



Reverend Francis Blatnik, S.D.B.

Dear Confreres,

January 15, 1978

FATHER FRANCIS BLATNIK, S. D. B., a member of the Paterson Salesian Community for fifteen years, died on December 23, 1977, at the age of 78.

Born in Konjsko, a small mountain village of Yugoslavia, in 1899, Father Blatnik lost his mother at the age of 2, and his father, who had come to America to support his family, at the age of 11.

To make ends meet, young Francis became a tailor and dabbled with gardening in Radna, Yugoslavia. It was in this town that Father

Blatnik first met the Salesians. He was easily won over by them and decided to join them as an aspirant in 1916. The Yugoslavian Draft Laws made no exceptions for religious and clerics; and so, as Father Blatnik facetiously used to tell us, when sought after by the Yugoslavian police to join the army, the Director of Verzej promptly intervened: he met the policemen; found out from them what they were after and politely excused himself. He looked for Francis Blatnik and another classmate of his, gave them enough money to go to Poland with a letter introducing them to the Salesians in that country and, much like St. Paul, Fr. Blatnik and his companion were 'led unto freedom through a window.'

Father Blatnik made his first religious profession on August 15, 1918 in Verzej, Yugoslavia; he took his final vows in Radna, Yugoslavia, in 1922. Prior to his priestly ordination, which took place in Turin, Italy, on July 10, 1927, Father Blatnik spent most of his Salesian life in Verzej and Radna (1918-1923); after his ordination, he was given various assignments in Ljubiana-Rakovnik and Kodeljevo (1927-1941).

During and after World War II, Father Blatnik became an inspiration and guide for all Yugoslavians who opted for freedom and did not quite agree with any form of totalitarian and atheistic regime in their native land. From 1943 to 1945 he was chaplain of the anticommunist forces in Slovenia and later dedicated himself to the care of the Yugoslavian refugees in Austria.

When the image of *persona non grata* gradually took possession of many communist minds and the threats on his life became more and more evident, mainly on political grounds, Father Blatnik thought best to be more useful to his country by working on its behalf from abroad, in exile.

In Rome he became the spokesman of the Yugoslavians on the Vatican Radio while being Director of the Catacombs of St. Callistus (1948-1953). After a period of parish work in Puerto Rico (1954-1961) Father Blatnik came to these United States and effectively began a work which proved, and still proves, providentially beneficial to all the Slovenians.

Father Blatnik came to Paterson, N. J. in 1962 as a teacher and confessor of our school and community, but most of all as a fund raiser for the Church of Silence and as the spiritual guide to most Slovenians living in this country and Canada.

Strong, healthy and hard working as he always was, Father Blatnik received a jolting set-back when a routine visit with his doctor made him aware of a malignancy affecting one of his legs. The discovery was, to all appearances, much too late and the leg had to be amputated. The Doctor who operated on him had acknowledged the presence of something mysteriously affecting also his lungs. But when told about the hardships of the refugee camp Father Blatnik had endured, the Doctor himself gave no great importance to his serious suspicion.

A period of rehabilitation at Morris Hall, in Lawrenceville, N. J. appeared to bring back to Father Blatnik the zest for life he once had. He was looking forward to using his new artificial leg and eventually continuing his work on behalf of his native land from the new house he had been assigned to, Don Bosco College, Newton, N. J.

But all hopes were temporarily halted when new X-rays indicated that the Doctor's original suspicion was no mere suspicion anymore but tragic fact: widespread cancer of the lungs.

Even though aware of the impossibility of a full recovery, Father Blatnik hoping against all hopes decided to fight for his life and asked to be treated with radiation. The treatment proved beneficial at least for a short while. For Father Blatnik felt quite different and was proud to be able to use his new leg and easily move around with the help of either a wheel chair or a walker. But then unexpectedly and definitively all benefits and hopes vanished. Although mentally alert, Father Blatnik started deteriorating and losing even his willingness to fight for his life. The excessive loss of weight, the inability to speak, lung congestion and severe chest pains forced him to leave Morris Hall, the rehabilitation center, and be subject to immediate intensive care at Fuld Hospital in Trenton, N. J. first and then at St. Joseph's Hospital in Paterson, N.J. where he peacefully died two days before the Birthday of the Lord for whom he had worked for 50 years as a priest.

Father Blatnik has passed on to his reward but the memory of what he was and what he did, will ever remain in our hearts and minds.

I have known Father Blatnik only for a short period of time and cannot write as beautifully as others will in the near future, about his character and the many undertakings which so greatly distinguished his life. But the following comments are only a partial tribute that can rightly be given to this humble and yet great man of God whom I have admired and tried to imitate.

