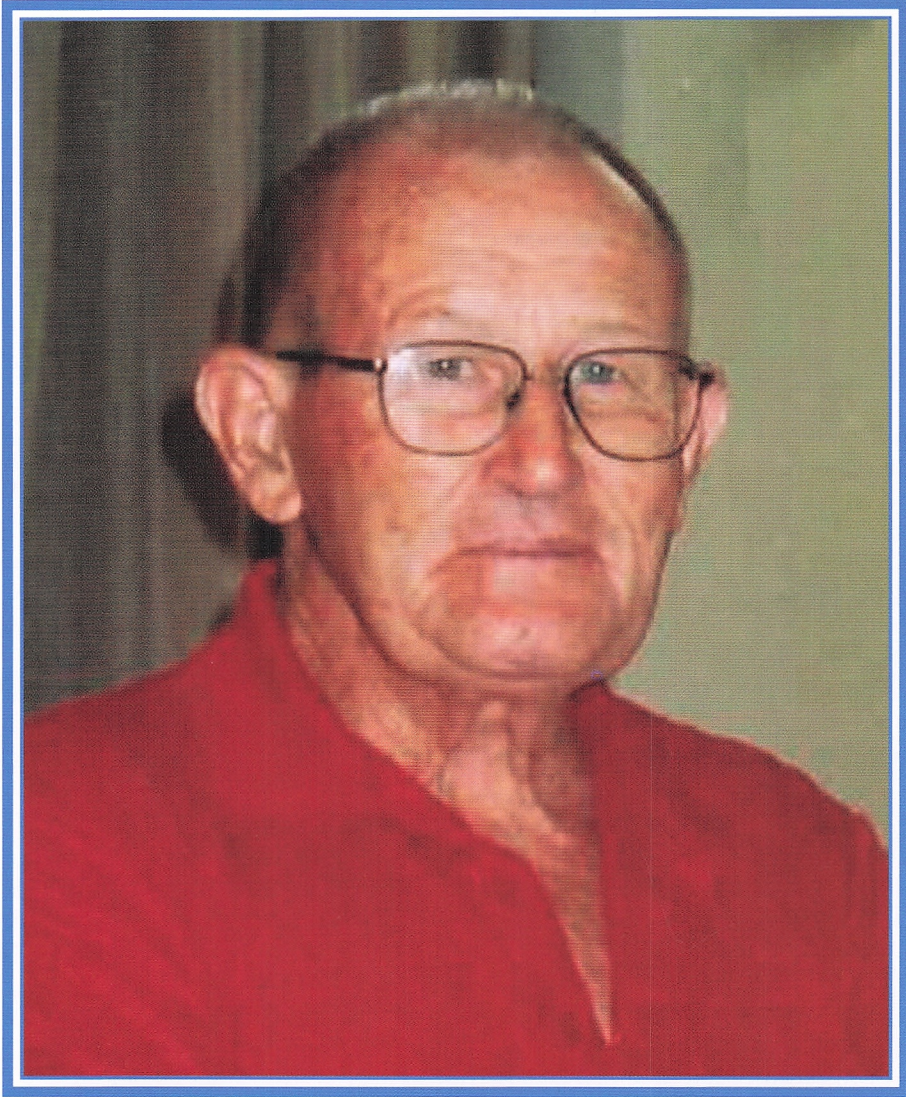


†2012

In Loving Memory of
Br. Henry van der Laan SDB



Born	15 July 1925 Nederhorst den Berg, Netherlands
First Profession	16 August 1953 Twello, Netherlands
Final Profession	22 February 1959 Ugchelen, Netherlands
Entered Eternal Life	30 December 2012 Engadine, Australia

Br Henry van der Laan passed away gently on the night of 30 December 2012 at the John Paul Village Nursing Home. He was eighty seven.



Born in the town of Nederhorst den Berg in the Netherlands on 15 July 1925, he was the fifth of eleven children of John and Gisbertha. They were a solid Catholic family and one of Henry's sisters would later follow her aunt into Religious life. His childhood was lived through the Great Depression and his sharefarmer father struggled to pay

adequate dues to the landholder. A lingering sad memory for Henry was the day the family put their meagre belongings in a hay cart and set off in search of another house and work. His teenage years spanned the Second World War. These would have been difficult and trying times for Henry and his family as the Nazis marched through Holland and then the Allies fought long and bitter battles as Western Europe was gradually liberated years later. Just before the end of the war, Henry and his two older brothers were arrested by the Nazis as they had failed to "volunteer" for work in the German factories. After a night in the cells, they were put on a train with other young Dutch men and sent on their way to Germany, but they managed to jump from the moving train and eventually walked back home.

