

# Br Laurence Sweeney SDB



4.10.1927 - 12. 12. 2002



Don Bosco Hostel & Youth Centre  
715 Sydney Road  
Brunswick

31/12/02

Dear Confreres,

Brother Laurie Sweeney died gently at 2 pm on Thursday afternoon, December 12, 2002, at Caritas Christi Hospice, St Vincent's hospital, Fitzroy, in the company of his sister Aileen, of Fr Provincial and of three other Salesian confreres.

In July 2002 Laurie was diagnosed as having an inoperable pancreatic cancer and was advised of a life expectancy of six to twelve months.

"How should a good religious take this?" was his response to a confrere only minutes after he was given the news by the doctor. He quickly accepted the news in a spirit of faith. He declined chemotherapy or radiation treatment, and for the next few months continued to live as normal a life as possible at home, with his usual tenacity and good humour. He bore his growing weakness without complaint or self-pity, he continued to enliven the community table with his repartee, and, as far as possible, he maintained his usual interests in the youth centre and hostel, and in the ROTA organization (Religious of the Third Age), of which he was a member.

At the beginning of October his sister Aileen came from London to be with him, and spent five weeks caring for him.

With the excellent home-care assistance of the Fitzroy Citymission palliative care nursing staff, Laurie was able to live at Don Bosco Brunswick until three weeks before his death. He was admitted to Caritas Christi Hospice on November 18 and there received excellent attention. His sister Aileen returned from London six days before his death, and lived at the hospital with him.

The Brunswick Salesian community gathered at Laurie's bedside on Monday evening, December 9, feast of the Immaculate Conception, for conviviality and prayer, with Laurie leading two decades of the rosary. That evening was to be Laurie's last period of consciousness, and it was one of great joviality, with Laurie singing and reciting poetry.

Throughout his illness Laurie had always expressed gratitude for the smallest services rendered, and he continued so to the end. His last words to his confreres on December 9, perhaps not surprisingly, were: "Thank you, everyone, for everything."



Laurence Anthony Sweeney was born in Sandymount, Dublin, Ireland, on October 4, 1927, the third son and fourth of the five children of Hugh and Ada Sweeney. Named after Dublin's patron, St Laurence O'Toole, he was baptised the same day at Star of the Sea parish church, Sandymount.

Laurie received his primary education at Westland Row School Dublin, and his brief secondary education at the Christian Brothers College, Dublin.

Laurie spoke frequently and with affection of his Sandymount boyhood, his warm, happy, balanced family life and his escapades with friends.

He left school early, working for a time in a factory.

In 1943 the Sweeney family moved to England, where employment opportunities were greater than those in Ireland. In England Laurie worked first as a tractor driver and then on an air-transport ferry.

In December 1945 Laurie was conscripted into the British Royal Air Force, and was discharged in April 1948, having qualified as a gymnastic and parachute instructor and having attained the rank of corporal. His Physical Training Instructor's Certificate certified his



instruction and examination in "leadership, gymnastics, indoor and outdoor games, swimming, boxing, theory and sports organization."

W. C. Kilkenny OBE, Officer Commanding of the Parachute Training Wing, No 1 Parachute and Glider Training School, Royal Air Force, Upper Heyford, Oxon, wrote in his reference for 3075807 Cpl. Sweeney:

*The above named N.C.O. has been a parachuting instructor since 15th May 1947. He has been a very good instructor and his conduct and discipline have always been exemplary. He has personally made 64 parachute descents and instructed a considerable number of soldiers in parachuting technique.*

*He has a cheerful personality and is an excellent worker. He is anxious to take a degree in agricultural work. He has had some experience, he has attended a short course and he has attempted to improve his knowledge as far as his duties allowed.*

*I can strongly recommend him as a very good worker, a good influence and a capable young man.*

## COOGEE

In 1948 Laurie's mother Ada came to Australia to be with her sick brother, Father Laurence McQuestion, a member of the Rockhampton diocesan clergy. Shortly thereafter the entire Sweeney family followed Ada to Australia, their ship berthing on Laurie's twenty-first birthday, October 4, 1948.

