

FATHER MICHAEL SWAN

*"And if there's going to be a life hereafter
And somehow I feel sure there's going to be;
I will ask my Lord to let me make my heaven
In that dear land across the Irish sea."*

So runs a verse from the popular Irish song, "Danny Boy". It seemed that once Fr. Michael Swan realized that the meeting with his Lord was imminent, he considered that a little co-operation of his own might prove helpful. He wanted to assist the Lord by initiating some of the arrangements himself. Thus it was that, after 35 years in Australia ('48 - '83), and because his health was failing, he requested to be allowed to return to Ireland. He left this Province in August '83 and after little more than twelve months went to his Maker on 31 October '84 at the age of 82.

It all began on 15 February at Ratoath, Co. Meath, when Michael Swan was born into a family that was typically Catholic and Irish, with two members of the family becoming religious (Sr. Christina Swan has worked for many years as a Salesian Sister here in Australia) and three of the boys, including Michael, joining the I.R.A.!

However, it had always been Michael's desire to become a priest. The troubles in Ireland hindered his pursuit of the life to which he felt called. The opportunity came when he was 27 years of age. He chose the Salesian Congregation and its youth apostolate as his field of ministry.

Michael was an aspirant at Cowley from 1927 to 1930 and made his novitiate there in 1930-31 with Father James Simonetti as his novice master. He took his first vows on 12 September 1931 and remained at Cowley for philosophical studies. He did his practical training at Shrigley (1933-34) and Pallaskenry, Ireland (1934-36). He studied theology at Blaisdon (1936-40) and was ordained at Blaisdon on 21 July 1940.

Father Michael was assistant at Beckford (1940-41), Socius to the novices at Ballinakill (1941-43) and assistant at Pallaskenry (1943-48).

He came to Australia in 1948. Our houses and schools in Oakleigh (Vic) and Brooklyn Park (S.A.) benefited from his teaching and administration and ministry as confessor. For six years he was Rector at the Don Bosco Boys' Club and Hostel at Brunswick. The final fifteen years saw him at Salesian College, "Rupertswood" Sunbury.

With a dedication to duty that was an inspiration to all who lived with him, Fr. Swan was always faithfully at his post, available to anyone who wanted to make his peace with God in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. It was as an instrument of the peace and forgiveness of God that Fr. Swan devoted himself with generosity and a ready availability to the Salesians and the students of the "Rupertswood" community. This community, privileged to have been able to count among its members this holy man, shares with the Australian and Irish provinces not so much a sadness at his death, but a joy and triumph at his entry into eternal life.

Michael Swan was a reserved and retiring man, unassuming and humble, yet with a ready wit, a twinkle in his eye, a cheery smile for all he met and a retentive memory that recalled with ease and in detail his early years in Australia. As a priest he was fully aware of the importance of preaching the word of God. One confrere wrote:

Those who had the privilege of listening to one of his sermons know what real gems they were. It was quite evident that he had prepared them seriously and prayerfully. He always seemed to be able to hold the attention of both adult and the young person.

His love for the Eucharist saw him celebrate Mass with faithful regularity and deep piety. It was the source of his strength and the mainstay of his life. His devotion to the Mother of God was tender and loving and the beads were never far from his hands.

True to his calling as a son of Don Bosco, it is as an apostle of the confessional that Fr. Swan will be best remembered by many thousands of students and his Salesian confreres.

We express our appreciation to the Salesians of the Irish Province for the kindness and tender care which they gave Fr. Swan from the time of his return to Ireland, throughout his stay at Milford House, and whilst he was at the private nursing hospital in Bray, Co. Wicklow. A word of particular appreciation goes to the Salesian community at Crumlin. Its Rector Fr. Vincent Diffley wrote:

"During his sickness Fr. Swan endeared himself to the community here and especially to the hospital staff. They had a very high regard for him. One of the doctors described him as a 'gentle, kindly man who was most co-operative and never demanding'. The matron told me the staff loved him. I, personally know he had a great love for his adopted Australia."

Fr. Michael Swan's mortal remains were laid to rest at Ballinakill, Ireland, on Friday November 2nd. Fr. Jeremiah Breen, representing our Province was the main celebrant and preached the homily. Present were twenty concelebrating priests, novices, Salesian sisters and other confreres.

A Mass to honour the memory of Fr. Swan was celebrated at Sunbury on Wednesday, November 7th, exactly a week after his death. The large number of confreres, Salesian Sisters — including Sister Christina, Fr. Swan's own sister — and students present paid eloquent testimony to a priest who was dear to the hearts of all. In his homily, Fr. Bertagnolli, the Provincial, attested to the qualities and values through which Fr. Swan has left us a lasting example:

- devotion to duty, at the cost of personal sacrifice;
- an unassuming manner in dealing with people;
- great respect for others, as children of God and fellow Christians;
- a deep love for the Mass, for the Sacrament of Confession;
- a desire to do God's will as manifested also in the wishes of one's superiors.

We, the members of the Sunbury Salesian Community and indeed all members of this Province, thank God for the life of Fr. Swan which has enriched our lives and the lives of thousands of young people, and we pray for the repose of his soul.

The "Rupertswood" Community,
Sunbury.