During the post-war reconstruction years, Henry worked as a farmhand. He then felt called to join the Salesians of Don Bosco and joined the aspirantate at Ugchelen. He was keen to become a priest, but found the study of Latin too difficult and so chose to train as a Brother. At this time the Salesian province had taken on a farm at Assel and Henry was chosen to be part of the project. He went to study at the National Agricultural College in Wageningen where a very natural 'green thumb' became obvious and a lifelong passion and expertise in plants was nurtured. He topped the class in his final year after specialising in tropical floriculture.

On graduation, he began his novitiate at Twello in the summer of 1952. Henry made his first profession as a Brother on Don Bosco's birthday, 16 August 1953, and was promptly sent back to the aspirantate farm to get it into better order and teach the students there. Fr Tony Moester recalls being at Brother Henry's silver jubilee celebration back at Assel and noticing the affection, gratitude and respect of his former students. In 1958

the aspirantate was transferred to 's-Heerenberg and Brother Henry moved there as farm manager.

The post-war years were a time of plentiful vocations and great missionary interest in Holland and young Salesians were encouraged to consider volunteering for newer provinces with limited confreres. Henry stepped forward and was assigned to Australia. It was a big step for him into a new world a very long way from all that he had known as home. However, a couple of groups of Dutch Salesians had already been posted to the Australian province and indeed large numbers of young Dutch singles and families were migrating to Australia in the hope of better security and life opportunity after the ravages of the European war. Henry would later connect with many of his immigrant country men and women and invite them to share in his ministry.

He arrived in Melbourne as a thirty-eight year old on Christmas Day itself, 1963. He was a new and special gift to the Australian province, but he would have wondered what this land of strange language and hot summer sunshine was offering to him! The sunshine he embraced immediately and sought out as much of it as he could absorb in the next forty-nine years of life. The English language was more of a battle. Migrating in mid-life, the Dutch accent remained strong and he would often revert to its idioms and phrases, especially when excited or anxious. But if at times his words were difficult for us Aussies to discern, his smile and engaging chuckle would generally win the day. Just as he soaked his body in sunshine, his eyes and face had an infectious warmth which was an invaluable asset in pastoral encounters and in winning donations from many an otherwise uncertain benefactor.

Brother Henry spent his first two Australian years at Melbourne's Sunbury in the agricultural section we then had at Salesian College Rupertswood. His first assignment was to manage the strawberry patch, but he really wanted to be working with poor boys. He would eventually spend another two and bit years there in



retirement. But it never became a place he loved; his normal comment on Sunbury was a dismissive: *rotten cold!* The initial euphoria of that first sunny Christmas was more than counter-balanced (in Henry's estimation) by the lingering windy winters and stony soils and did not suit the 'spartan' dress code he came to adopt. He did, of course, make good friends whilst there and that personal warmth was well remembered and cherished.

The places he did come to love, and which came to love him, were Engadine's Boys' Town and Palmerston, near Darwin. Partly no doubt, it was due to the weather; but what attracted him even more was the mission where he felt he was genuinely working with the most needy.

At Boys' Town from 1966 to 1988, Henry adopted his trademark uniform of singlet, shorts and thongs. Somehow it meshed with his new appointment under the intriguing title of *factotum*. In many respects, this title best described the reality of Br Henry's Salesian ministry in Australia. It appears to mean *doing whatever* and especially doing those tasks others in his communities might have felt were rather beneath their own assumed dignity. Henry would get out and dirty, cleaning, collecting, providing. He actually became the "replacement factotum" for another man at Boys' Town who was an incredible all-rounder, Fr Joseph Ciantar. As well as pioneering the Salesian era at Boys' Town, beginning the parish and building the enduring Shrine of St John Bosco, Fr Ciantar was so well known at his regular pre-dawn rounds at the Sydney food markets, chatting with the sellers and scrounging food for his boys. Using his gregarious personality, Henry excelled in this role of provider. He soon came to befriend the various managers and storemen of Boys' Town's suppliers and extended his range of contacts. Beyond standard contracts, he chased discounts, specials, near-expiry-date foodstuffs and returned items which could still serve his needy boys. Local Woolworths store managers would ring for him if there was a freezer breakdown and semi-thawed chickens or ice cream would be collected for Boys' Town instead of being dumped.

