

FATHER CHRISTOPHER WALSH. S. D. B.

It is with great regret that I have to send you the sad news that Fr. Walsh, the Rector of the Salesian Institute in Cape Town died suddenly on July 16th 1947. He was 48 years old.

Christopher Walsh was born at Pendlebury, near Manchester on December 23rd 1898, a happy gift of the Christ-Child for the feast of Christmas. After his primary studies, he spent five years in a secondary school in his native town; but his desires for the priesthood, early manifested though they were, could not be realised when he would have wished, for the first World War gathered him into battle as soon as he was old enough to carry arms. He served with the army in Egypt, Turkey and Russia; but the sight of suffering humanity during those terrible years served only to increase his ardour and determination to give himself to work for God in the service of his neighbour.

As soon as he could obtain his discharge from the army, in 1920, shortly after his 21st birthday, he entered the Salesian College at Chertsey. The following year he started his novitiate at Cowley, Oxford and he made his first profession in September 1922. After his course of Philosophy he made his perpetual vows in 1925 and the following year he commenced his theological studies at Farnborough. It was a great joy to him when, for the last two years of his theological course, the Superiors decided to send him to Turin to study at the Crocetta. He imbibed a rich store of things Salesian during these memorable and fruitful years and profited immensely in every way by the opportunities which were afforded him. The joy of the sacred Priesthood came to him in Turin in July 1930, and the new priest returned to England full of zeal and eagerness to commence his life's work.

This life's work God made almost immediately manifest. It was to work for the youth of South Africa, especially for the poorer boys, a work to which his superiors sent him in the same year as that of his ordination. Fr. Walsh was appointed to the Salesian Institute at Cape Town and quickly began to make an impression with his happy temperament and his wide and sympathetic outlook. It was no surprise to his confreres and friends when in 1933, the Superiors appointed him as Rector of the Salesian Agricultural College at Lansdowne, near Cape Town. Not only was he the Rector but also the Parish Priest and this more than anything else drew out all his qualities of zeal, of spiritual direction, of a warm-hearted understanding, which made people of all ages and conditions turn to him with confidence. His natural gifts of oratory began to attract wide attention and soon he began what might be called an additional apostolate which made him sought after throughout the whole union of South Africa as a preacher of retreats to priests, religious and layfolk.

At the expiration of the canonical six years at Lansdowne, Fr. Walsh returned to the larger house at Cape Town to become Rector of the Institute at a very critical time. The second World War had started and, although in this Autumn of 1939 there were few immediate effects, the confreres of the two Salesian Houses in South Africa realised that it would mean for them virtual isolation from the Provincial House in London, and from their families and friends in the home countries. It speaks much for the devoted efforts of the two superiors, Fr. Walsh and Fr. Millen, that the schools under their care went from strength to strength and enjoyed the highest esteem throughout the Peninsula. Fr. Walsh was determined, as one who loved him put it "to put the Salesian Institute on the map and to give it the place it richly deserved" How well he succeeded can be told by a secular priest who recently wrote "I am so glad to be near the Fathers for they mean so much to me: they are kindness and helpfulness itself. The community is held in high esteem by all and the tone of the Institute is very high. This is due in no small measure to Fr. Walsh himself who is persona grata – with emphasis – with both ecclesiastical and civil authorities. The Bishop seems very fond of him and his influence for good among the clergy, especially the juniors, is very great."

Fr. Jackson in his panegyric said. . "Only those who lived close to him knew how he worked. At all times of the day or night he was ready to help and console; no one in trouble was ever turned from his door. At times he would tell us that he had accepted another boy, and when it was mentioned that the school was full, he would reply in his characteristic way. . "The child's mother is dead; Don Bosco will provide." In reply to a question, he said one day "Yes, most of the boys are from very poor homes – that is the joy and privilege of working for them. " That was no cliché for his obvious love for the boys and his tireless efforts on their behalf were an inspiration to one who came into contact with Salesian work for the first time. " Those within the fold and those outside came to him for guidance and consolation; after his death many non-Catholics wrote or telephoned to say that they were the better for having known him. Non-Catholic employers frequently wrote to congratulate him on the fine type of boy trained by the Institute. Whenever it was a question of doing good, or some kindness, his charity knew no distinction of class or creed; with him a soul in need was neither Jew nor Gentile, for "a man full of the humanity of Christ, he became all things to all men that he might win them to Christ.

It is obvious from these words that Fr. Walsh possessed the secret of a captivating charm of manner. His house was a happy house, the home of a happy family who loved their father and who knew, both community and boys, that each individual mattered to him; there were no favourites and none forgotten. Each soul was the object of his loving care; and it is worth noting that outsiders have remarked how completely successful Fr. Walsh was in his deliberate intention of making this House for poor boys a home – and not a mere institution.

And so to the end. He had not been too well for some little time and he had to spend a short period in a Nursing Home; but although the preaching of two retreats had tired him, there was no indication of any serious illness. He still seemed to be his indefatigable self. ; everywhere his bright sunny smile, his twinkling eye, his warm greeting and infectious friendliness. On the morning of July 16th he went around the workshops and schools as usual – a word for everyone, a smile and a joke. At 9. 15. a. m. he went to his office and discussed various business matters with the bursar and he seemed to be quite well at that time. About 10. a. m. however he complained of feeling a severe pain in his head and he decided to go to his room to rest. Shortly afterwards a Brother passing his door heard him call and went in – to find Fr. Walsh lying on his bed, obviously in great pain. He was able to gasp a few words and then asked that Fr. Grey a very old friend of his, should anoint him. The doctor was sent for immediately and he advised that he go straight to hospital; but about ten minutes after entering and only an hour after being taken ill, Fr. Walsh peacefully gave up his soul to God. The cause of the death was cerebral haemorrhage.

The sad news passed rapidly throughout the city and through the Vicariate. The suddenness of his death overwhelmed not only the Salesians but the multitude of his friends. The Catholic community hastened to express its sorrow and distress, the Bishop, from his own sick bed writing of his sympathy at the loss of a great Rector and of his personal grief at the passing of a valued and esteemed friend.

The funeral was a triumph. The School Chapel was manifestly too small to hold the crowds and, by the kindness of the Parish Priest, the Sacred Heart Church was the scene of the Solemn Requiem Mass, celebrated by a dear friend of the Salesians, the Rt. Rev. Bishop O'Reilly, who also gave the absolutions and officiated at the graveside. Fifty-five priests were present, of whom many came from great distances to pay their last respects to one who had been to many, a confessor, guide and welcoming host. Many religious and civil authorities attended the funeral, as well as large numbers of the laity. The Salesian Band led the procession to the cemetery.

The death of Fr. Walsh is indeed a great loss for the work in South Africa and for the Province, already so stricken by the Angel of Death this year; but we bow our heads humbly under the mighty hand of God, knowing as we do that, from his place in Heaven, this zealous priest will be able to do even more for the welfare of the poor children of God for whom he spent himself so entirely and so generously on earth. I beg your good prayers for the repose of the soul of our dear Confrere, that he may speedily attain to the heavenly joys he has so richly earned.

Yours devotedly in St. John Bosco,

F. V. Couche. S. D. B.