

Br. Joseph V. Tortorici, SDB 

March 27, 1936 – February 10, 2020



Salesian of  
Don Bosco



June 24, 2020

Brother Joseph Vincent Tortorici,  
Salesian of Don Bosco

Dear Confreres,

Br. Joseph V. Tortorici, SDB, died early in the morning on Monday, February 10, 2020, at St. Philip the Apostle Residence at Mary Help of Christians Center in Tampa, Florida. He had been in hospice care for a few days, suffering from pancreatic cancer. He was 83 years old and had been a professed Salesian coadjutor brother for more than 62 years. He was a good and humble man, also a character, who looked at the bright side of life. He often said: "I'm in good shape for the shape I'm in!"

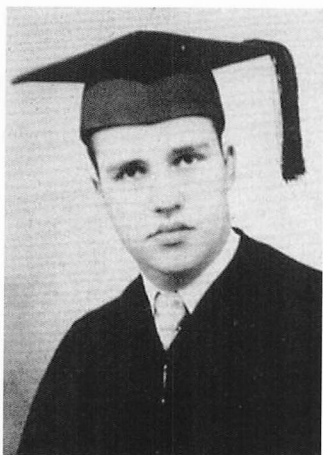
Joseph Tortorici was born in Manhattan, New York, on March 27, 1936, the son of Francesco and Francesca Neri Tortorici who immigrated to the United States from Sicily, Italy. He was baptized at Our Lady of Peace Church in Manhattan on January 24, 1937, and confirmed there ten years later. His father worked for the city parks department;

his mother was a housewife. Joe was the fourth of five children, all boys; one of his four brothers died early. Some of his fondest childhood memories included picnics and visits to Coney Island with the family (and the rides!).



**Br. Joe's mother**

After his parents' deaths, Joe lived with relatives in Scranton, Pennsylvania. He attended Minooka



High School Senior  
Yearbook, 1955

Grade School (1948-1951) then graduated from South Scranton Catholic High School on June 12, 1955. Though Joe had very poor eyesight, he had great “ear” sight and a natural talent for music. In his high school yearbook he was mentioned as the “most accomplished musician at S.C.” and nicknamed “Mel” for being a loyal fan of the New York Yankees and their play-by-play announcer/sportscaster, Mel Allen. He

considered being a musician and also thought about the priesthood.

Joe was a person of goodness and kindness, without guile or duplicity.

*At that time the disciples approached Jesus and said, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” He called a child over, placed it in their midst, and said, “Amen, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever receives one child such as this in my name receives me.”*

– Matthew 18:1-5

Joe decided to become a Salesian after a Passionist priest encouraged him to go to the seminary in Newton, New Jersey, and check it out. He felt welcomed right away and knew that the Salesians were the right fit. Joe felt that it “had to be providential” that he found the Salesians, and to the end, Br. Joe felt like he was right where he belonged.

In the fall of 1955 the clergy of his parish, St. John the Evangelist, recommended Joe for admission to Don Bosco College Seminary: "Joseph... has always shown a spirit of cooperation and helpfulness in parish activities. His spirit of piety and sincerity has been an edification to the priests and people."

Joe enrolled as a Son of Mary at Don Bosco Seminary in Newton, New Jersey, on October 1, 1955. He was admitted to the novitiate on September 7, 1956, at Newton, and had a great novice master in Fr. Angelo Franco who instilled in Joe his tremendous love for Don Bosco. (There were also a bunch of characters in that novitiate, like Jim Naughton, Paul Bedard, etc.) Unable to do close work or to study because of his poor vision, he worked in the laundry and bakery. The house council noted Joe's obedience, willingness and intelligence.



1982

"Fr. Master" (Fr. Franco) saw a goodness in Joe. On September 8, 1957, when Joe made his first profession of vows at Newton, Fr. Master included the following in Joe's profession card:

*He who hears you, hears me.* – Luke 10:16

*Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God.*

– Matthew 5:8

*Be docile to all superiors in everything and at all times. Check your urge for light music. Be considerate of your neighbor. Avoid anxiety and a spirit of independence.*

Joe lived his profession as a Salesian coadjutor brother for more than 62 years. There was in him humility, simplicity, sincerity and a little fight and cautiousness. He wanted to help but he didn't want to be walked over either. Don't go too far, don't be mean, don't take advantage.

Br. Joe's musical talent was specially recognized. His admission to perpetual profession six years later described him as "docile, cheerful, sincere, open." It also noted that he was "good in bakery, band leader." He made his final vows on August 24, 1963, at Mount Mongola in Ellenville, New York.



**Community Baker, 1973**

Br. Joe served as baker for the confreres and other seminarians at Newton from 1957 to 1976. His baking skills were outstanding; there was nothing in the world to compare with his bread hot out of the oven, and his cakes and pies, too, were unsurpassed.