Sometimes this eagerness would lead to oversupply and there might be a week when the boys and community lived on a staple diet of meat pies or French fries. Ice cream was even dispensed three times a day following a store freezer malfunction, and most in the Salesian province were eating a "reverse-fast" of marshmallow snowballs after a factory offered a pallet load of these. Henry's rule-of-thumb was never to turn down an offer, no matter how awkward it may have looked at the time, as otherwise we might not be considered again. At home the Town's kitchen storeroom became the centre of "Van der Laan enterprises" and from here Br Henry would dispense largesse. Much of the donated surplus would be handed on to needy families or else swapped for other supplies. These were days when the budget was very tight and Divine Providence was relied on to keep the Town operating, and they fortuitously pre-dated stricter consumer and supplier regulations which would later force his superiors to attempt to rein in the more dubious activities of "Van der Laan enterprises".



During all this provisioning, Henry built up acquaintances and friendships with the many people he met. It was always "Br-Henry-from-Boys'-Town" so that they knew the destination of their sought donations and discounts and were alerted to the plight of needy boys and poor families. There would generally be a reminder to offer their prayers too, and a word or two about Don Bosco. His requests and thanks would be accompanied by a chuckle and grin, his eyes lighting up to win an acquiescent response. It was hard to say no to Br Henry; and he never suffered from a reluctance or embarrassment to ask for anything.

This was also the way he related with the boys. A number would help him in his collecting and store room organising. And of course there were extra food incentives to encourage their participation. He similarly had charge of the swimming pool and spent many hours in both maintenance and supervision, developing lovely garden and lawn surrounds and making sure the boys could enjoy themselves but remain safe.

He gained a truck and bus licence and would help with the various weekend outings for those boys who were "24/7" at Boys' Town. Using the same techniques polished in his supplies gathering, he would often drive up to an entry-fee event or facility, smile and announce *I am Brother Henry from Boys' Town. I don't have enough money but you can let us in for free or a family discount.* And most times he would bluster his way through, the family of twenty-five or so enjoying whatever was on offer and eating their standard "chat cheese and devon" sandwiches, washed down by a can of Bert's lemonade.

The bus trips were memorable for other reasons too. Old Boys still talk of the back-seat competitions they judged between the two Brother drivers, Henry and James, as to who held the current record for driving the old Bedford bus longest without changing gears. The smell of friction burning and all-too-frequent clutch plate replacements revealed preoccupations with thoughts other than good driving. And in one infamous incident, with smoke swirling from the bus engine cover and a long procession of cars trailing on the hilly Heathcote Road, Henry managed to pull over just past the Woronora Bridge, diagnosed the problem as an overheated engine, sent a boy to the river with a bucket, then poured the cold water over the engine! A cracked block now totally immobilised the bus, the boys walked home, but certain things he appeared not to worry about and tomorrow was always another day for Br Henry!

Henry also went out of his way to provide for a number of poor families, especially those with a boy at Boys' Town. There would often be extra food that could be dropped off on the way back from a supplier. He similarly might have "found" some spare clothing or footwear, even a portable heater in winter, goods which made that vital difference to a struggling family's survival or morale. These things would be hand delivered with his

inimitable smile and a brief chat and that particular family would be so much the better for his visit and the knowledge that someone cared – and cared in a practical manner. Before family-restoration became the new model of Boys' Town service philosophy, he was ahead in feeding so many of our poorer families, making the friendly contact visit or even organising holidays for the children.

