Hamilton, Terry Jennings and Alan McDonald departed for England to make their Novitiate and become Salesians. Peter was still too young, and so continued his education at Sunbury to the Leaving Certificate, which in those days was the last year of secondary education. Peter then applied to go to the Novitiate. However, due to the fact that Peter's parents had been married outside the Church, he could not be accepted as a candidate for the priesthood. According to Peter's written account, Fr Dunne, who was then the Rector at Sunbury, wrote to several religious congregations, as well as to the diocesan seminary, to ask whether they would accept Peter. But all replies were in the negative. Father Dunne also wrote to the Rector Major of the Salesians to ask that Peter be accepted as a Brother. But the answer was again negative.

However in 1938, Father John Biloni who was on the Staff at Sunbury and would have known Peter very well, travelled to Italy to see his relatives, and went to Turin to see the Superior General and pleaded with him to allow Peter Swain to become a Brother. "This time success" wrote Peter in his account. The news was communicated by cablegram on 11th August 1938, and within a week Peter was on "SS Orama" on the way to London. The Novitiate in Beckford had already started. Peter got there three weeks late, but was accepted anyway. So in September 1938 Peter joined a group of 46 young men from England, Ireland and Australia in the Novitiate. Peter was "professed" as a Salesian Brother on 23rd September 1939 - just as the Second World War had been declared! ...



Brother Peter remained in England during the first years of the War, while he was studying for a degree at the University of London, as an "external" student, from the Salesian Houses of Beckford and Shrigley. By the middle of 1943, Father Ciantar, (who had taken over the administration of the Salesian works in Australia) managed to secure some berths on a merchant ship that was coming to Australia. So in October 1943, three young Australian Salesians (Bros. Peter Swain, Bill Naylor, Adrian Papworth) left from Glasgow on the "SS Menelaus", travelling across the Atlantic in a 50-ship convoy, with an escort of 10 corvettes! The convoy reached New York in 15 days without incident. At this point the "SS Menelaus" left the convoy and headed for the Panama Canal, and the Pacific Ocean, reaching Sydney a few days before Christmas. And the group then travelled by train to Melbourne, where they were made very welcome by relatives and Salesians for the Christmas celebrations.

Peter's memories of his time in England were very happy. He kept a strong link with the English Province and with the Salesians he had known during his training days. The present



Provincial of the English Province, Fr Mike Winstanley, in a letter of condolences to the Australian Provincial, acknowledged the “deep affection” that Brother Peter had retained for the UK and the Confreres of the English Province.

In January 1944 Brother Peter was assigned to the “Don Bosco Hostel” in Brunswick (Melbourne) to assist the boarders. This allowed him time during the day to continue his studies with the University of London by correspondence. In 1945 he graduated with a B.Sc. majoring in Geography and Geology. In 1946 Peter successfully completed a Diploma of Education under Professor G.S. Browne at the University of Melbourne. (Several years later, Brother Peter also completed a Bachelor of Education). In 1947, Father Ciantar, who had already expanded the Salesian presences from Sunbury to Brunswick (Melbourne) to Adelaide and to Glenorchy (Hobart), decided to open an “aspirantate” on a new property at Oakleigh (East of Melbourne),



donated by the Moroney family through the good graces of Archbishop Mannix. Brother Peter became a member of the foundation community of this new house. In his story Peter makes the comment “another pleasant experience was beginning”. Indeed!

Brother Peter’s association with the Oakleigh-Chadstone Salesian presences spans 50 years, from 1947 to 1996. These houses were at the centre of the formation and administration of the Salesian Province in Australia, and Peter was involved in a multiplicity of activities and ministries... It is almost impossible to list them all. From the early days of the Oakleigh house, Peter was involved in the apostolate of school education, as a classroom Teacher, Education Lecturer, Coordinator and Supervisor of Teacher Education, Headmaster, Sportsmaster, Inspector of schools, Chairman of Education Advisory Bodies... But while school education

was certainly his major field of ministry, at the same time Brother Peter was entrusted with other important responsibilities and activities, such as the National Director of the “Dominic Savio Club” (which at one stage had a membership of more than 5000 school children, and a monthly magazine written, edited, prepared and dispatched to all members by the Director; from 1955 to 1965); Coordinator and Provider (cook) of the Don Bosco summer camps at Dromana (Vic.) for about 20 years; Secretary of the Eucharistic Festival, held at Salesian College Sunbury (Vic.) every year (this attracted crowds of between 20,000 and 40,000 people ... from 1948 to 1973); member of the Provincial Council (the Executive Board of the Salesians in Australia); Secretary of the Provincial and of the Province for almost 25 years; Editor of the Salesian Bulletin and of the magazine “The Link”... And then there were those courses and seminars and meetings and gatherings ... all needing a capable Secretary and Organiser; and invariably Brother Peter got the call.