The family soon settled in Sydney, at the beachside suburb of Coogee, and, with other family members, Laurie was soon actively involved in parish social life, including singing and acting in theatrical productions. He was elected president of the parish youth group.

During this time Laurie mastered the craft of photography, and earned his living as a professional photographer.

A member of the Coogee parish youth group during that time, Pauline Vermaelen, recalls:

*Laurie was President of the CYO (Catholic Youth Organisation) at Coogee, NSW, in the early 1950s. He took his position seriously and was always concerned for the spiritual and moral welfare of the group.*

*A keen gymnast and table tennis player, he encouraged the members to form several teams of which he was coach. Many healthy minds and bodies were developed under his guidance.*

*He was also quite deft on the dance floor and one year was encouraged to partner a debutante at the Parish Ball.*

*Laurie was also a keen photographer, and his camera accompanied him on his many outings with the CYO. St Brigid's Coogee can be thankful for the historical records of the club through Laurie's photographic prowess. He was always in demand as wedding photographer when a CYO member married. He developed and printed his own work in a small room at the back of his parents' café in Coogee.*

*Although he had a cheeky nature, he also had a profound and child-like faith in God. It was no surprise when he left the CYO to enter religious life, a life he dedicated to God for just on fifty years.*

## OAKLEIGH

At the age of twenty-three Laurie applied to join the Salesian Society.

His fellow novice Father Leo Heriot SDB recalls:

*On May 24th 1951 we came into the dining room in the back room of the Moroney residence [Oakleigh]. It was a wet cold day, and in the dining room, as was his custom, Fr. B. M. [Fedrigotti] was there with his Mahomedan cap on his head and his big overcoat, and sitting beside him was a little Irishman, one Laurie Sweeney. Father B.M. announced the arrival of a new aspirant from Coogee, in NSW. At that time he was (almost) twenty-four years of age, and he was going to join the aspirantate. My first impression was of a chirpy little bow-legged Irishman, who knew what he was about. Evidently one of the priests had advised him that the Salesian life was for him. He settled*





into life on Moroney's Hill, and made himself at home very quickly. Being such an outgoing and bubbly character, we all soon learned a lot about him. He settled into the community and adjusted himself well in his new place. He was helping Brother John [Ledda] in the kitchen and helping brother [Robert] Angus in the various works on the farm. He carried on his photography and helped in the shopping for the community. We would see him going down to Oakleigh in the jinker with Dominic Melito. Dominic used to drive the horse Floss through the streets to do the shopping. It is related that Dominic used to yell at Floss "You bloody-de-bugger", and Dominic would be corrected gently by Laurie: "You should not swear in public". One of his great characteristics was the adjustment that Laurie was able to make in the various circumstances and situations in which he found himself.

## **RUPERTSWOOD**

In January 1952, together with Leo Heriot and Norman Ford, Laurie began his novitiate year at Rupertswood, Sunbury.

Father Heriot remembers:

*On the 22nd January 1952 we began our novitiate, and we took over from Pat Laws and Bill Fleming. Pat Laws advised us to do the novitiate well, and Bill Fleming said: "This is the broom room and here are the brooms and hermons [floor polishers] that you will become acquainted with."*

The first few days of the retreat were preached by Father Cornell, because in those days ten days of retreat were prescribed for novices. The retreat for the confreres began on the Sunday evening and was preached by Father Ciantar. Father Ciantar impressed us with his practicality in Salesian life. It was in one of his talks on the third or fourth day that Father Ciantar expressed a thought that struck Laurie. It was in one of the chapters after the death of Don Bosco that one of the confreres made the statement "Our Salesian system must turn to the elite of our society and look after those who are 'well-to-do'". It was at that moment that Bishop Cagliero, later on Cardinal Cagliero, stood up and said..."No! No! The day we start to look to the elite, the Congregation has run its course." This thought impressed Laurie very much... In the novitiate Laurie was put in charge of the linen room, and he was immensely responsible for what he did... He showed special interest in .. the poor kid who could not look after himself, ... the really deprived kid...