His skills as a gardener and his early Netherlands horticultural studies also found a home in Engadine's temperate climate. He planted and nurtured gardens around the swimming pool area, wanting to make it look as attractive as possible. He had a special interest in tropical flowers and soon established a special growing shed for them and for an increasing range of tropical fish. He joined the local Shire Bromeliad Society and was soon winning awards for the magnificent orchids he grew. But Henry was never content with small hobbies or moderation and the shed somehow spawned a glass house which in turn mysteriously metamorphosed into an array of glass houses, sprinkler systems and a



supply of plants and fish rivalling commercial outlets. There were some issues of acquisition which various Rectors might question, but they would be left none the wiser after convoluted answers. "Van der Laan Enterprises" operated within, yet beyond, the realm of the bursar's office, and a complex system of exchanging 'extra' food and other donations for plants and fish, which would in turn be offered as gifts or traded for further goods, left no paper nor audit trails beyond the worryingly enlarging infrastructure. Somehow various charities benefited through this back-door network, while donors and the needy alike felt gratified and acknowledged, and Br Henry got to enjoy and capitalise on the hobbies he most liked. There were some questions it was simply better not to ask!

Meanwhile, he encouraged a coterie of friends, most of them fellow Dutch expatriates, to come in on a weekend and help prepare meals for the boys and the Salesians, or else assist with maintenance or special projects in the grounds. Many became lifelong friends of both Br Henry and "The Town" and its passing parade of boys and Salesians. These may not have taken on official enrolment as Salesian Cooperators, but they were true, faithful and generous collaborators in our mission.

It was a lifestyle he continued when moving to his second major appointment in Palmerston in the Northern Territory. He moved there in 1999 and remained till his retirement in 2007. After thirty three years at

Boys' Town Engadine, this was not an easy move for Henry, though it was necessary with the changing model of child care in such agencies and the increasing need for stricter adherence to protocols and Government requirements. The more 'flexible' way in which Br Henry had interpreted and implemented his role of provider had worked well enough in earlier decades, but was no longer appropriate in a new era of tighter regulations and audits. His was always a rather "loose" way of accounting and reporting which could give grey hairs and ulcers to Rectors and Bursars and "accountability" was not part of his language set! It was time for a change, but after such a long time of cultivating contacts and friendships, it was not easy at seventy-four to move into a new parish role some 4,300km away to the north west. But at least the hot climate suited Henry's love of sun and tropical plants and his gregarious nature came to the fore, so he soon found new friends, just as he sought out those who were most poor and at society's peripheries.

Officially appointed as a pastoral carer in the Our Lady Help of Christians parish, he soon attached himself to the local St Vincent de Paul society and helped look after the poor and, most especially, aboriginal children in the vicinity. He felt most at home with society's strugglers and looked for ways to help them practically.

Extending his arms, he responded to Salesian visitors from Timor Leste during its struggling years of new independence as our poorest neighbour. They were warmly welcomed and generously helped as true and needy

neighbours. It was a deepening and continuation of his concern and practical response, as with his Engadine years of involvement in Mother Teresa's mission extension out at Burke. There were poor and struggling people in our country and in close-by Timor. And he found ways of getting the supplies they needed.



Fr Jojo San Juan, the Salesian parish priest of Quelicai in Timor Leste, well remembers his first meeting with Br Henry:

I believe that Br Henry is in heaven because he was an angel to me. I can't forget the way he received me in the Salesian Community of Palmerston way back in 1999. I felt hopeless when I started my awful day because I

was traumatized by the events of burning and violence in Dili. It was he among the Salesian confreres in Palmerston who accepted me at once and made me feel comfortable. It was Brother Henry who gave me some money to answer to my personal needs of buying some clothes, a needed toothbrush or some sandwich to eat. It was he who asked me gently if I had some money to use for my personal needs at that time. I was ashamed to inform him that I had only about five dollars in my pocket.

I did not know where to go and ask for help, but Br Henry was the human Salesian who touched my heart when he asked: "Jojo, I like to ask a personal question. Do you have some money with you?" And I humbly said, "I don't have much. I have only 5 dollars in my pocket." It was then he gave me five hundred dollars. I felt good for being the recipient of love and thoughtfulness that I needed.

*Dear Br Henry, thanks a lot for your big heart, your brotherly concern (which we Salesians sometimes forget). You accepted me and raised me up when I was down in 1999. Thanks for your friendship, your jokes, your weird ideas, your showy smile that caused smiling faces around. Thanks. May God bless you. See you in Heaven, Amen.
Peace and love,
Jojo.*

Fr Jojo exemplifies how Br Henry affected so many of the needy he helped; the warm and personal greeting, the smile, conversation that at times was rather quirky, then a genuine offer of very practical assistance. Especially in his later years, he had time and offered that time and warmth to people in need.

