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Fr. Eugene H. Walter, SDB

Born:	July 23, 1952
Profession:	September 1, 1973
Ordination:	May 21, 1983
Died:	February 15, 2004



Vestition Day - Ipswich, MA - 1973



Deaconate Ordination

Front Row: T. Brennan, J. Occhio, D. DeBlase, J. Horan, J. Serio
 Back Row: J. Vien, T. Connery, J. Nazzaro, J. Mara, D. Donovan,
 G. Walter, W. Buccifero

Dear Confreres,

On Sunday, February 15, 2004, our brother ,

Fr. Eugene H. Walter

was suddenly and without warning, called home to meet his God while preparing to celebrate the 12:30pm Sunday Mass at the Marian Shrine Pavilion Chapel.

As a part of our Salesian tradition we have always prayed for a quiet and peaceful death. God must have heard his prayers. Could there have been a better setting to meet God than on His altar , surrounded by brother Salesians and the people he so lovingly served and ministered to for the last ten years of his life?

"He was a great guy, and just so human." Said Denis Cahill of Thiells, who with his wife Jeanie, worked with Fr. Gene at Pre-Cana marriage-preparation conferences at the Shrine.

In so many ways, he had a powerful impact on the lives of those he ministered to and with. . His cheerful demeanor, in spite of the burdens of his blindness and diabetes, his love for the young and for teaching, his love for the retreat apostolate with the young, and with women religious, and his fidelity to his vocation, remain an inspiration to us all who seek to serve god with our whole mind, heart , soul and strength.

Gene was born in St. Albans, Queens, New York on July 23, 1952, son of the late Eugene and Helen Sullivan Walter. He was baptized on August 3, 1952 and received the sacrament of Confirmation on May 5, 1963 at St. Killian Catholic Church in Farmingdale, New York where he was taught by the Amityville Dominicans. He developed a great affection for them and took the name of "Dominic" at his first profession in honor of them. While at St. Killian's he joined the boys' choir under the direction of the Benedictines who staffed his parish. He was proud of the training and the opportunities that they gave him.

A brief conversation with Fr. Joseph Stella, SDB at the Marian Shrine in Stony Point, NY, where his family visited while waiting for their car to be fixed, after breaking down on a Sunday day trip from Long Island, led to a prophetic invitation and declaration that “Mary Help of Christians had led him to the Salesians and she wanted him to join our family.” This chance meeting proved to be the spark that ignited the fire of Salesian vocation in Eugene Harry Walter.

Gene began his Pre-Novitiate in Newton, New Jersey on September 1, 1971. His Novitiate year began in Ipswich, Massachusetts, on September 1, 1972. He formally entered the Salesian Society and made his first Religious Profession on September 1, 1973 back in Newton again. Ordination to the priesthood came on May 21, 1983 in Columbus, Ohio.

From his first encounter, Gene had developed a real devotion to and love for St. John Bosco and the mission and apostolate of the Salesians. He felt drawn to the education and guidance of young people, especially those most in need. A graduate of Don Bosco College in Newton, New Jersey, and later the Pontifical College Josephinum in Worthington, Ohio, from which he received a Masters in Divinity, Fr. Gene was well prepared for the educational ministry in which he engaged in Salesian High Schools in Indiana, Massachusetts and New York.

Gene was a teacher and youth minister at St. Dominic Savio High School in East Boston, Massachusetts, from 1983-1986, and served at Salesian High School in New Rochelle, New York from 1986-1990. An excellent teacher of English, History and Theology, he was beloved by his students and so welcomed his assignment to teach at Don Bosco Prep in Ramsey, New Jersey in the Fall of 1990.

It was here that he would experience a rapid and serious deterioration in vision brought on by his diabetes that would ultimately result in total blindness.

His health situation made it necessary for Gene to leave his place of service at Don Bosco Prep and move on to his new assignment at the Marian Shrine in Stony Point, New York in 1993.

When Gene came to Stony Point he was still going through a series of surgeries that he was told would either prolong his sight or cause him to lose whatever sight he had. Two of these surgeries seemed to prolong his vision. The third left him totally blind. This surgery took place on January 25th, the Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul, when Paul lost his sight that he might see Christ.

Thanks to the constant support and prodding of his brothers in the community as well as the on-going encouragement of former students, family and friends, Gene's story does not end here. While this was not an easy time for Gene, . . . or at times for his community members, (All that he cherished and worked for had seemingly been taken from him.) it proved to be a time that demanded much reflection and renewal. His whole approach to ministry and life itself had to be completely reformulated. Though challenging to others at times, he showed that he was ultimately ready and open to be challenged himself. One of the Sisters from Dominican College said that "it was at this time that Gene took as his own, John Milton's words - *"They also serve who only stand and wait."*

The waiting period was followed by intense rehabilitation at the Carroll Institute in Newton, Massachusetts, where after four months of re-learning and new learning, Gene returned to the Marian Shrine community.