Father Blatnik has fulfilled the commitment which he had assumed on the very day of his baptism: for he was a prophet, a good prophet; a priest, a good priest; a shepherd, a good shepherd. Father Blatnik has fulfilled the commitment which he freely assumed on the day of his profession: for he was a Salesian, a good Salesian.

A prophet is a person who speaks of behalf of God: Father Blatnik spoke on behalf of God from the pulpits of various parishes throughout the United States and Canada, from the Vatican Radio; through his many writings in the Slovenian Newspapers; and especially with his life. I still recall two instances related to the discovery of his serious sickness and sharply pointing out the way he carried out his prophetic role. When he was told by the Doctor that his leg had to be amputated and, a month later, that he should prepare himself for death, for there was no hope of recovery, Father Blatnik recollected himself as if to feel the impact of the blow God wanted him to take and then slowly and clearly said: "Thank you, Doctor. God's will be done." On his way back to Morris Hall, the rehabilitation center, Father Blatnik quietly commented: "I have told a lot of people how they should meet with God's call. Now it's my turn to live and die by it. God's will be done." Although without resentment, Father Blatnik acknowledged the fact that on many occasions he was seriously slighted even by those whom he deeply loved and for whom he had made a lot of sacrifices; he also wrote about the fact that he was falsely accused of having attempted at the life of Tito. And yet with his casualness and deep humility he would add: "But I forgive them. I forgive them all, for they knew not what they were doing." Father Blatnik spoke on behalf of God with his life: he was a good prophet.

To be a priest means essentially to place one's life at the service of others. I know of no one to have been as dedicated to the service of others as Father Blatnik; I know of no one to have accepted the serious and difficult implications of the priesthood as Father Blatnik did. These last few years of his life, Father Blatnik was affected by a heart condition. He never

took that illness as an excuse not to be active in the priestly ministry. He endured a lot of fatigue and suffering by traveling mostly by train and bus, to meet the demands of many people in Washington, D.C., in Cleveland, Ohio, in New York and other places. He always lived like a priest of God should and he did this for fifty years. He was a good priest.

A good Shepherd is a person who leads people towards the right direction, towards the attainment of the last end and the appreciation of all God's given gifts. Father Blatnik was a real leader as he led his Yugoslavians towards the appreciation of and fight for freedom against communism; he led the refugees in the Camps of Austria to hope for a better life and not to easily yield to the hardships of a barracks type of life; he led all the Slovenians of this Country and Canada to show practical concern for the people of the Church of Silence; he led our community with his good example; he led the boys of our school especially in the sacrament of reconciliation by opening to them the riches of God's mercy. Father Blatnik was a good shepherd who diligently took care of his flock.

Father Blatnik was a good Salesian indeed: he cherished Salesian ideals; he loved being with youth and working for youth; made every possible effort to advertize Don Bosco's devotion to the Blessed Sacrament and to Mary Help of Christians; and he always appreciated the warmth of the Salesian community. On countless occasions he told me "Tell the Salesians not to be ashamed of Don Bosco. Tell them to speak about Don Bosco to all their students; to make him known and loved. And they will see the flourishing of Salesian vocations . . .".

We all heard about the classic example of poverty displayed by Blessed Michael Rua and stand in awe even today when we read about the way he lived and how closely he imitated our Lord's ways. With the backing of many of my confreres, I can honestly say that if anyone had seen the way Father Blatnik lived, the so called 'possessions' he had in his room, the clothes he wore or had in his closet he would have unmistakably have said that a second Blessed Michael Rua had lived among us. Father Blatnik had collected substantial amounts of money . . . for others, not for himself. He was typing day and night to appeal to people . . . for the needs of others. He had put the interest and needs of others over and above any interest and need he had. Father was a good religious Salesian.

I am sure that all of us here in Paterson, N. J. will never forget this beautiful human being who unassumingly has shown how fulfillment can become a reality in the life of a Christian, Religious and Priest.

I hope and pray that he will always be an inspiration to all the Salesians in this province who were privileged to host him for fifteen years.

The Mass of Resurrection for Father Blatnik was concelebrated by more than fifty priests with the newly elected Bishop of Paterson, Bishop Frank Rodimer, as the main celebrant, on December 27, 1977. Prior to his interment in Goshen, New York, several Slovenians who had come from Washington, D.C., the New York area, Connecticut and Cleveland, Ohio, paid a worthy tribute to Father Blatnik in their native language and customs.

Kindly pray for the eternal rest of Father Blatnik and for this community.

Sincerely yours in Don Bosco,
Father Vincent Zuliani, S.D.B.
Director of Don Bosco Technical High School