Photography was high on the agenda of Laurie, and in the novitiate Laurie had set up his darkroom, and continued to do his photography work. His great work was to photograph the statue of Mary Help of Christians in the chapel, and for three days Father Power was helping Laurie get the best shot of the statue. The little Irishman on top and the holy novice master standing beneath the ladder, holding up the bow-legged Irishman on top. The first photos did not turn out so well, so the two Irishmen had to repeat the process. Laurie was something of a perfectionist in the jobs he did. Events in the school were photographed by Laurie, and he was not satisfied with just a photo; it had to be sharp. Also he was a gymnast, and in the novitiate he would often tell us about his work in the airforce as a parachute instructor, and he was graphic about the description of his fall from on high in a 'candle', and how he got up and carried on amid his discomfort. ["I was the nineteenth man out of twenty out of the door and I was the first to hit the ground"]. As we walked down the drive each day, able almost to name each stone, Laurie would talk about the book he read, and he talked about "The Way of Divine Love" by Sister Josepha Menendez. He was taken up with this book and it impressed him very much, especially the revelations that she received about religious life. What Laurie read remained with him and he was able to discuss it and to avoid the extravagance that could come from these personal revelations... He was always enthusiastic about his vocation. He was very much the Salesian brother, he was always aware of his personal potential, and made the most of what he had to do...



## BOYS' TOWN ENGADINE

Laurie made his first profession on the feast of St John Bosco, January 31 1953. That same day he left Rupertswood, with Father Joseph Ciantar and Father John Cerutti, for Sydney, to work at Boys' Town in Engadine. He was to be a pioneer member of the Salesian community and work in Engadine, together with Fathers Ciantar, Cerutti, Colussi, Giorgio, Scanagatta and Lowe.

In a recent article (August 2001) in the Australian provincial newsletter, *Link*, Laurie wrote of his beginning at Boys' Town:

*Father Ciantar, Father Cerutti and I departed for Boys' Town, NSW, on the same afternoon [January 31], and stopped overnight at Albury with Father Ciantar's friends. Apart from one incident where I, a learner driver, was forced off the road by an oncoming car, we arrived at Engadine late the following day in good spirits. (..After the incident, Father Ciantar kept me in the driver's seat.)*

We Salesians were all new to the job at Boys' Town. Father Ciantar had been in Boys' Town during the previous year with Father Dunlea and the De La Salle Brothers, but we were now beginning the first Salesian community at Boys' Town. On our arrival at Boys' Town we were greeted by a little tough guy as we got out of the car: "We are going to run youse out of here." My reply was, "You and what army?"

(Laurie in later years would recount, to the amusement of listeners, that he was known at Boys' Town as "Peanut" – because he was small and tough. Fellow Boys' Town Salesian brother James Hamilton recalls Laurie as 'a good disciplinarian, a good religious and a very good gymnast'.)

It is perhaps difficult now for younger Salesians to imagine the conditions under which the early Salesians laboured. A reading of Father Ted Cooper's recent history of the province, *Grateful Heirs*, will assist. Suffice to say here that Boys' Town was a tough assignment in the early Salesian years there, and one of the most difficult of the many daily tasks at Boys' Town was the supervision of the boys' dining room. The young Brother Laurie Sweeney took over the dining room in his first year, and stayed there throughout his time at Boys' Town. That achievement alone would merit the title later accorded him, no doubt partly in jest but not without significance, the title of 'legend'.

