



Salesians of St. John Bosco



Salesian House,
Surrey Lane,
Battersea,
London SW11 3PB

February 1987

Dear Confrères

About 3 a.m. on the morning of Saturday, 17th January

FATHER FRANCIS THOBURN, S.D.B.

died peacefully, after a brief illness, at the Salesian House, Battersea, London.

Francis was born in Loughborough, Leicestershire on the 9th February, 1903 and baptised in St. Mary's church, Loughborough. Francis' family later moved to Manchester and then to Leiston in East Suffolk. There was no Catholic church in Leiston at that time so Francis' father offered the use of the family house for Sunday Mass and a priest came from nearby Aldeburgh to celebrate Mass for the small local congregation. A permanent chapel was built in Leiston in 1919. There was no Catholic school near Leiston so Francis' father, being particularly anxious to give Francis a good Catholic education, arranged for him to be enrolled as a boarder at the Salesian College, Battersea. Francis started at the College in October 1915. About two years later Francis told his parents that he would like to become a Salesian and, if possible, to work on the missions. In 1918 he was accepted as an aspirant and in 1919 he started his novitiate year at Burwash, Sussex. During that year Francis' mother died and he left the novitiate for a while, but he was eventually professed as a Salesian in October 1920.

Francis then combined his years of studying for the priesthood with the practical experience of Salesian life at the schools of Farnborough from 1920-26, at Battersea from 1926-29 and Bolton from 1930-33. On the feast of the Assumption 1933 Francis was ordained a priest by Archbishop Amigo in St. George's Cathedral, Southwark, London. Father Thomas McKenna was also ordained at the same ceremony.

After ordination Father Francis was asked to go to the Salesian Mother-house in Turin to edit the English edition of the Salesian Bulletin. The following year he returned to Farnborough as a teacher, and then, from 1937-46 as the Parish priest at Farnborough. In 1948 he became the priest in charge of the Fleet parish and from 1949-53 he was the Parish priest at St. Ives, Guernsey. In 1953 Father was asked to edit the Catholic Documents publication, which was then being printed by the Salesian Press for the Apostolic Delegate, Cardinal Godfrey.

Father Francis, as a young Salesian, had often expressed the wish to work on the missions but he had been advised against undertaking this form of apostolate as his health sometimes gave cause for concern. However, Father went some way towards fulfilling his missionary zeal when, in 1958, he was asked to take charge of the Salesian Missions Office at Battersea. He continued to carry out that task until 1984 and he was dealing with a constant flow of correspondence from many Salesian missionaries around the world. The Archbishop of Shillong wrote recently . . . "He has been a great friend and helper of us missionaries. May God grant him the reward of the just and faithful servant."

During this time Father was the chaplain for the Battersea branch of the Knights of St. Columba. The Battersea branch was erected at Battersea Town Hall in 1958 and Father was the chaplain until his death. The "Southwark Knight Newsletter" reporting on his death said . . . "During his priestly life he had been chaplain to seven KSC Councils as well as Deputy Provincial chaplain to the Southwark province for many years. His knowledge of the Order, its personalities, its strengths and weaknesses, its rules and constitutions, were outstanding. This knowledge made him a great source of inspiration to the many officers who sought his guidance and to all who attended his retreats and days of recollection". He was for many years the chaplain of the local Legion of Mary group. He was also the Clerk to the Governors of the Salesian College from 1967 until his death.

Father Francis was a priest of deep faith and great goodness of heart, with a gift of making many friends. That he had carried out during his life a far-flung apostolate of goodness and kindness has been very strikingly brought home to us since his death by the number of letters and other tributes to his memory which we have received.

The remains of Father Francis Thoburn were received into the College chapel on the evening of Thursday, 22nd January, when Holy Mass was celebrated and the Office of the Dead was recited. On Friday, 23rd January, the body was transferred to the Sacred Heart church where Concelebrated Requiem Mass was offered by Father Provincial and many Salesian and Diocesan clergy, and many of Father's relatives and friends. The burial later took place at the Salesian plot in Morden cemetery.

May God, our Father through the intercession of Mary, Help of Christians, quickly grant him the reward of those who die in the Lord.

Please pray for Father Francis and for the confrères in this community.

Yours sincerely in Don Bosco,
Bernard Higgins, S.D.B. (Rector)

Data for the Necrology: Fr. Francis Thoburn born in Loughborough, England, on the 9th February, 1903, died in London on the 17th January, 1987, at the age of 83 years after 66 years of Religious profession and in the 53rd year of priesthood.

R.I.P.