Father John Nazzaro, now engaged in formation ministry, writes:

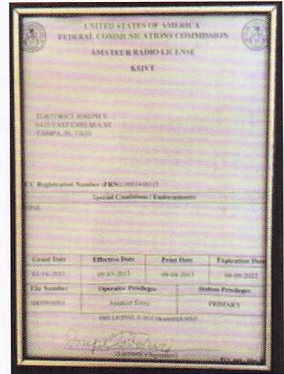
"Who could ever forget the smell of fresh bread in the gray house in

Newton... He got us all through formation with his bread and always playing his music."

His music skills were tremendous. Br. Joe directed the novices' band for ten years, played in all the shows and at

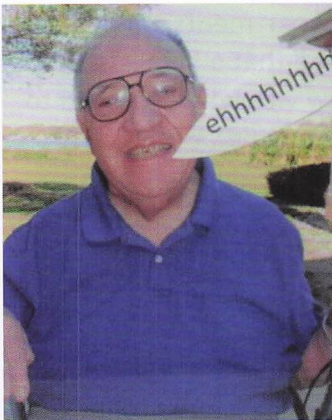
jam sessions and practices. Sometimes he got in trouble for too much secular music, walking a fine line with superiors, but he'd change lyrics to clean them up.

Br. Joe also sponsored a ham radio club for the brothers. Ham radio remained one of his apostolates for more than 50 years; Brother evangelized, spread God and goodness, and did his ministry to so many through amateur radio. As an example, for about 30 years Br. Joe did international mission radio helping missionary religious and laity reach loved ones around the world.



Amateur Radio License

Br. Joe was always willing to provide music for the seminary community's entertainment as well as religious services. He had a way of playing religious-sounding melodies that were actually from Broadway musicals (e.g., "One Hand, One Heart" from *West Side Story*). Given an opportunity, he was more than happy to take part in an entertaining skit. He also



entertained the novices (and brothers and staff) with monologues he'd memorized from TV comedians. Some of the favorites were "The Italian Wedding" and "Noah". Despite his terrible eyesight, somehow he persuaded one of the brothers to teach him to drive – an experiment that ended abruptly when they were "caught in the act" of practicing

by the community prefect on the grounds of Camp Don Bosco.

In 1976 Br. Joe was assigned to Don Bosco Tech in Boston, Massachusetts, where he helped with office work, especially as telephone receptionist. It may sometimes have been purgatorial, but Br. Joe provided presence in that work!



**Newton, 1972**

He continued as a receptionist at St. Anthony Parish in Elizabeth, New Jersey, from 1985 to 1994, and also served as the church organist. In 1994 he was posted to Archbishop Shaw High School in Marrero, Louisiana, where he served as a support staff member and assisted with the school's band

program. He also provided music at St. John Bosco Parish in Harvey and the assisted living home at Wynhoven Apartments in Marrero. Br. Joe shared that a highlight of his time at Shaw was when he used to sit in with the band at football games, jazz band and concerts, playing the saxophone. (Br. Joe could play the piano, organ, keyboard and saxophone.)



**Radio Club, 1972**

A friend from Br. Joe's "phone list", Mary Alestra, shared the following:

*I met Brother Joe in 1989 through my junior high school ham radio class. Brother Joe would speak with our class on the radio every week from his station at St. Anthony's Church in Elizabeth, New Jersey. I really enjoyed ham radio class and wound up getting my own ham radio license and setting up a station at home. Over the years, I would continue to talk to Brother Joe on the radio, and my family would also visit him to share Mass at St. Anthony's, where he would play the piano for us. Brother Joe became a dear family friend, and we have kept in touch over the past 30 years by radio, and most recently by phone. We will miss his warmth, his love of music and his sense of humor very much.*

Br. Joe provided presence. He accompanied many in his lifetime – by phone, by radio, sitting with you in chapel, praying a rosary together, singing and playing music. He was nonjudgmental. He had an “I love you; I don't care about what you've done; you're here now; and while I might not be able to help, I can sit here with you” style. And he was joyful.

At a celebration of Br. Joe's 50th anniversary of profession in 2007 at St. John Bosco Church in Harvey, Louisiana, Fr. Jim Heuser's homily focused on Brother's 50 years of self-surrender in the different communities and ministries in which he



**25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Profession  
Celebration, 1982**

served “day after day, in season and out of season, daily placing his life at the disposal of God,” making his life a place where seminarians, parishioners, students and others could meet God.





**Papal blessing received at 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Profession, 1982**

An alumnus of Don Bosco College, Alex Tucciarone, remembered: “Joe understood giving others the gift of kindness and respect without expecting anything in return. The ability to always be cheerful added to everyone’s life.”

Due to his vision impairment, Br. Joe used his sense of hearing and touch to help him “see”. He had a tremendous capacity to memorize using his hearing, and often, he would verbalize his thoughts, thereby “seeing” them audibly. He also used touch to “see”, for example, to see what note he was on at the keyboard. Brother may have been faulted sometimes for his repeated sayings and singings or for his selection of music, and Brother may have been teased a bit too much sometimes for his simplicity, but he stayed positive and kept right on being who he was. Br. Joe was true to himself.