In the *Link* article quoted above, and which illustrates Laurie's adaptability and resourcefulness, he recalled:

*In the first year, 1953, the task of assisting the boys' dining room was shared among the various Salesians. But after some time I was asked to be the dining room coordinator for one week. The week grew into many years.*

I had to invent a way of giving the Salesians time in their dining room before I allowed the boys to explode onto the playground. So I invented the champion peel competition.

*Most days we had a variety of fruits. The idea was to see who could cut the longest peel from a fruit, using a knife or whatever. The boys would bring their fruit peel carefully up to me. I would be standing up on a chair, and dangle the peels to see which was the longest.*

There were four House teams at Boys' Town: Bosco, Savio, Rua and Magone. The House that the winner of the competition belonged to was the first to leave the dining room. The boy who won was a hero while the one who bumped the hopeful winner and broke his peel took his life in his hands, since there were lots of knives available, even razor blades (though there weren't supposed to be any). One of the greatest victories was that of the champion who produced the longest grape peel.

The Salesians in their dining room always approved of these contests, because it gave them time to digest their food before assisting in the playground.

Brother Laurie's assignment at Boys' Town would not have been an easy one, and yet in later life he was able to see some of the fruits of his time there. In his September 2001 *Link* article he was to reminisce:

*The lads could be best described as having disturbed backgrounds. A typical example: a lad I was hard on gave me lots*





*of trouble. I even felt guilty, but in later years he returned, now married, to Boys' Town on a visit. I asked him if he hated me. He replied: "Not at all. Most of my so-called mates are now in jail. I am one of the few still doing well, and I am happy to have you to thank for it."*

Another case of a lad who was wild. A Salesian could not take any more from him and marched him to the Rector's office and declared: "Either he goes or I go." After calming him down, the Rector reminded the Salesian that this boy had nowhere to go and we were his last hope, and it was our privilege to keep him. "So, Father, the boy must stay."

I had a similar experience with such a boy. I wanted him kicked out, but the Rector said no. Later in life, that boy heard of my stroke, and requested my Superior to let me come to his home and be rehabilitated, as he was into physiotherapy. I went to his home and he did some good for me.

## **OAKLEIGH**

In 1965 Brother Laurie received an obedience to Archbishop Mannix Missionary College, Moroney's Hill, Oakleigh. He continued in his role as photographic chronicler of the province, established a printing press there and for many years printed the Salesian Bulletin and other Salesian publications.

But it was in his role as director of the Boys Club that Brother Laurie flourished.

Father Provincial recounted in his panegyric:

*The Don Bosco Boys club had been founded at Oakleigh in 1963 to provide apostolic experiences as part of the initial formation program during the novitiate and post-novitiate. With the departure of Fr Pat Laws from the scene at the end of 1965, Laurie found himself in charge. His first circular written in February 1966 outlined the week's program, which included gymnastics with Br Peter Kerin and Br Laurie Sweeney, choir with Fr Kraan and Mr Mayo, judo with Bill Visser and Jack Harris, trampoline with Ken Ryan and Peter Bourke, and football with Br Terry Cooper. The attendance fee per session was ten cents, in the new decimal currency.*

Over the next ten years, Laurie was the driving force behind a campaign of fundraising, building and expansion that saw the addition of many new indoor and outdoor facilities. Along the way, he met many obstacles, but he was not easily deterred, and he found some good allies and helpers among his fellow Salesians, the instructors, and parents of children who came to the Boys' Club. He was also adept at enlisting and consolidating a broad base of support for the Boys Club in the local community. The Boys Club concert and prize-giving night became an annual fixture, with well known figures such as the local mayor and the local member of parliament in attendance.

Size alone, large numbers of boys and instructors, national trampolining titles and state titles in gymnastics, judo and karate, and tuition in electronics, photography and guitar music do not tell the full story. Perhaps even more importantly,

the Don Bosco Boys Club catered for many low-income families in the area, and along with all its other offerings, it included catechetics and religious instruction for Catholic students at local state schools. Laurie was instrumental in pioneering a model for the youth centre as an integral part of Salesian work in Australia, and from Oakleigh it spread first to Brunswick and then to St Marys.