A story from Gene's time at the Carroll Center: One of his instructors took him to a mall to help him develop his sense of smell as a tool for mobility. As they walked through the mall, Gene could distinguish by smell a shop that sold leather coats, a shop that sold candy, and a store that sold athletic shoes. As they walked, Gene asked if they were in front of a video store. The instructor was surprised and said yes. She asked Gene how he knew. Gene

told her that he could smell the covers of the videos! The instructor was shocked.

Armed with a new type of vision, he enthusiastically engaged in retreat work, pre-cana conferences, youth and parish ministry.

With listening ears and a responsive heart, grateful to all who had assisted him, Gene became a source of hope to the many he considered himself blessed to serve. A former student would say - *"You no longer can see, but how well you see into our hearts."*

Less than one year into my new assignment at the Marian Shrine, Gene's second brother died suddenly of a heart attack. The Wake Service was out in Garden City, Long Island from 4:00 -9:00PM. We thought that leaving at 4:00PM would give us a safe cushion of time. Traffic conditions decided otherwise. Four hours and fifty minutes later we arrived. The funeral home decided to keep the place open for another hour or so for Gene's sake. On the way, Gene, who was my co-pilot, kept telling me which exit to look for and what street to take. . . usually, just when we were coming up to that particular sign or intersection. It was quite spooky. Actually, it was quite amazing.

One special gift - that seems so obvious to all , but appears to be such a challenge to put into practice by many - was his unique ability of making contact with young people on their level and in their world by truly listening to them. What was important to young people was important to Gene. He really seemed to be able to reach the hearts of so many of the people he ministered to because he showed a genuine interest in their joy, their hopes, their concerns, their hurts and their problems. The fact that his eyes did not confuse things by getting caught up in extraneous and superficial issues, enabled him to focus one hundred percent on the individual before him.

Fr. Rich Alejunas, SDB, spoke at Gene's wake ser-

vice: *“Even though Gene could recite the dialogue from The Bells of St. Mary from memory, or even recall his memories of the arrival of the Beatles in New York forty years ago – he was there – these things, and Dracula and the Yankees are not what draw us close to him and close to each other. . . We gather around Gene tonight because of his great heart and love.”*

Our motto of *“Da Mihi Animas . . . Cetera Tolle”* was exemplified in his personal style of ministry. They used to say of Don Bosco that every person he came in contact with felt special and their lives were better off for having met him. The tremendous out-pouring of affection and loss expressed at his Mass of the Resurrection, especially by the great number of young people from several states whom he ministered to over the years, was proof positive of the success of Gene’s approach.

Fr. Jay Horan, SDB, Gene’s good friend, classmate and funeral homilist shares this recollection. *“While Gene was at the Retreat Center, he often led guided meditations. I never ceased to be amazed how day after day, and year after year, he was able to draw deep reflection in the various ages of young people that came through the retreat programs. I witnessed young people skip lunch in order to stand in line to celebrate reconciliation with him.”*

Fr. Jay continued by offering this reflection from 1 Samuel 16:7 ‘Not as man sees does God see, because man sees the appearance, but the Lord looks into the heart.’ *“Gene’s blessing was that we did not have to worry about our appearance, for Gene could only see into the heart, and that is what made him a blessing for us.”*

Adults also were affected in a positive way by his spirituality. The late Betty Thacke, the long time secretary at Salesian High School once remarked after a retreat, *“He is not blind; he just sees differently from the rest of us.”*

In the Advance Directives called Five Wishes, that we

use in our community, Gene wrote under Wish 5 (What I Want My Loved Ones To Know), If anyone asks how I want to be remembered, please say the following about me: “ . . . *That I was a kind and caring person who tried to help others; who sought to use his handicaps to reach out to others and give them hope.* ”

Priests pray the Breviary several times during the day. Though Gene could not pray the Divine Office with the community, his constant companion became a truly essential Salesian prayer tool, his rosary. Always present, it became singularly associated with him. He always had time to say a Hail Mary or two for someone in need.

As we pray for the repose of Gene's soul, I think it's safe to say that those words will certainly be his legacy to us. Remembering his sister and other family members and friends who suffer his loss, let's also pray for the countless others, both young and not so young who will miss his positive and hopeful approach to ministry and to life.

Our Salesian family has not only lost the presence and services of a faithful priest and loving brother. We have also gained another powerful ally and member in the Salesian garden in heaven.