Many Salesians in the Australian Province have had some association with Brother Peter, and many would have been influenced by his teaching, by his friendship and by the example of his life. For years the houses of Oakleigh and Chadstone offered formation to aspirants and pre-novices, novices, post-novitate Brothers (with teacher-training and philosophy) and theology students right up to the priesthood. And through the Don Bosco Camps at Dromana came several vocations to the Salesian way of life - including the present





Provincial of the Australian Province, Fr Frank Moloney, who aptly described Brother Peter as “an outstanding example of the Salesian Brother as Don Bosco saw it: a man for all seasons, able to turn his mind and hand to everything and anything”. Similar sentiments were expressed by an Australian Salesian who has spent almost all his Salesian life in India. This is what he wrote to the Provincial at the news of Brother Peter’s death: “I have maintained a very dear personal relationship with Brother Peter from my first aspirantate days at Oakleigh in the early 50s, and would rate him among our great Australian Salesians. In his humble unassuming way he provided an inspiring witness of the heights which a Salesian Brother can attain in the Congregation”.



This year marks the Golden Jubilee of the foundation of Salesian College, Chadstone. Brother Peter was one of the first teachers on the Staff in 1957. “Chadstone is Peter Swain’s school: he was the prime mover to get full secondary registration for the College” - stated in a recent letter the Salesian Priest who was the Foundation Principal of the College in 1957. Salesian College Chadstone enjoyed the presence and ministry of Brother Peter for many years in various capacities, as teacher, sportsmaster, organiser of major excursions, Headmaster/Principal... He saw the College grow from a 2 classroom-70 students school to a multi-campus 800plus students complex. He has always been proud of his association with this College where he is still well remembered by the past students and parents, especially those who enjoyed the excursions, and sports carnivals, the cricket and football games, and Peter’s love and interest for his Carlton football team...

In the 70s for some ten years Brother Peter was also on the Staff of Christ College Chadstone, a Catholic Teacher Training College, attended by our own Salesian candidates and philosophy students. Here he lectured in education methodology and supervised students when they were sent out to various schools for their practical experience. His presence and experience were very much appreciated by Staff and students.

As the passing of time began to take its toll on Brother Peter’s energies, his responsibilities and activities were gradually diminished. At the same time, he remained active in the field of office administration, and in the organisation of the central archives of the Province. With his methodical and thorough approach, Brother Peter put in place a record-keeping system that is still of great value today in the newly-established Province Centre at Ascot Vale (Melbourne).

In 1996, at the age of 76, Brother Peter was invited to go to Rome, at the Headquarters of the Salesians (commonly known in Salesian circles as the “Pisana”), to take up the delicate and important post of Secretary of the Asia-Pacific Region for the Salesians, then under the leadership of Fr Joaquim D’Souza - this region included countries such as India, Thailand, China/Taiwan, the Philippines, Vietnam, Korea, Japan, Indonesia, East Timor, Australia, the Pacific Islands... Brother Peter took to his new job as “fish to water”: he enjoyed being at the centre of the world-wide congregation, and meeting so many Salesians, from the highest positions of responsibility to the many individuals and groups that regularly call through this centre. And the experience of living in Rome was something he loved, and remained firmly impressed in his mind to the very end. Brother Peter described his time in Rome as “amongst the happiest years of my Salesian life; and I would willingly have stayed there had ill health not struck me in 2004”.