**60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Profession Celebration (with other jubilarians) at Mary Help of Christians Center, 2017**

Br. Joe didn't keep many material possessions, but among them were mementos of his 25th, 50th and 60th jubilees, some music and the Plan of Life card that he handwrote when his then director, Fr. Steve Ryan, asked each confrere in the community to make their plan of life:

*My personal plan of holiness is this:*

- Give thanks to God in all circumstances; this is God's will for you.
- Don't worry; God is in control.

Br. Joe also had two favorite verses from Scripture:

*Even though you meant harm to me, God meant it for good, to achieve this present end, the survival of many people.*

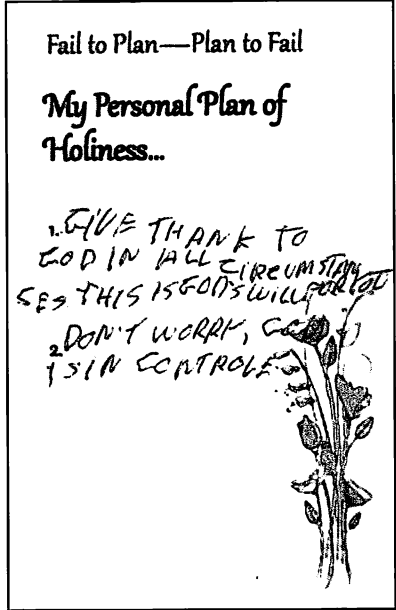
– Genesis 50:20

*We know that all things work for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.*

– Romans 8:28

Both verses show us who Br. Joe was: nonjudgmental, optimistic, kind, humble and charitable.

In July 2013, Br. Joe came to Mary Help of Christians Center for a visit. The very first night of his stay, Br. Joe hurt his knee and went to the hospital. He was discharged a few



Personal Plan of Holiness

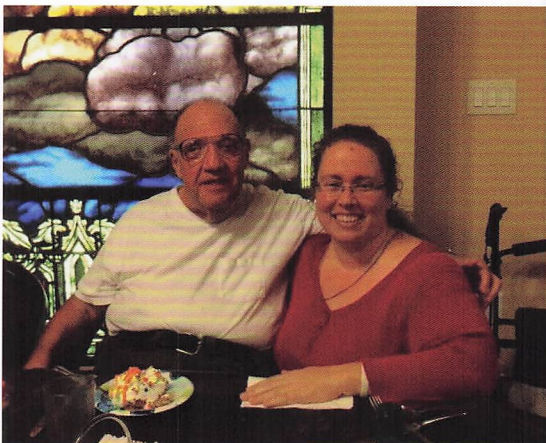
days later, but that injury and time of recovery precipitated Brother's move/transfer from Louisiana to Tampa.

Br. Joe was a welcome addition to the community at Mary Help and continued serving in several ways: he played the keyboard for the community at daily mass and prayers, he played the



**With confreres and Pereira family at Mary Help of Christians Center, 2016**

organ for a few of the masses in the church at Mary Help and he played the keyboard at the parish Senior Luncheon. He was also devoted to the rosary and continued ministry by inviting Mary Help staff and lay people to pray the rosary



**Br. Joe with one of his Rosary buddies at St. Philip Residence on his birthday, 2014**

with him in the chapel at St. Philip Residence (this took place 2-4 times a week for years). And did Br. Joe love classical music, big band music and especially

Sinatra! Now and then you could hear “Mack the Knife” being sung by Br. Joe at St. Philip Residence, or his imitation of the Big Bopper and Jimmy Durante. Br. Joe said that singing Frank Sinatra songs, telling good jokes and mimicking voices were some of the things that made him smile.



**Br. Joe's Sinatra album**

On the evening of Sunday, February 9, 2020, the community and I gathered in Br. Joe's room to say our goodbyes. I administered last rites and in the early morning hours of February 10, 2020, Br. Joe Tortorici passed peacefully to eternity.



Br. Joe's funeral rites were celebrated in both Tampa, Florida, and Stony Point, New York. He was buried at the Salesian Cemetery in Goshen, New York, on Saturday, February 15, 2020.

May he rest in peace and we thank God for the life of this cheerful and lovable Salesian brother – a character, musician and

good-humored Brother who persevered.

We close in Joe's own words, words that he used daily as a closing call sign on his many years of ham radio: "God bless

you, and God bless America. We need all the help we can get!”

Sincerely, in Don Bosco,

*Fr. Franco Pinto, SDB*

Director  
Mary Help of Christians Center  
Tampa, Florida

“Well done, my good and faithful servant. Since you were faithful in small matters, I will give you great responsibilities. Come, share your master’s joy.” – Matthew 25:23

## DATA FOR THE NECROLOGY

Br. Joseph Tortorici, SDB

**Birth:** March 27, 1936, in New York City, NY

**Religious Profession:** September 8, 1957 in Newton, NJ

**Death:** February 10, 2020 in Tampa, FL, at age 83, a member of the Salesian order for 62 years.



**Mary Help of Christians Center**

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[www.mhctampa.org](http://www.mhctampa.org)