On October 13 1981, just after his fifty-fourth birthday, Brother Laurie suffered a serious stroke, which was to leave him partially paralysed, down the left side of his body, for the rest of his life. What a blow it must have been to a relatively young and a very strong, fit and active man. Talking in later years about the weeks and months just after his stroke, Laurie admitted to a feeling of depression. But that feeling, very understandable, was certainly very temporary. His extraordinary tenacity soon resurfaced, and he tackled his rehabilitation with inspirational courage.

## **BRUNSWICK**

In 1983 Brother Laurie transferred to the Don Bosco Youth





Centre and Hostel at Brunswick as an assistant.

Despite his physical disability (which included being totally blind in one eye, the result of an accident when building at Oakleigh years before), for many years he continued to play competitive table tennis – with success – and to coach trampolinists and table tennis players. Shortly after his death, a young adult still actively assisting at the Youth Centre observed of Brother Laurie: "In trampolining and table tennis he taught me all I know."

Indeed, as recently as 2002 Brother Laurie would occasionally coach children in backflips on the trampoline. To observe him instructing was a lesson in itself. He was an excellent instructor.

Laurie kept himself busy throughout all his years at Brunswick. Until his final illness he continued to be a regular presence in the Youth Centre, he maintained his interest in the hostel youth, swam several times a week, visited families in the area, was an active member of ROTA, nurtured a monthly Rosary group, was a keen film-goer, maintained his enthusiasm for photography, and, a devoted radio news listener, kept the community informed.

Laurie was always a most cheerful and positive presence in his Salesian community. Rather than embittering him, his physical disabilities and the daily crosses they bestowed on upon him seemed to purify him. In his religious practices Laurie was exemplary. His devotion to the rosary was obvious and real. His devotion to Our Lady Help of Christians was a practical one.

Laurie was a never-ending source of good-humoured entertainment at the dining table. He maintained that a rector once advised him that it was better to talk at the table than to be silent, and he certainly practised the injunction. Some of his sayings, often repeated, lost nothing in the repetition. He was taught in the RAF, he said, that "if you shout long enough and loud enough, you'll get what you want." He was a Fulton Sheen devotee, and learned from him, among other things, that "you don't have to wait till you're old to be a grump; you have to be practising all your life." He was fond of quoting another Salesian, "and I won't tell you who it is: If you can't say anything good about another Salesian, don't say anything at all." Laurie practised that good advice. An essentially humble man, Laurie's disarming confidence in the omniscience of other confreres expressed itself in a multitude of questions.

Laurie may be fairly described as a pioneer member of the province. His work at Boys' Town and at Oakleigh in particular earn him that appellation. The province owes him a debt of gratitude, in addition, for an excellent photographic record of persons, places and events, for the two films of the province he made, and for many years of work at the printing press.

The Salesian community at Brunswick is very grateful to Laurie's sister Aileen, who cared for him with such loving attention during her stay with Laurie in his final weeks.

Laurie has gone to Our Lord whom he loved with devotion in the Eucharist and to his Blessed Mother, for whom his love was real and strong. He has gone to his family, all of whom predeceased him except his sister Aileen.

We commend our brother to the prayers of our fellow members of the province. Brother Laurie Sweeney, sometimes described as a legend, and one who gave unique meaning to the words 'irrepressible' and 'tenacious', was, as we are, very human, and he would be very grateful in death for our prayers, as he willingly requested them in his final illness. May he in his turn intercede to the good Lord for us and for all those young people entrusted to our care.

Brendan Murphy SDB  
Rector  
Brunswick.







#### Dates for the Necrology.

Born: 4th October 1927, Sandymount, Republic of Ireland

First Profession: 31 January 1953, Sunbury, Victoria

Final Profession: 31 January 1959, Sunbury, Victoria

Entered Eternal Life: 12 December 2002, Melbourne, Victoria.