Henry's prayer life was similar. He held on to strong personal devotions to Jesus and Mary Mother of God and, whilst habitually very talkative, could sit quietly in the presence of the Lord. During his active years and sometimes to the dismay of others in his communities, he also often wanted to pray with the down-and-out and society's fringe dwellers. This writer remembers being encouraged by Henry back in the 1970s to accompany him after the Boys' Town Sunday mass to services in the charismatic ecumenical homes at Moombara and Bundeena. These small Christian communities rehabilitated drug addicts and youth living off the streets. Henry found God's presence in praying with them. And he assisted with sizable food donations on each visit.

In Darwin he was again more at home praying with the local charismatic community or in little aboriginal groups, though he could just as well join with the Missionary Sisters of Charity who had great love and respect for him (as long as he came decently dressed!). He enthusiastically worshipped with the Neo Catechumenate community in a neighbouring parish and liked to swap stories and reflections with them.

Even more so than in Engadine, Darwin's tropical climate was ideally suited to Henry's native skills in horticulture and he was soon enhancing church and presbytery gardens with beautiful local and exotic flowers. Our province presence in the Northern Territory proved, however, to be limited. Aging confreres and a diminishing personnel pool led to our withdrawal from the two "Top End" parishes in Palmerston and Katherine and, in 2007 and now aged eighty-one, Br Henry was transferred to Sunbury, the community where he began his Australian Salesian life. With mixed memories of his first years at Rupertswood half a century previously, he moved there reluctantly but strove to fit in. He no longer had an active apostolate, but did find solace in gardening and prayer and soon made more friends. A rare personal comment in his appointment diary a couple of months after arrival indicates an understated yet revealing discovery of the Sunbury Council pool: *two hours there, warm pool, very strong spa and a hot sauna. I enjoyed it.* With this refuge he was content for a time, but his diabetes was deteriorating and a knee reconstruction was not very successful and left him quite immobile. The province provided him with an electric cart, but his judgement about it was *too rotten cold*. Open sides in Melbourne winter are not designed for brief shorts!

Fortuitously, a hostel room became available for him at the John Paul Retirement Village, part of the parish of St John Bosco in his beloved Engadine, and Henry moved northwards again in May 2009 before another winter set in. The aged community setting was good for Br Henry and he for it and he was able to maintain frequent visits with the Salesian community and entertain other visitors at the hostel. Of special help was Boys' Town old boy and teacher, Ron Delaney, who came in as friend and regular carer.

He took up painting in retirement. He had always loved photography and, in his Boys' Town years, had a darkroom in the old bakery that made professionals jealous. His artworks will most likely not hang in the NSW gallery. There is an almost childlike simplicity to them, but then that also is a mark of Henry's character. Some of the faces reveal the loveliness



of the characters painted. You know it is Anne or Thelma, you know it is even Henry himself in his later works. The Spirit was aiding his technique and talent was gradually emerging.

Gardens and flowers similarly appeared wherever he was. Henry's early studies in Holland were put to extensive use. Outside his eight years in Darwin's real tropics, he would create his own mini tropical environments with glass houses, heaters and aquaculture. Rectors were given vague accounts as to how all these were acquired and the facilities would often somehow magnify overnight. But visitors were proudly shown the latest productions and most left with a blooming gift. Even in the small hostel room, orchids had their corner and outside his neighbours benefited with colourful garden beds. His long-time friend, Doug Kidd, who had co-driven Henry from Darwin, regularly chauffeured him to Bunnings and other garden centres where Henry was rapidly earning the status of one of those well-known "local characters".

In retirement, Br Henry also embraced further prayer. It was a swing all the way now to very traditional forms of piety as he came to spend much of the day with Mother Angelica and EWTN broadcasting in his room. He loved also to take part in the weekly parish Bible study group and offer opinion. His rosary was beside him and he made sure we provided him with a copy of the Church *Ordo* so he could pray the right Office of the Day with the universal Catholic Church. He and God found each other in different ways at different times of his life. His early *factotum* business often kept him wandering and busy away from the rituals of community prayer. But he aged rather akin to Tevye, in *Fiddler on the Roof*, who wanted to be a rich man so that, amongst other things, "he could sit in the synagogue all day and pray". That was a blessing of retirement, one he accepted and in which immersed himself.