At the beginning of 2004, Brother Peter (by now already 83 years old and in a state of physical decline) returned to Australia. Among his personal documents there are several messages given or sent to him by various people at the “Pisana”: they all expressed their deep appreciation for Brother Peter’s presence. The following, among others, sums up the feelings of many others: “Many thanks for your close cooperation, for the gift of your presence in the community, and for helping to foster the family spirit in this big house” (Fr Vaclav Klement, Regional Superior). In the words of Fr Mazzali (Economer General), Brother Peter “was an excellent Salesian, a kind and considerate man, much loved by everyone, deeply human and authentically religious”.

The present Superior General of the Salesians, Fr Chavez who lived in the same house with Brother Peter in Rome, sent the following message of sympathy to the Provincial, Fr Moloney: “All has come to a blessed ending. May the Lord fill him with joy and life forever, because he served God so generously in the Province of Australia and in the Congregation. I have wonderful memories of his years in Rome.”

And in a subsequent message, Fr Chavez added: “In Brother Peter I admired the great human qualities, and the high level of spiritual life so well assimilated in his original culture”.

Those words and sentiments were echoed by many Salesians who knew him while at the “Pisana” in Rome. In a message to Fr Provincial, Fr Joaquim D’Souza offered the following reflection about Brother Peter: “He was an outstanding Secretary: diligent, attentive, foreseeing. He was very much a community man, regular at prayer and at meals, available and helpful to Confreres. I learned a lot from his quiet and simple ways, from his deep religious spirit and the holiness of his life”.

Brother Peter joined the Salesian community at Engadine (Sydney) in May 2004: for him this was also an opportunity to be somewhat closer to his only sister Patricia and her family. But also in retirement his days were filled with various interests and activities: from translating into English the life-stories of great Salesian Brothers, to keeping in contact through e-mails with hundreds of Salesians all over the world, to helping out in the community with small chores, to reading up all about cricket and Aussie rules and sharing this with the community... His mind was always active, even while his body was gradually “shutting down” due to the spread of cancer. During the last week of his life, the Rector would call in to see him every evening and give him a brief report on the Provincial Chapter, reassuring him of the prayers of the Confreres. He would nod to acknowledge that he understood, and whisper a word of thanks.

To conclude I would like to highlight some of the outstanding qualities and contributions of Peter, as a Salesian Brother. Those who have known Brother Peter will remember him:

- 1 For his love of Don Bosco and all things Salesian. His conversation, his activities, his interests, his contacts ... were Salesian through and through.
- 2 For his regular and orderly way of life: in this he was in essence an excellent Secretary. He served in this capacity with great efficiency for many years under five Provincials in Australia, and for another eight years in Rome under two Regional Superiors.
- 3 For his religious obedience - no doubt something he had seen and learned from his



association with the great Salesians in Australia and in England during his formation years. Brother Peter always insisted on acknowledging and respecting the role of his Superiors, even when they had been his pupils!

- 4 For his keen sporting interests: he himself had been a very good cricketer and football player (Aussie rules). He was buried with the football tie of the last premiership won by his beloved Carlton Football Club. Sport was always a very good point of contact with the young people he taught and associated with in his many and diverse ministries.
- 5 For his precise and detailed organisation of major events and excursions - some have been mentioned above: camps, geography trips, conferences and seminars...
- 6 For his prompt and regular communication and contacts with friends and people he knew in many parts of the world: Brother Peter never left letters and messages unanswered...



The Salesian community at Engadine would like to acknowledge with gratitude the love, care and support offered to Brother Peter by various parishioners and by the Staff and residents of John Paul Village. A word of gratitude goes to Brother Peter's family, especially to his sister Patricia (for her love and generosity towards Peter), to his niece Annette with husband Doctor John Kramer, to his nephew Peter Moses and wife Gail, and their families. We now extend condolences for the loss of Patricia (their mother and grandmother), who joined Peter in heaven only a few weeks after him!

Please continue to remember Brother Peter Swain in your prayers, and include also the intentions of this community and of the Australian Province: may the work and mission of Don Bosco continue to attract young people of the calibre of Brother Peter to serve the young in Australia and the Pacific.

Fr Frank Bertagnolli SDB  
(Rector)



### **BROTHER PETER SWAIN SDB**

Born  
First Profession  
Final Profession  
Entered eternal life

20/11/1920 in Melbourne, Australia  
23/09/1939 at Beckford, England  
15/08/1945 at Sunbury, Australia  
13/04/2007 in Sydney, Australia



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