Eternal rest grant unto him, O Lord. And let perpetual light shine upon him! May he rest in Peace! Amen.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Steven Dumais, SDB". The signature is fluid and elegant, with the "SDB" being slightly more formal and upright than the first name.

Fr. Steve Dumais, SDB
Director
Marian Shrine

Reflections on Gene

Lois Milanesi, Gene's sister, shares these remembrances. *"I was a teenager when Gene was born, and I loved pushing his carriage on long walks and feeding and playing with him. I was the official babysitter for him and our younger brother Tom, who arrived two years later. When they were a little older we often went to the movies together. Gene always liked the scary ones."*

"Two teachers from his elementary school years, Sr. Ellen and Sr. Helen Edward, had a profound effect on him and remained friends throughout his life. They must have been responsible in some way for his decision to enter the priesthood. However, the thought must have already been in his head since upon meeting the nuns on his first day of school, he informed them that someday he would like to be Pope."

"Gene loved baseball. His favorite team, as everyone knows, was the New York Yankees. I don't know how this came about since the rest of us were Giant fans. He passed his enthusiasm for the Yankees along to his nephews. Baseball was usually the topic of most conversations when he called them. They also shared a love for music. In 1963 when the world was caught up in Beatlemania, he was papering his room with their images and even convinced my mother to spend hours at the airport to greet them when they came to the U.S."

"He loved sweets and even as toddler had a sweet tooth. On one occasion, with the relatives gathered and the grownups busy in conversation, he proceeded to eat most of the cake that was to be dessert for everyone."

"During his early years as a Salesian, we spent many good times at Newton. His nieces and nephews have fond memories of these Sundays together. Always close to them, as years went by, he enjoyed vacations with all of us in Florida. Disney was a favorite for him. In later years, when his sight failed, and it was difficult to walk, he still

enjoyed the rides in his wheel chair. The Haunted Mansion and the souvenirs which we described to him in detail."

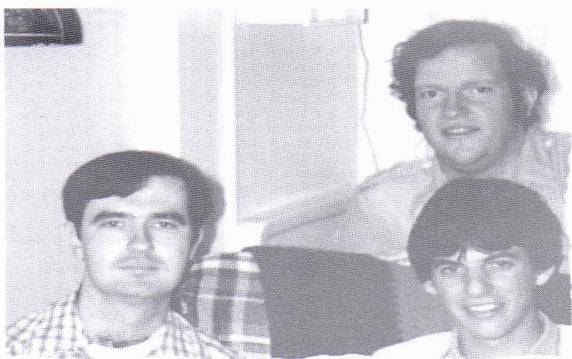
"I remember sadly, the deaths of our parents and brother and how difficult it was for him to officiate."

"I remember all these things, but mostly I just remember a loving and fun-loving brother."

Fr. Edward J. Weber, the pastor of St. Francis of Assisi Church in West Nyack, New York, and the Dean of the Vicariate of Rockland County, graciously shared these few thoughts about Gene:

"Fr. Gene Walter came to St. Francis in 1995. At first he was part of a rotation team but gradually St. Francis was the parish that proved best suited for him because of our few steps and the presence of our deacon who could become his 'eyes' and guide during Mass. Fr. Gene was quickly adopted by the people of St. Francis. His homilies were always inspiring but also reflected his humor and caring spirit. He was also to weave into the celebration more mundane subjects like the New York Yankees. When the seminary assigned seminarians to have a pastoral experience at St. Francis, they became for him, as he did for them, a help and guidance for their future ministry."

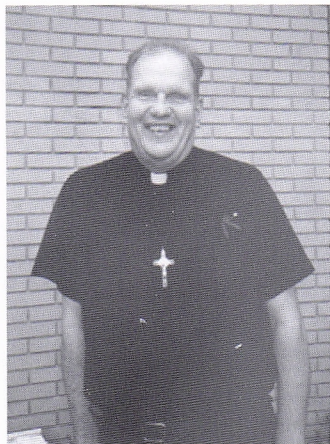
When Fr. Gene's health began to deteriorate many of the parishioners reached out to him as he did to them, in their needs. The great relationship that began when Fr. Gene arrived continued to grow. The parish was very responsive to helping to get Fr. Gene in his wheel chair to the altar, as well as helping to transport him back and forth from the Shrine to the parish. The giving and receiving relationship continued long after Fr. Gene's health forced him to no longer be the permanent weekend assistant. To this day he is spoken of and remembered by the entire parish community, especially the youth group that he also worked with very closely."



Gene, Jay Horan & Kent Gartner -
Salesian Center - 1980



Gene at Award & Graduation Ceremony -
Dominican College, Blauvelt, NY - 1997



Marian Shrine - 2003



Gene in his Glory - Yankee Dugout -
Division Series - 1999