Like all of us, Henry had his weaknesses. His native stubbornness, expanding hobbies and maverick dismissal of accountability were legendary. But the boys, suppliers, volunteers and families he befriended felt gifted, in terms of both tangible offerings and in the way they were acknowledged as worthy persons. Many who knew him in his later years said they saw something of the face of God; a revelation in the infectious smile and little laugh, in the requests that would wear you down so you had to say 'yes' in response. Yet the image of the Son of God lay even more in the gnarled hands and worn-out knees; the image of Jesus who in earlier years was himself most likely a *factotum* or a *teckton*, an apprentice carpenter-mason. There is here the legacy of St Joseph; the worker, the provider, the one who accepted without too many questions, the one so often in the background, the one in fact whom Don Bosco selected as patron for his Brothers.

Three testimonies from Boys' Town Old Boys, who lived too far to be able to attend his funeral, well describe Br Henry's influence on young lives:

He was a gentle man who treated me with love & respect. I had the pleasure of catching up with Br Henry at BT's reunion... A great role model

for any person in the service of God. I only wish now that I had shown my love & respect for these beautiful people earlier as they were in effect my father for the years I spent at BT. I now realise the great sacrifice & commitment the Brothers and Fathers made whilst teaching at BT.
(Robert Gudgeon)

Br Henry was truly a one off. For me he can be best summed up as a Father to many young boys and a Friend to everyone. [John Laundauer]

Br Henry was a remarkable man who touched everyone's life (especially mine) that he came in contact with. His is a story of boundless energy given to the Order and the lives of the many boys in the 33 years he spent at Boys Town... he was one of those people that helped to change my life.
(Pat Hawkins)

The final year of his life was not easy. Peripheral vascular disease and diabetes had been increasingly restricting blood flow for a few years and led to the need to amputate one of his big toes. From limited mobility on a walking frame he was now restricted to a wheel chair and there were periods of distressing hallucinations. He knew his life was drawing to a close and in his final month calmly spoke of looking forward to the next chapter in eternity. On the third last day of 2012, he cheerfully chatted with friends in his nursing home room and then lapsed into coma the following day, passing away in the late evening.

Many friends farewelled him in a moving Requiem mass in the John Paul Village, Mary Help of Christians church at Heathcote. Br Henry's body was then taken for the final funeral mass and burial in the Salesian cemetery at Rupertswood, Sunbury, where he began his Australian apostolate. Placing the pall on his coffin, at Provincial Fr Greg Chambers' invitation, was another grateful Boys' Town old boy and now Greek Orthodox priest, Fr Chris Dimolianis.



Henry grew in homely wisdom and stature even as his body wore out. That is a saving image for us, a call for us to enter more willingly into God's plan wherever that may take us. It is also a call to pray for Henry, not as a model of perfection, but of growth and immersion into faithfulness. So we pray that he is easing into whatever new role the Kingdom of heaven has in store for him.

Fr Peter Carroll SDB,
Rector, for the Engadine Community
January 2014

FINAL TRIBUTE

Boys Town Old Boy, Ron Martini, writes a special final tribute:

My dearest friend

None will ever walk in your shoes for they are too big to fill. Your endless devotion to your faith will always be like a beacon to me. You showed me the way when I was lost; you consoled me when I was in turmoil. When I was young you helped me to learn tolerance. Where I had anger, you were my friend then. You were still my friend to the end. I weep with sadness at the loss I feel, but I know that you are in a place that you truly belong. My dear friend Henry I will always treasure all the memories I have of you, there were never any bad ones. Your friendliness opened up the hearts of many, your actions in my eyes were so pure. To me you were a saint among men. It was not only an honour knowing you but an absolute pleasure. No matter what the hardship you faced, you always smiled and marched on. You never faltered until the mission was done. What more inspiration could one aspire to, a loving caring heart that never lost his faith in God. You always found the best in people; these are just a few of the things I will remember you for.

My dear friend Henry, this is not farewell. This is just a short pause for us, we will meet again and we will embrace with a smile on our faces as we had done before. Until then I will fondly remember you, goodbye for now Henry your friend always. I quietly share prayers with all of you on this day.

